Transactional distance theory as a foundation for developing innovative and reactive instruction

Moderator & Summariser:
Wendy Lowe
Instructional Designer
Organizational Change Management Group
Oracle, Canada
Tel: +1 514 843 6762 #5504
wlowe@ca.oracle.com

Discussion Schedule
Discussion: 1 - 10 November 99
Summing up: 11 - 12 November 99

Pre-discussion paper

While researching texts for a distance education course I became interested in the notion of transactional distance as outlined in Moore and Kearsley's "Distance Education: A Systems View" and developed previously by Moore in the early 1970's. Moore thought of transactional distance in terms of dialogue, or communication between teacher and student, and structure, or the design of the instructional material.

In 1995 I was involved in research with computer-mediated communication at Concordia University. SoftArc's FirstClass was used to enrich a course in Instructional Design with great success, despite the fact that the students had regular face-to-face lectures and saw each other often outside of class. The conferencing system and the instructional strategies developed to accompany the class material allowed students to build a learning community that formerly had never existed. Deborah Stirling (http://www.stirlinglaw.com/deborah/stir4.htm) proposes that Moore's theory should encourage the development of more innovative instructional models. These models could prove as relevant in the classroom as in a distance system.

In traditional distance education, where the learner is separated from the instructor and other students in time and physical space, the only method of communication was often by regular post and occasional meetings. Practitioners recognized the need to provide strategies of communication, though no one tried to make believe that this type of education was the same as face-to-face. (I sometimes think that the original idea behind distance education, fact the learners might not otherwise have access to instruction, has been lost in some of the comparisons we try to draw today between distance and traditional teaching). In fact, in the classroom, dialogue is often pitifully absent and students are tightly bound to the instructional structure.

For distance education, the use of email and computer-mediated conferencing have seemed an obvious solution to the improvement in teacher/student and student/student communication, though early research found that logistical problems and reluctance to try and persevere with the new technologies stood in the way of students' genuine appreciation of the way in which they could become drawn in to a discussion with fellow learners and the instructor as well (for one example see Hiltz online:
http://eies.njit.edu/~hiltz/workingpapers/philly/philly.htm).

Technology changes and improvements have fostered new approaches to distance education which in turn are leading to innovative classroom applications. When I tutor the distance course for which I am responsible at McGill University, I realise that I give more written (online) feedback to students per assignment than I ever received (in either verbal or written form) from most of my teachers in the Masters' program I completed two years ago.

One issue that occurs to me while pondering collaborative online strategies is the following: if, in decreasing transactional distance, we provide strategies to increase dialogue and adapt or decrease the structure of the instructional material, is there a point at which the dialogue takes over and the original learning objectives are compromised? Are we back to discussing whether constructed learning is of first importance? What about content that must be learned in order to satisfy some criteria: do strategies to increase dialogue move the student

away from the instructional design of the material, or is it the job of a skilled facilitator to carefully control the dialogue to serve the ends designated by the curriculum?

See also:

Elizabeth Lynch at Arizona State University,
http://seamonkey.ed.asu.edu/~mcisaac/emc703old97/spring97/4/lynch4.htm

Bischoff, W., Bisconer, S. Kooker, B. & Woods, L. (1996). Transactional distance and interactive television in the distance education of health professionals. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 10 (3), 4-19.

Bischoff, W. Dissertation Abstract online:
http://www3.ncsu.edu/dox/NBE/UMI_DL_Abstracts/AAC_9334909.html

Moore, M. & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance Education: A Systems View*, Wadsworth Publishing.

Post-discussion summary

Summary

My initial curiosity about transactional distance was related to the argument that says that distance students might not learn or persevere as well because of the separation of teacher and learner, and that this might be due to lack of communication strategies. It hadn't occurred to me initially that transactional distance exists all the time in classrooms.

Muhammed Betz, towards the end of our discussion offered this: " The term transactional distance refers to, first and foremost, the learning transaction (much like a business transaction or a client-customer transaction, to allude to TQM jargon) between the learner and the instructor (i.e., teacher, author/designer, whatever is politically correct!). Transactional distance is referring to the quality of the learning transaction with the quality dependent on both participants in the transaction as well as variables of media."

Theory

Farhad Saba emphasised that to be truly paradigmatic, distance education theory should explain all education, not just that where student and teacher are separated by distance. Instructional systems design must include built-in negative feedback loops to optimize interaction at a distance and keep learning sessions productive.

Glen Gummess felt that the nature of Moore's theory will not produce innovative teaching strategies but rather provide a framework for reality, while David Kennedy suggested that the transactional distance concept may be flawed and actually unhelpful. He felt that the term lacks internal logic and the concept predictive validity. In his experience, decreased structure results in decreased dialogue. Other participants did not agree with him.

Molly Freeman feels that Transactional Distance Theory does not invite spontaneous response to a change in direction in a learning situation.

Steve Stahl questioned the use of the term "structure" and its impact on transactional distance - he gives an example where it could be argued that structure actually decreases transactional distance.

Dennis Nelson suggested that the fundamental issue should be a focus on "living objectives" rather than "learning objectives". He places these objectives within the context of real life, the learning it offers and how we react to these learning opportunities.

Course Design

David Kennedy took the view that course design rather than dialogue itself is the major factor in transactional distance.

Ania Lian felt that course design is the product of goal definition, and that participation is not in itself a goal. She invited list members to differentiate between transactional distance and the teacher/learner distance as regards developing critical thinking. She asked how we can educate learners to think critically or outside the structure and how much freedom we give learners to participate (or not) in structured events. The goal of a course should dictate this exploration. But we should consider structuring the teaching so that the dialogue becomes a need rather than a teacher's decision. Rick Parkany drew a good metaphor when he compared teacher and course design to a director and a script.

Cathy Burke is an instructor who has experience with students who feel that learning at a distance may be less real than what happens in the classroom. Face-to-face contact seems to be reassuring for many. She also contributed the idea that online discussions can decrease transactional distance because all students benefit from the exchange and all are encouraged to participate in an asynchronous environment. She did point out that this online "freedom" might have positive and negative effects, but then so does any form of communication.

Roger Goodson mentioned that he felt there was little interest in constructivism in higher education: that is not the feeling I get from IFETS list (or others): would anyone care to respond?

Dennis Nelson, in response to Ania Lian, described a "good teacher", mentioning that such a gem helps learners learn without telling them, helps learners feel prepared for what is to come and makes them eager for the next instalment. He points out that many different styles and teaching approaches can place responsibility with the learner, and asked whether any list participant has qualitatively studied an approach where activities/dialog would be structured instead of course design, and the focus would be on learner to learner dialog. Ania Lian then proposed that it is difficult to say what makes dialogue a good thing.

Martin Owen, intrigued by the discussion between Farhad and Ania, feels that "optimisation" may be determined by the community of learners and agrees with Ania that goals of collaboration and interaction (as well as others) can be achieved without compromising learners' needs to explore.

Molly Freeman feels that different points of view relating to transactional distance may be attributed to culture, gender and learning styles. Differing methodologies will give rise to differing emphases and values.

David Kennedy brings us down to earth by explaining how Moore's concept of transactional distance, social and psychological (a distance of understandings and perceptions), differs from physical distance. Muhammed Betz suggested that it is this difference which is most confusing when discussing transactional distance. Farhad Saba reiterated that much research centres on the concept of distance as physical. He also concluded that instructional designers can only control the "management of conditions" of teaching and learning, and that they cannot assess the "quality" of learning and teaching first hand.

I tried to turn the discussion to more pragmatic matters such as whether anyone had any examples of situations (classroom, distance) where transactional distance is affected by teaching strategies or course design? Molly Freeman contributed Guy Bensusan's site http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~hgb/tlqm.html at Northern Arizona State University, as a good example of structure inviting dialogue. David Kennedy replied by addressing the key issues of physical, social and psychological distance and how they are addressed at the University of Paisley with online strategies and activities to encourage participation in the learning community.

My original question about dealing with transactional distance in instruction seems to have been somewhat lost in questions centering around definitions of terms and concepts. It is interesting to note that the direction in which the discussion moved affected who participated in it.