Sustaining interaction and immediacy in e-teaching and e-learning

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Abstract

The rapid development of teaching and learning by distance has led to inevitable comparisons between face-to-face and virtual learning environments. Even though courses delivered electronically differ in some ways from those taught in a traditional classroom, the teacher in both environments can encourage active learning and can be accessible and available to all students. Fostering meaningful interaction and relationships, not only between student and teacher but also among the students themselves, can be accomplished, in large part, on how the course is designed and what activities it contains. Teachers who establish a sense of immediacy and who show that they value both the quality of the content and the quality of the relationships in their class can be successful whether or not the course is delivered in person or at a distance.

Resumen

El rápido desarrollo de la enseñanza y aprendizaje a distancia ha llevado realizar comparaciones entre los ambientes virtuales y presenciales. Aunque los cursos dados electrónicamente difieren, de alguna forma, de aquellos enseñados en una clase tradicional, el docente en ambos ambientes puede motivar el aprendizaje activo y puede estar accesible y disponible a todos los alumnos. El fomentar las interacciones y relaciones significativas, no solo entre el estudiante y el profesor, sino también entre los mismos estudiantes, se puede lograr en su mayoría según el diseño del curso y las actividades que contenga. Los profesores que establecen inmediación y los que demuestran valorar tanto la calidad del contenido, como la calidad de las relaciones en sus clases podrán ser exitosos en un curso virtual o en uno a distancia.

As distance learning and teaching become increasingly common, a critical challenge facing teachers is achieving a balance between quality content and responsive modes of delivering this content to students. Ways of forming and sustaining relationships in e-Teaching share many features in common with face-to-face teaching, but there are significant differences as well.

One aspect of virtual teaching and learning environments is the danger of students feeling isolated and consequently unmotivated. Prioritizing meaningful interaction among students and teachers and putting into practice the principles of *immediacy* and *social presence* can help minimize the lack of engagement that students can experience in e-Learning. Careful attention to

course design as well as strategic incorporation of activities and on-line tools that facilitate productive interaction and immediacy can significantly enrich the classroom atmosphere and, by extension, increase student motivation by helping students feel connected to each other and to the teacher.

THE GROWTH AND STATUS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Virtual learning environments have become commonplace, especially since the 1990s. The original development of e-Learning was primarily in adult education and in traditional universities in developed countries such as the U.S. and Australia, but distance education has now spread throughout the world, including in developing nations (Kember, 2007). According to a report on online education in the U.S., "Over 6.1 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2010 term; an increase of 560,000 students over the number reported the previous year" (Allen & Seaman, 2011, p. 4). There is ample evidence that this trend is continuing if not intensifying.

Distance education can be delivered in a wide range of ways and incorporate technology to greater or lesser degrees, including what are called "hybrid courses" which combine traditional face-to-face (F2F) contact with e-Teaching. Electronic delivery of courses can also take place in real-time (synchronously) via e-conferencing software such as Adobe Connect or by way of video chat/instant messaging applications such as ooVoo. Alternatively, instruction can be provided entirely in an asynchronous format via learning/course management systems like Blackboard or Moodle. The delivery mode and the elements within the electronic tools that are chosen for course use depend on the needs of the learners, the limitations of the educational institution or provider, and the technological skill of the instructor or team of instructors, among other factors. For example, threaded discussion boards are often utilized in both the synchronous and asynchronous formats as a way of initiating and/or sustaining discussions between and among students and their teachers. Even in courses conducted primarily through a course management system that does not normally include real-time interaction, individual instructors may choose to incorporate practices such as conducting their office hours via Skype or by telephone in order to establish a more direct and immediate contact with students.

LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS AND EFFECTIVE LEARNING

Just as there is no single delivery method for distance learning, students in e-courses also vary in their circumstances, learning styles, and preferences. For some students, electronic delivery of courses may seem normal and may even be preferred. Others, however, may be wary of the distance approach to instruction; they might, in fact, have a negative attitude toward it and consequently feel that it is a less personal way to learn and to be taught. Teachers need to be prepared to have both kinds of students in their classroom, as well as students who have mixed feelings about e-Learning. It is also helpful for teachers to be aware of specific ways of teaching and communicating that can be adopted in order to alleviate student anxiety and enhance the teacher's presence in the course.

One way a teacher can reach students more effectively, whether it is a F2F or distance course, is to expect students to engage in "active learning." Active learning has been heralded by researchers and practitioners to be superior in many ways to the time-worn teacher-centered method of teaching. What are termed "constructivist models of learning" operate on the assumption that "learners actively construct their own meaning and knowledge from their experiences" and that active learning, along with an emphasis on collaboration with others and the use of authentic tasks promotes a deeper and longer-lasting learning experience (Bangert, 2004, p. 218). Some students may resist the move to student-centered classrooms, but as collaboration and dynamic interaction become the norm in students' everyday lives and the workplace, educators are doing students a service by encouraging them to be active participants and thus more engaged in their learning.

A constructivist model of education and increasing the use of technology in instruction seems to line up well with the kinds of students who are entering the educational system today, as well as those who will come in the future. A recent trend in distance learning is the provision of academic content and services to younger students and their parents in K-12 institutions (Paloff & Pratt, 2007). In a 2009 report, the International Council for Open and Distance Education points out the suitability of this development among the so-called "net generation," particularly when these students come to be of university age.

The generation of learners now entering the higher education system in many parts of the world is significantly more technologically literate than previous generations. These technology savvy learners will likely demand a more aggressive e-based pedagogy that will include digital technologies… (ICDE, 2009, p. 18).

The aforementioned tendencies and changes in the educational landscape have also been taken up by researchers in such fields as education, psychology, and neurobiology. Hayles, in her 2007 article on how cognitive styles vary from generation to generation, makes a distinction between hyper and deep attention. The author maintains

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that hyper attention, a cognitive mode that is becoming increasingly common among the current generation, "is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams…and having a low tolerance for boredom" (p. 187). Although these tendencies may be viewed with a certain sense of alarm, if teachers are aware of this shift they will be better able to accommodate it. Furthermore, educators can purposefully guide their students in how to strategically use both deep attention and hyper attention in academic tasks like sustained reading.

The use of technology in education, both in F2F and distance classes, is appropriate for the engagement of both hyper and deep attention. This can be accomplished, as Hayles has illustrated, by the use of social media in exploring themes of literature, or by incorporating the kinds of electronic games with which students are already familiar and in many cases highly skilled. This utilization of students' previous experiences (those with or without technology) can in turn also enable these learners to develop new abilities, knowledge, and perspectives.

IMMEDIACY, INTERACTION, AND SOCIAL PRESENCE IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Another feature of successful learning is the emotional connection that students experience, otherwise known as *affective learning*. This has been defined as representing "the attitudes students develop about the course, the topic, and the instructor" (Russo & Benson, 2005, p. 54) and is in large part a function of the kinds of relationships students are able to develop while enrolled in the class and possibly beyond. It has been demonstrated by Russo and Benson, among other researchers, that positive affective learning is enhanced by *teacher immediacy*—specific behaviors that enhance closeness between the teacher and student and by a clear sense of the teacher's presence. Immediacy behaviors can be verbal or non-verbal and can communicate an array of messages and intentions. According to Gregersen (2008), "immediacy behaviors signal approachability, indicate availability for communication…, reveal interpersonal warmth and closeness, and reflect a positive attitude on the part of the sender toward the receiver" (p. 32). Some behaviors that are believed to create immediacy include gesturing, using humor, addressing students by name, and encouraging feedback. It is not always possible to replicate the non-verbal immediacy behaviors in a distance environment, but achieving immediacy verbally is very much an option.

In addition to teacher immediacy, affective learning is also influenced by the quality of the interactions students have with their classmates; in fact, ample opportunities for meaningful interaction should be viewed by teachers as a necessary design component for their distance courses. Emphasizing immediacy and interaction in distance education can promote positive student motivation and may well prevent students from dropping or psychologically distancing themselves from the course and/or the instructor and other students.

A related concept is the idea of *social presence*, which has been described as "the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication" (Gunawardena and Zittle as cited in Aragon, 2003, p. 60). Social presence is something that teachers strive for in both F2F and virtual instruction, but it can be seen as more of a challenge in e-Learning, especially in asynchronous learning environments where learners can feel isolated and disconnected with the instructor and others in the class. In addition to positively influencing affective learning, teacher presence and teacher immediacy have been linked with improved cognitive learning as well as perceived learning; in other words, how much students **thought** they had learned in a course (Russo and Benson, 2005).

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE TEACHING BY DISTANCE

There are many different ways in which the aforementioned principles can be incorporated into virtual teaching and learning environments. Following are suggestions for putting into practice the kind of interaction, teacher immediacy and social presence that have the potential to tap the best that technology and e-learning have to offer. The goal is for learners to experience active learning and the satisfaction of being an integral part of a dynamic learning community in a distance learning environment. This is just a partial list; as technology evolves and spreads and education by distance becomes more and more common so will the ways that instructors and students maximize the advantages of this model of course delivery.

COURSE DESIGN FEATURES

An online course has to be accessible and welcoming to students from the start.

The visual layout of the syllabus and technology tools such as a learning management system (for example, Blackboard) should be clear and easy to navigate so that students can easily access information and make contact with the teacher and others in the class. Common elements that teachers can incorporate include a welcome message to the class, exchanging initial e-mail messages to each individual student (if class size permits), and making sure that students introduce themselves to each other before or when the class starts. Instructor and student profiles can be posted on the LMS or on a course website, blog, or, alternatively, the teacher can create a group or community on a social networking site such as Facebook.

Assessment should be meaningful and, when possible, collaborative.

The qualities of effective on-line learners are diverse, but as learning styles and modes of education evolve, so has the profile of the kind of online learner that is likely to be entering our classes. According to Dabbagh (2007), the online learner of today "is competent in the use of on-line learning technologies, particularly communication and collaborative technologies [and] understands, values, and engages in social interaction and collaborative learning" (p. 224). For learners who possess these qualities and competencies, self- and peer-assessment that are accomplished collaboratively with the help of technology are often more valuable than traditional, teacher-centered assessment practices.

THE TEACHER AND THE TEACHING

The teacher needs to be present and available in the course.

It is important to realize that teaching by distance requires a different kind of accessibility compared with the F2F classroom. While some of the contact with students may take place in real time, much of it does not, and students can easily feel ignored to the point that they disengage. When the teacher communicates immediately who s/he is, answers emails promptly, holds regular office hours, participates actively (when appropriate) in virtual discussions, and gives students prompt feedback, students are more likely to see that person as someone who is approachable and who cares about them as individual human beings and as learners.

It is up to the teacher to create and sustain a positive learning environment.

Think about what makes a F2F classroom environment comfortable. The instructor may come in early and chat with the students or the students and teacher may share personal stories in a discussion in order to make a point or provide examples. After a few class periods, a teacher creates closeness with students by addressing them by name. All of these things can be done in a virtual classroom, but it might take some creativity on the part of the teacher. On an e-conferencing system such as Adobe Connect, in addition to seeing the faces of some or all contributors to a class discussion, there is a running chat on what is called a "chat pod" that appears on the screen for all to see. Ideally, this is talk that is on-task, but it can also be the kind of verbal interaction in which students engage before or after class. The chat pod is also a good place for someone to ask a question when that student cannot or will not ask it out loud but nonetheless wants a response. To be able to better know students as individuals, instructors can print out student profiles that in-clude students' pictures or can create a file on Word or a spreadsheet that contains information about students that emerge over time. The teacher might find at least some of this information beneficial when communicating with students in the future.

STUDENT-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Course activities should include ample opportunities for interaction and collaboration

Planning an online course means planning in advance every aspect of the course, including the kinds of activities, grouping, and sequences that will be a part of each class session or module. Collaborative learning activities, including various kinds of group work, brainstorming activities, group assignments and projects, and debates, are all excellent ways for students to establish a solid social presence among themselves. That is not to say that solitary activities, such as journal writing, cannot also be an important part of a distance course, but students working together toward a common goal collaboratively has the potential to extend their perspective and transform the activity. Incorporating a cooperative element could result in an activity like journal writing evolving into collaborative writing or peer response journals.

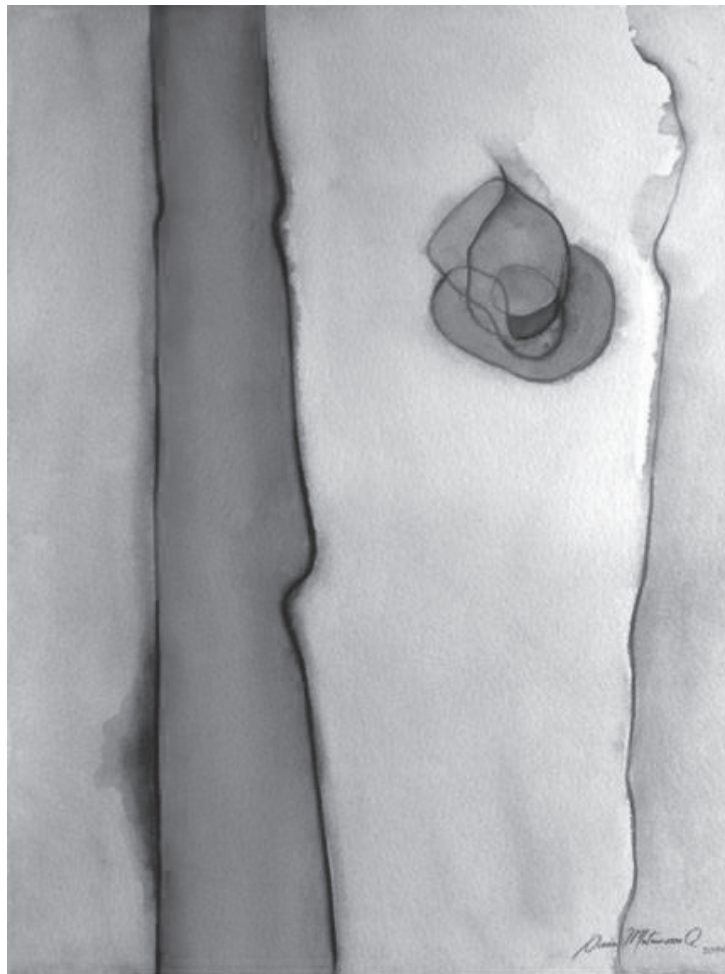*Teachers should encourage students to take discussions seriously and therefore actively participate*

Asychronous electronic discussion boards are an effective way for students to explore issues and share opinions, but active participation by all class members is essential for the success of this kind of interaction. Aragon (2003) makes the point that participating regularly benefits students both in the short and long run. "It is very easy to be passive when it comes to discussion boards, and passivity leads to instructional and social experiences that are not fulfilling" (p. 66). The key role played by immediacy and social presence in the virtual classroom makes active participation in class interaction that much more indispensable.

CONCLUSION

Good teaching and good learning rely on the quality of relationships, and distance teaching and learning are certainly no exception. Research findings and evidence from the field on the positive impact of teacher immediacy and social presence underscore the fact that what constitutes exemplary teaching and engagement of learners applies universally and does not depend on whether or not the teachers and learners are in the same place.

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