Chapter VI
Conversation Theory Conceptualized in E-Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines Gordon Pask's conversation theory, comparing his approach to the current literature about the growing field of e-learning as a vital component for knowledge acquisition. For this chapter, conversation and dialogue are simply defined as an exchange of information between students and instructors. This exchange can be informal like a conversation or more formal like a dialogue (Merriam-Webster's, 1974). Pask developed his conversation theory based primarily on an exchange of information between a human and an artificial intelligence, that is, a computer.

INTRODUCTION

E-learning environments are readily observed in online computer courses at all grade levels and subject areas in schools, in higher education, and in the corporate world. Simple observation of the growth in numbers of e-learning environments is enough to communicate the importance of the technology advancements, just as the invention and spread of printing presses. It is known that the use of computers is growing and to make them a productive tool in education for the facilitation of learning, it is critical to explore their theoretical and conceptual foundation, so how to properly integrate computers into the classroom can be learned. The only way to do that is to investigate and compare current best practices. This will, in turn, help to optimize the e-learning environ-

ments for learners acquiring new knowledge and skills.

This chapter examines important implications for instructors, trainers, and students facilitating conversations used for meaningful online interactions. The main objective of this chapter is to encourage instructors by suggesting ways to improve their use of online dialogue in teaching and learning. This chapter introduces conversation theory through a historical perspective, followed by defining its basic relevant attributes, analyzing potential connections to the affective learning community, and then examining its use in knowledge building processes, assessment practices, and implementation of teaching strategies. For those not familiar with the concept of an affective learning community, it can be simply defined as a group of individuals working together within a trusting environment to encourage and support each other's learning efforts. At the end of this chapter, predictions of future trends will be presented while providing suggestions for continued research directed towards extending the quality and utility of e-learning.

Secondary source quotations are included to help illustrate the application of Pask's conversation theory within the authentic modern online learning environment. Thus, with the assistance of these secondary sources, Pask's conversation theory will be more readily presented for immediate application and use in the online educational environment.

BACKGROUND

Imagine online courses today devoid of conversation. Having experienced courses with and without the ability to easily converse, a lack of conversation is like losing one's own voice. Without a voice, one cannot question what is being said to improve one's own understanding. Without interactive, authentic, "real-life" dialogue or conversations between peers and instructors, learning perspectives are restricted (Pask, 1977). "The process of transfer—the application of new knowledge and skills to a variety of real-life situations" facilitates learning processes (Smith & Ragan, 1999). When students are able to develop their own examples, applications, analogies, and connections to prior knowledge, deeper more meaningful learning is possible. The old correspondence courses provided "good learner-content interaction and good, though slow, learner-instructor interaction, it gives no learner-learner interaction" (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Rather than limiting the focus, peer input can widen viewpoints and opportunities for knowledge gains through multiple chances for dialogue over the content areas of interest. Historically, correspondence or independent study courses consisted of students reading course materials, then being tested over content memory proficiencies (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). As the technological capabilities have evolved over time, instructors have been adapting, working towards improving the quality of computer aided online learning. The shift to using more interactive computer based platforms provides a more collaborative instructional environment. Rather than waiting a week for a letter to arrive in the mail, the response time is condensed, allowing rapid and timely feedback, an increased variety of information transferal, and greater chances for understanding through asynchronous question-response interactions between learners and instructors. Collaborative peer learning allows for the development of personal motivation, social cohesion, presenting viewpoints, hearing those of others, discussions of issues, and even argument for modeling higher quality solutions to problems and thus influencing learning through cognitive elaboration and practice (Slavin, 1996).

While browsing the popular press, reading the education journals, and viewing classrooms filled with computers, many improvements in online technology based capabilities ranging from Internet access to advanced software packages for learning, presentations, data collection, and