Chapter X

Participation: The Online Challenge

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ABSTRACT

One of the main challenges in Web-based education is to encourage student participation. Although many instructors would like to increase participation in their online courses, there is no established body of knowledge on the various forms such participation may take, or how it should be measured. In this chapter, a taxonomy for classifying different types of participation in online courses will be proposed, and the pedagogical issues involved will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing popularity of student-centered and constructivist approaches to education, student participation in class discussions is being considered not just something "nice to have," but an essential part of the teaching and learning process. As we move from traditional to virtual classrooms, the challenge of understanding and nurturing such participation becomes even greater. In this chapter, a taxonomy of student participation in online class discussions is proposed, in the context of Web-based courses.

For the purposes of our discussion, Web-based education will be seen as a special case of distance education (DE). DE is "planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements" (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 2).

Distance education is here to stay. Between 1998 and 2001, the number of universities offering distance education increased by 33% (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Currently, over 50% of U.S. colleges and universities are offering DE courses, and over 2 million students are taking them. By 2004, it is estimated that almost 90% of U.S. colleges and universities will be offering DE courses, and by 2006, almost 5 million students are projected to be taking them (Fornaciari, 2002; Symonds, 2001).

This growth in distance education, however, has not been accompanied by a proportional growth in the understanding of its pedagogical implications (Gallini, 2001; Shedletsky & Aitken, 2001). This gap is particularly glaring in terms of fully exploring the interactive potential of one special form of DE—Web-based education.

One of the main challenges in Web-based education is to understand and encourage student participation. Although many online instructors profess to value, and industriously attempt to grade online participation, there is no established body of knowledge on the various forms such participation may take, or how it should be measured.

In this chapter, the educational paradigms that explain why participation plays such an important role in the teaching and learning process are examined, the types of interactivity involved in distance education are reviewed, a taxonomy for classifying different types of participation in online courses is proposed, and the pedagogical issues involved are discussed.

"Know your learner" is good advice for all professors, but it is even more so for those of us teaching courses with little or no face-to-face interaction. The proposed taxonomy will help us move in that direction, by contributing to a deeper understanding of the nature and dynamics of student participation in Web-based education.

THE RELEVANCE OF PARTICIPATION AND INTERACTION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance training and education can be approached from two main paradigms: transmission and transformation (Berge, 1999, 2001). In the *transmission* paradigm, "content and knowledge determined by someone else is *transmitted* to the learner" (Berge, 1999, p. 19). In the *transformation* paradigm, "a learner *transforms* information, generates hypotheses, and makes decisions about the knowledge he or she is constructing or socially constructing through interpersonal communication with others" (Berge, 1999, p. 19). The basic assumption of the transmission paradigm is that there is a body of fixed information that can be passed on to students. In this instructor-centered approach, the instructor selects the content and the teaching methods that will best "push" such preconceived knowledge to the passive students, from whom a specific outcome is expected.

In the transmission paradigm, the main value of student participation is to provide evidence of whether the student has correctly "absorbed" the content that the expert instructor has attempted to transmit.

The intellectual roots of the transmission paradigm can be found in positivism (transmission of knowledge from an expert to a novice) and behaviorism (new behavioral patterns are introduced and repeated until they become automatic).

The assumptions of the transmission model have been questioned by authors such as Paulo Freire (1970), who criticized it as a "banking model" of education, where an instructor deposits information into students. Recent research on education and cognition has been

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