

Chapter 4.1

Role Adjustment for Learners in an Online Community of Inquiry: Identifying the Challenges of Incoming Online Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study outlines the process of adjustment learners experience when first participating in an online environment. Findings from a pilot study of adjustment to online learning environments validate differences found in three presences in an online community of inquiry. Using pre- and post-questionnaires, students enrolled in entry-level courses in two graduate degree programs at Athabasca University, Canada, describe their adjustment to online learning. Responses were analyzed in relation to the elements of cognitive,

social, and teaching presence, defined by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) as core dimensions of student role requirements in an online community of inquiry. In each of these presences, five areas of adjustment characterize the move toward competence in online learning: interaction, self-identity, instructor role, course design, and technology. Student comments provide understanding of the experience of first time online learners, including the challenges, interventions, and resolutions that present themselves as unique incidents. Recommendations for the support and facilitation of adjustment are made.

INTRODUCTION

The move to online delivery in postsecondary education institutions has increased exponentially over the last decade. Early concerns were raised about the extent to which students would embrace online education. However, recent evaluation of student enrolment in online courses indicates much willingness to engage; optimistic online enrolment projections are now a reality and there are implications that growth will continue. "Online enrolments continue to grow at rates faster than for the overall student body, and schools expect the rate of growth to further increase" (Allen & Seaman, 2004, Introduction, 3rd para.).

As growth continues, more and more students will experience online education. Students will have to develop new skills required to be competent online learners, and will modify behaviours from classroom learning to fit the online environment. The details of this adjustment process for students to this new delivery method are still underexplored; "there is also (sic) a need for better understanding of students' adaptation to online learning over time" (Wilson, Varnhagen, Krupa, Kasprzak, Hunting, & Taylor, 2003).

Adaptation to the role of online learner can be understood by looking at the structure of the online pedagogical environment, or community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) and tenets of role theory (Blau & Goodman, 1995) and how role change occurs (Turner, 1990). The integration of new behaviours into one's role repertoire (Kopp, 2000) occurs in a context (Katz & Kahn, 1978) and through an intricate process of role taking, role exploration, and role making (Blau & Goodman, 1995). As the context of teaching and learning in online environments is very different from long standing classroom structure, and will act as a catalyst for role adjustment for individual students moving online.

This article outlines the character of adjustment made by such students, determined from a study of novice online learners. Students responded to

open-ended questions before and after (pre and post) their first online experience; responses were coded and categorized according to adjustment to cognitive, social, and teaching presence. With each of the presences, responses formed a pattern around activities and outcomes in the following thematic areas: interaction, instructor role, self-identity, course design, and technology. In addition, a process of meeting challenges presented by this new environment is outlined. This data provide understanding of the experience of first time online learners. Recommendations are made for incorporating this understanding into instructional design and facilitation in order to ease adjustment for students new to the online environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Community of Inquiry

The community of inquiry model, originally proposed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), served as the conceptual framework around which to study online learning and learner adjustment. The theoretical foundation of this framework is based upon the work of John Dewey (1938). At the core of Dewey's philosophy are collaboration, free intercourse, and the juxtaposition of the subjective and shared worlds. This is the essence of a community of inquiry. Consistent with his philosophy of pragmatism, Dewey (1933) viewed inquiry as a practical endeavour. Inquiry emerged from practice and shaped practice. Dewey's work on reflective thinking and inquiry provided the inspiration for operationalizing cognitive presence and purposeful learning in the community of inquiry framework (Garrison & Archer, 2000). The other elements of the community of inquiry model, social presence, and teaching presence were derived from other educational sources, but are consistent with Dewey's philosophy and the

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