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Interactivity in a Graduate Distance Education School

Brent Muirhead
11190 Indian Village Drive
Alpharetta, GA 30022 USA
Tel: +1 770 751 1783
edu@mindspring.com

ABSTRACT

As distance education schools grow in popularity, contemporary educators are raising important instructional questions about the quality of these programs. A vital question involves concerns about the level of interactivity (communication, participation, and feedback) between students and between teachers and their students. Interactivity is a challenging subject because there are few research studies that address the issue. The author has investigated interactivity and completed a doctoral degree from a distance education school. The discussion highlights the unique challenges and benefits of computer-mediated education for adult learners. The closing section of the paper is devoted to outlining the skills that are essential for student success. The paper offers relevant insights into social interaction that should assist students, administrators and distance educators.

Keywords

Interactivity, Computer-mediated communication, Distance education

Introduction

The social dimension of learning by computer-mediated education has received little attention in literature. Sherry (1996) raised real concerns that students appreciated the accessibility of their distance education courses even though their on-line courses contained far less dialogue than the conventional face-to-face classes. Kearsley (1995) observed that computer-based instruction focused mainly on student-content, self-study lessons and materials. He believed that a greater emphasis in collaborative and cooperative learning and the growth of computer networks prompted educators to raise questions about the issue of social interaction. Because of studies like Kearsley's, the educational community has become more aware of the importance of promoting student interaction in on-line learning classes (Spitzer, 1998).

Recently, the writer completed a Ph.D. program from a distance education graduate school (Capella University). The majority of my courses were taken through the Internet by utilizing computer-mediated classes. Also, my dissertation study (Muirhead, 1999) involved exploring the issue of interactivity (communication, participation, and feedback) between students and between students and their tutors. My interest in on-line education comes from being a veteran student who has completed three masters' degrees and one doctoral degree from traditionally based educational institutions. My extensive academic background has given me a unique perspective on the problems and promise of distance education.

Challenges and Benefits of Distance Education

The value of computer-mediated instruction for today's adult learners should be evaluated by considering basic questions about the teaching and learning process. It is important that prospective distance education students ask a series of questions that will help them evaluate whether computer-mediated education will meet their learning needs. Unfortunately, some students fail to take the time to explore the nature of distance education and either have difficulty completing their doctoral programs or drop out of school. For instance, students are given the freedom to make numerous educational decisions, such as selecting dissertation advisors, and the wide range of choices becomes a major problem for them. Their prior educational experiences did not prepare them for learner-centered educational settings because most contemporary graduate schools have program guidelines that restrict students in their capacity to personalize their course work. Then, when they enter graduate distance schools they become academically paralyzed because they do not have the mind sets and learning experiences to create and manage their own educational programs.

My distance education experiences have given me the opportunity to evaluate two vital instructional Internet issues: the feasibility of encouraging professional and personal growth and the importance of having adequate

instructional support (academic and affective) for the learner. Obviously, each of these issues has important implications for the distance learner. My brief discussion will seek to place each of these within the context of computer-mediated education and to offer insights to assist those who are currently involved or interested in the quality of teaching and learning in distance education schools.

Frequently, prospective on-line students wonder about the academic credibility of today's distance education schools. It is a vital question that raises legitimate concerns about how well their degree will be received by prospective business and educational employers. My selection of a school was based on six basic factors: regional accreditation in the United States, adequate learner support staff, course titles that would be easily recognized by educators and business personnel, financial costs that were realistic for an educator, program flexibility, and a learner-centered philosophy.

Distance educators view computer-mediated education as an excellent format designed to promote interaction with a diverse student population. On-line educators strive to create a democratic climate that encourages students to share their views and ideas freely. Students use written comments to share conceptual knowledge with their fellow students and professors. The process of reading and writing on-line promotes cognitive and metacognitive skills (Hannafin, Hill & Land, 1997). Students gain practical experience by translating their ideas into narratives that effectively communicate with other students. Writing is a powerful tool that offers numerous opportunities for students to display their depth of knowledge, organizational skills, reflective insights, and ability to explore new ideas (Greenberg, 1998; Repman & Logan, 1996).

My on-line educational experience affirmed that distance education can help individuals meet a variety of personal and professional goals. For instance, one of my short-term goals was to have my letters published in major newspapers. After my on-line education, my letters, which addressed vital social and educational issues, were published in *USA Today* (eight), *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (four), and twice in *The New York Times*. How did my Internet classes help me publish my work? In addition to the required written assignments, such as posting weekly comments for on-line discussion forums and term papers, the professors encouraged students to write on subjects that were relevant to their personal and professional interests. In my case, it involved writing on issues such as how to effectively integrate technology into high school classrooms. Also, my professors designed written assignments that could be used for future publication.

The absence of face-to-face contact with professors and other learners raises concerns about the affective dimension of distance education. Effective communication between teacher and learner is essential to sophisticated learning experiences, and academic collaboration is a vital integrating factor that helps learners to successfully negotiate graduate school. Distance learners cultivate a host of faculty relationships. Rossman (1995) related that learners devote significant time communicating with professors during class assignments, during comprehensive exams and during the thesis or dissertation process.

However, computer-mediated education creates unique risks for both tutors and learners. When teachers face heavy workloads from large on-line classes requiring large amounts of personal e-mails, phone calls, and discussion forum comments, the quality of on-line interactivity with students suffers. Also, if learners become discouraged by fellow classmates who appear to offer more intelligent discussion comments, it can have a negative impact on the quality and quantity of their discussion postings. As learners devalue their personal knowledge and life experiences, their on-line contributions can become more driven by an obligation to get through the experience (Rowntree, 1995).

My on-line experiences and research into interactivity (communication, participation, and feedback) have found that both students and professors have communication problems. Students complained about classmates who were constantly late in posting on-line discussion forum comments because they felt that the late posters reduced the number of contributions and had a negative impact on the quality of academic discussions. Although the majority of learners observed that their teachers gave them feedback on their work, the educational problem involved teachers who did not provide consistent, timely, and relevant feedback. Therefore, both teachers and learners experienced some communication problems with computer-mediated education (Burge, 1994; Muirhead, 1999).

The communication problems that occur during on-line courses reveal that both teachers and students must be active participants who are consistently involved in relevant academic dialog. A student-centered learning model requires that both professors and students be prepared to take personal responsibility for their role in the learning process. New students who enter distance education programs should receive clear instructions about the importance of being proactive and self-directed. Administrators must create seminars, workshops, and

educational literature that gives students a clear picture of their role in creating sustained, two-way communication with their classmates and tutors (Sherry, 1996).

Successful Distance Education Students

What is the profile of a successful on-line student? Distance education literature reveals a strong emphasis on students who are motivated, have good time management skills, and are self-reliant. Ben-Jacob (1997) observed that "it is someone who understands time commitment and will keep pace with the course work. This personality type will be successful and will appreciate the lack of time constraints in a distance learning without abusing them" (p. 212).

Distance education contains a natural learning curve for students as they adapt to working in a computer-mediated educational setting. Often, students must become more active and self-directed in their study habits, which can be a major change for those who tend to be passive about their education (Kearney, 1997). Research studies are starting to identify the skills that are necessary for today's on-line students. Rowntree (1995) shared the following four primary competencies for students:

1. Computer skills - students should be able to effectively use the word processing and communication software that required for on-line discussions.
2. Literacy/discussion skills – students should be able to read and respond critically to complex and sometimes lengthy messages. The students must be able to use relevant written comments to develop ideas, raise questions, challenge student thoughts, and share their feelings.
3. Time management skills – students must have flexible educational plans that assist them in completing assignments in a timely manner. The students should have the necessary skills to read, comprehend, and discern written course materials and a host of on-line discussion messages.
4. Interactive skills – students must have the cognitive ability to create alternative ideas or illustrations while encouraging other classmates by being patient and by respecting their needs to share on-line (net etiquette). Students must display respect for others by being flexible in the amount of and frequency of their on-line comments. Students should be willing to work with other students and help foster a dynamic learning group.

Current research studies should encourage administrators to explore ways to orient and educate new and existing faculty members to the on-line learning environment. Administrators need to investigate creative ways to promote relevant staff development plans that meet the needs of today's graduate educators. Instructors vary in their level of on-line experience, therefore their interactivity skills must be supported and encouraged through formal and informal professional development activities (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Computer-mediated education creates definite social interaction challenges for the teaching and learning process. Personally, my on-line education reflected a unique blend of positive experiences and several frustrating moments. For instance, my dissertation committee did an outstanding job of offering me timely advice by using numerous e-mails and telephone calls. Also, most of my on-line classes had intellectually stimulating on-line conversations that encouraged critical analysis of social issues. However, my primary learning problem involved students who failed to do their portion of the weekly group projects. In fact, more research is needed on how to help teachers effectively manage on-line group work assignments. Yet, my distance education degree program was a positive learning experience that has helped me achieve important personal and professional goals.

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