

Chapter XIV

A Framework for Choosing Communication Activities in E-Learning

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Abstract

In this chapter, we present a framework for planning communication activities according to the level of structure and potential dialogue desired in a given course. This framework serves as a tool for making decisions about how to give students more or less autonomy, how a series of course activities can be scaffolded, and the amount of structure or instructor facilitation that is needed. The framework we have developed uses each variable of the transactional distance theory as a dimension, which displayed as a quadrant allows us to represent instructional strategies and various communication activities for e-learning. This framework is beneficial as a tool for planning the instructional design process, informing pedagogy, and conducting research.

Introduction

Over the past 10 years, the use of discussion forums or bulletin boards to support asynchronous learning communications has become a common practice within mixed-mode and online courses. Both pedagogy and context serve to drive and influence the use of this technology. The interest in constructivist approaches in the design of learning contexts has resulted in the creation of communication spaces where interaction, participation and negotiation of meaning can take place. At the same time distance education has increasingly moved online, the choice to use an asynchronous tool for communication seems to be well suited to this mode of delivery where teacher-student (TS), student-student (SS), and student-content (SC) interaction is influenced by geography, time zones, and personal scheduling conflicts.

In distance education, course development can be an individual or collaborative effort involving instructors, course authors, and instructional designers. For the purpose of this chapter, we will refer to the role of the instructional designer, since that is the perspective that we occupy in our own institution. However, regardless of whether development adopts a solo or team approach, there are a myriad of decisions to make when constructing online communication activities that support the TS/SS/SC interactions. These include decisions around how the activity will be organized, the kind of facilitation that is needed, and the type of assessment and feedback that will be provided. Furthermore, the use of technology enables the implementation of collaborative practices, and with a greater emphasis on learner-centered approaches, online learning technologies have evolved considerably in the last ten years. In 1998, Bonk and King recognized the challenge that the new educational landscape presented and noted that “with all these new learning channels, educators are faced with unprecedented educational opportunities and challenges. Without question, the formats for electronic collaboration are proliferating” (Bonk & King, 1998, p. 5). Almost ten years later, while text-based discussion forums still dominate as a means of class communication, these communication spaces now might include voice or video. Although there are many innovators exploring new technologies and approaches, it is still a challenge for instructors to find ways to enable the best potential of the technologies and strategies available.

As instructional designers, in developing courses for online learning we know that learning activities should not be used indistinctively, since each one of them has the potential of being pedagogically effective and enhance the quality of the learning experience for a particular set of course objectives and needs of the students. When instructional designers work with subject matter experts they often offer a choice of different delivery models in an effort to find an approach that will address the needs of the course objectives and content while taking into

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