Chapter X

The Continuing Struggle for Community and Content in Blended Technology Courses in Higher Education

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Abstract

This chapter reports a three-year case study of communication strategies in online discussions in a graduate seminar and extends preliminary findings from the first two years of the study (Dykes & Schwier, 2003; Schwier & Balbar, 2002). It discusses how different combinations of synchronous and asynchronous communication strategies were implemented in a graduate-level course, and examines how implementation strategies influenced the balance of community, social engagement, and content in online learning environments in higher education.

Introduction

If a course goal is to create an online community, then an instructor must be a participant in online discussions in order to nurture community development and growth. The first and, in our view, most important factor for novice instructors in e-learning environments to consider when using online discussions is that discussions significantly increase their involvement with students compared to a traditional classroom seminar.

Our reflections on online discussions, content, and community in this chapter are intended to provide examples of practical theory within social constructivist pedagogy, and they are consistent with approaches to self-reflection described by Murphy and Loveless (2005). Burge, Laroque, and Boak (2000) encourage instructors and researchers to include reflective descriptions of practice and strategies used in online instruction.

When faced with delivering part or all of a course online, an instructor usually attempts to create an online learning environment based on the familiar classroom setting. The learning environment includes the instructor, content, learners, and learning activities. One can easily transfer content and most learning activities online into a learning management system. But how does the instructor create an atmosphere that nourishes real and deep engagement among the learners, the instructor, and the content? Evidence of learner engagement in the classroom setting is found in dialogue and interaction with the instructor and other learners. The platforms for online chat (or other synchronous communication tools) and discussion boards (or other asynchronous communication tools) available in learning management systems are where many online instructors focus their energies in forming an environment where learners may become an engaged community.

There is no shortage of advocates for virtual communication in traditional and flexible learning in higher education (Burge, 2000; Cohill, 1997; Willis, 1994). There are also voices of dissent (Boehle, 2000; Brook & Boal, 1995; Fabos & Young, 1999), and those who specify the conditions under which online learning is likely to be successful or unsuccessful (Bates, 2000; Kowch & Schwier, 1997; Moller, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). A growing number of studies describe and examine the contextual experiences and impressions of learners and instructors with collaborative learning online using synchronous and asynchronous communication strategies. This chapter fits into the last category. The experiences documented in this chapter range over a period of three years in a graduate seminar course.

If an online or blended delivery course uses discussions and chat it does not necessarily follow that a learning community will form. It is the learners who determine if they participated in online discussions or if, through online discus-

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