Chapter 16
Connecting Communication to Curriculum and Pedagogy in Online Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter relies on the analysis of communicative patterns, discursive sequences, and instructional strategies featured in an entirely online graduate level course featuring a combination of compulsory and optional chat sessions. Findings emphasize the use of communication dynamics to promote social presence and socially-mediated learning in online learning communities, which, for the purpose of this research project, are represented by the required synchronous discussions used in class. Recommendations focus on employing a flexible pedagogy that takes into account student characteristics, appropriate instructional and technological tools and strategies, course cadence or pace, creating and maintaining an online learning community, as well as clear and engaging communication. Further considerations relate to ensuring the identification of specific purposes for online chat sessions, their integration into the entire set of instructional strategies and resources, clear procedures for online discussion topic selection, and the associated grading policy.

INTRODUCTION

Sixty-five percent of higher education institutions include online delivery of instruction as an essential component of their strategic growth and development processes (The Sloan Consortium, 2011). Under these circumstances, teaching and learning in virtual environments have reached an important evolutionary phase. For more than a decade now, infrastructure build-up led the set of campus-wide initiatives by focusing on online courses and programs. Once institutions have reached a level of effective management of their online delivery of instruction, we witness a shift to ensuring indicators of effectiveness assurance (McKnight, 2004). In other words, we are moving from quantity to quality (Liu & Johnson, 2004) that should align with student-centered online pedagogy. College curricula are analysed in terms of how they provide students with solid knowledge

bases and associated skills, as well as with cross-disciplinary 21st century skills (Johnson, 2009). E-learning represents a flexible platform allowing students access to rich learning opportunities (Hayden, McNamara, & Kane, 2009), to the co-construction of knowledge while expressing "their online identities" (Kazmer, 2004), along with "convenience and flexibility" (Lao and Gonzales, 2005, p. 460). Concurrently, the online learning environment offers the potential for students to interact with course content, leading to "greater understanding of material and issues" (Warrick, Connors, & Norton, 2004). Faculty's ability to design and implement effectively online courses relies on a variety of factors that contribute to the development of meaningful interactions in the virtual world. Three factors are quite prominent when it comes to the effective implementation of online instruction: interaction with content, with instructors, and with peers (Swan, 2002; Wanstreet, 2006). Keeping them in balance leads to the creation of a sustainable and engaging learning community in the virtual environment. At the same time, institutions of higher education should be cognizant of the needs of online faculty when it comes to developing online courses. There is an increasing body of evidence that demonstrates that supporting these faculty members includes professional development, training, as well as technical and administrative assistance (McKnight, 2004). Current practices denote insufficient training or support, leading to varying degrees of understanding and skills needed to design effectively an online class (Lao & Gonzales, 2005). Under these circumstances, online course design should blend best pedagogical practices with a thorough understanding of the specifics of virtual learning environments and how students interact best in there. As the nature of online teaching and learning is fluid, course design could not be "static" or linear (Liu & Johnson, 2004). Instead, it should be dynamic, allowing for instructors to assume a collaborative role in all phases of the process of developing and implementing online courses.

This chapter exemplifies how analyzing communicative patterns in an entirely online course can inform curriculum and pedagogy in a flexible manner. The initial interest in the topic was prompted by earlier research undertaken by the author in the area of online assessment as it progresses from face-to-face, traditional to virtual learning environments. Subsequently, curriculum design considerations were taken into account, ranging from the transfer of pedagogical strategies to the actual process of managing communication and engagement in online courses. Finally, all these pieces came together to support the idea that effective online teaching and learning has to go beyond mere "evidence of networking" (Söderström, Hamilton, Dahlgren, & Hult, 2006, p. 541) to get to a level of community building that highlights the fluid nature of curriculum implementation and formative assessment used in the online courses supporting this phenomenological study focused on the structure of a meaning-making experience in the virtual world (Merriam, 2002). Integrating course-specific content with appropriate technology-mediated instructional strategies should rely on the analysis of students' experiences in the virtual learning environment (Lyons, Reysen, & Pierce, 2012). In other words, a coherent course design (Reisetter & Boris, 2004) would entice student engagement by enhancing the social presence of both students and their online instructors (Dixson, 2010; Kupczynski, Ice, Wiesenmayer, & McCluskey, 2010).

BACKGROUND

The fact that online instruction has gained such importance over recent years is supported by research indicating that it can be as effective as traditional, face-to-face instruction, given a course design that promotes active learning prompted by a flexible and productive instructor presence (Dixson, 2010; Jones, 2011). A literature review conducted by Swan (2002, p. 24) points out several

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