

Chapter VIII

Enlivening the Promise of Education: Building Collaborative Learning Communities Through Online Discussion

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ABSTRACT

An important dimension in education is interaction, that is, the coming together of a number of people to discuss, debate, and deliberate about issues of common concern. In distance education, such social environments are as much present in online learning contexts as they are in face-to-face learning contexts such as tutorials. This chapter expands the notion of teacher-student interaction to focus on integrating human computer interaction in the curriculum. This is done through the use of online discussion forums at Open University Malaysia that help build collaborative online communities using common principles of teaching and learning. Citing a recent case in point, this chapter demonstrates how the Open University Malaysia-Collaborative Online Learning Model for online interaction helped cultivate learner-centric virtual discussions and supported an interactive online community that showcased characteristics of social interdependence and instructional support. This chapter takes a social constructivist view of human computer interaction by proposing an instructional model supported by collaboration, guidance, interdependence, cognitive challenge, knowledge construction, and knowledge extension. The Introduction section of this chapter provides the rationale for human computer interaction and gives an overview of current-day perspectives on the online classroom. This is followed by a trenchant review of recent research on online interaction with a view to outlining the theoretical premise for the use of computers to develop thinking and collaborative or team skills. This section also provides a rationale for the use of online forums and gives a frame of reference for the role of the instructor in this enterprise.

In the next section of this chapter, the Open University Malaysia-collaborative online learning model is described, with details on The Learning Context as well as Group Learning Outcomes, which may be seen as inherent parts of the model. Under the sub-section Knowledge Construction, the chapter carries a qualitative analysis of online interaction for one Open University Malaysia course using a comprehensive list of indigenous categories and sub-categories as well as examples of interactions that match each sub-category. The chapter ends with a Summary, a statement of Acknowledgement, a list of References, and an Appendix. The appendix contains the Task that was used for the course for which online interaction in this chapter was analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

In ancient Roman cities, a forum was an assembly place for judicial activity and public business. Such assembly often took place in a public square or marketplace. This is where orations were delivered, and public meetings and open discussions were held by various people. Similarly, in ancient Greece, a place of congregation—like a marketplace—was known as the agora. Such movements in history have given rise to the human need for discussion, debate and deliberation for the explication of ideas and facts before one can promote or dissuade an idea or event.

As extensions of the forum and the agora, today's online forums and online discussion groups have given rise to various discourse communities (Jonassen, 2002), collaborative learning groups (Dillenbourg and Schneider, 1995) and learning networks (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995). In these virtual classrooms (Hiltz, 1995), tutors, learners and experts come together to discuss content-related topics, debate on issues of common interest, share resources and deliberate on best solutions to various issues or problems. Such developments in educational practice have had an enormous impact on the way we teach, and on the way we interact with our students. We now view the online or virtual classroom as an extension of the traditional face-to-face classroom, and conversations begun in the latter are continued in the former, and so on. The role of the tutor or teacher has been redefined to include online facilitation, support frameworks and dialogue

(Collison, Elbaum, Haavind & Tinker, 2000). In tandem to this, the learner is expected to play a constructive role in the knowledge s/he builds and in the online learning process s/he is engaged in (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999). In sum, the historical premise for discussion, debate and deliberation for the explication of ideas and facts remains significant in the classrooms of today.

The brief discussion above demonstrates the way the online classroom has become a significant part of educational practice today, and how human computer interaction has transformed current conceptions of the role of the teacher and the learner. In order to provide a framework for understanding these developments, the next section of this chapter presents a review of research on online interaction and outlines recent developments in the theory of online pedagogy.

(Note: In this chapter the term tutor also refers to a teacher, instructor or facilitator.)

ONLINE INTERACTION

Recent research on constructive pedagogy has drawn attention to the use of online networks to improve thinking and to develop team skills. The thrust of the work in this area comes from the social constructivist view of learning (Bruner, 1986; Shaw, 1994), where learning is perceived as a “personal, reflective and transformative process” leading to the co-construction of knowledge through collaboration, inquiry, invention

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