

Chapter 7

University Teachers' Interactions with Their Online Students at an Australian University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on teacher-student interactions in the context of the use of digital technologies for online teaching and learning in an Australian university using thematic analysis and focus group discussion data. Cotemporary scholars agree that the factors influencing teacher-student interactions in online environments are diverse and multiple and are framed by a complex set of historically grounded and socially mediated forces. One potentially fruitful way to interrogate these factors and forces is to draw on aspects of affordance theory, by examining the kinds of relationships that are (and are not) afforded by particular digital technologies in those online environments. More broadly, affordance theory emerges as a useful conceptual lens for understanding the influences on and the impacts of teacher-student interactions using digital technologies in online environments. Those influences and impacts in turn are crucial to (re-)visioning digital futures in the context of students' learning outcomes in tertiary education, and to advancing critical thinking in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Online teaching and learning in higher education is expanding globally, including Australia. The driving forces behind the popularity of online

learning are both economic and social. The main economic force is online education is cheaper compared to the face-to-face (F2F) education (Martínez-Caro, 2011) and the main social force is widening access to or participation in higher

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8411-9.ch007

education and higher education completion rate (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; OECD, 2005). However, economic and social forces are interlinked with each other. Because of cheaper education, demand for education is increasing and on the other hand, to meet the demand more and more higher education institutions are supplying of online degree program. Further to that, in Australia the profit motive also has promoted the expansion over the last twenty years (Norton, 2012). For example, Open University of Australia runs as a for-profit business (Norton, 2012). As in tertiary higher education, critical thinking is an important learning outcome (Stassen, Herrington, & Henderson 2009), where interaction between students and teachers play an important role. The interaction between student-teacher has taken a new dimension in the context of online teaching and learning context. The main objective of this chapter is to under the critical issue(s) from the perspective of academics in an Australian university. The motivation of this study is in the coming day, the increasing numbers of higher education institutions' will be engaged in online education. This will create further demand for online education according to the economic law - Say's law of market. The law first appeared in a book entitled 'General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money' written by John Maynard Keynes (Hollander, 1987). The law state that 'Supply creates its own demand'. It means that while any education product is produced in a society, a consumer finds out the product. Over the next decade, F2F academic degree program may be fading away and the demand for online academic degree program will be rising (Mann & Hennebery, 2014). Consequently, it is imperative to investigate the critical issue entailing the interaction between teachers and students.

Online education is a process and using the process students and teachers interact with each other via Internet-based learning technologies (Curran, 2008). To keep the Internet-based education technology higher education institutions are

investing heavily on information and communication technology (ICT). So that, the state-of-the-art ICT as a medium of instruction can facilitates the interaction between the academics and students in the online teaching and learning process. The tremendous achievements in ICT such as Broadband Internet has further have facilitated the probability of expansion of online education in the last two decades. The use of various types of ICT tools and services in teaching and learning process has become so widespread that a technology biased education system has been in place globally (Isman, 2006; Korucu & Alkan, 2011). Though such techno-biased education may marginalise the students coming from the low-socioeconomic backgrounds; in the coming years, the growth of technology-based degree program continued to be an accepted mode of education globally.

In the context of given global changing higher education scenario, the Australian Government has promulgated its' Digital Future Vision 2020, including tertiary higher education too. The vision is to expand online education opportunity by the year 2020 (Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011). The policy goal is:

By 2020, Australian schools, TAFEs, universities and higher education institutions will have the connectivity to develop and collaborate on innovate and flexible educational services and resources to extend online learning resources. (Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011 p. 5)

AN OVERVIEW

Australia in 2020

'University' and 'higher education' are synonymous literally; but university is a particular type of higher education enterprise that provides higher education. In Australia, there are 39 full universi-

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