

## **Social Dynamics of Online Learning: Pedagogical Imperatives and Practical Applications**

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### **Communication in the (Online) Classroom**

Approximately 20 years before online learning emerged, scholars in two different fields made similar statements about the learning experience. In 1972 a doctoral student in adult education at the University of Wisconsin researched numerous educational programs where the instructor and student were physically separated and developed what is now called the transactional distance theory (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, pp. 199-203). Moore postulated that distance was a pedagogical, not a geographical, phenomenon. He also stated that one could overcome this distance through effective dialogue (i.e., instructor-learner interaction) and instructional design (i.e., structure). In a similar vein, three communication scholars authored a book in which they declared, "There is a difference between knowing and teaching and that difference is communication in the classroom" (Hunt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978, p. 3). In other words, they concluded that the process of communication is at the heart of the learning experience.

These education and communication scholars understood that the learning experience wasn't primarily about the shape of the room, color of the chalkboard, type of font used for the syllabus, high-tech or low-tech equipment in the classroom, or the physical separation between the instructor and students (or the students from one another). Rather, the communication dynamics within the classroom environment were the critical factor in the learning experience. This is especially significant when considering distance education, where the call is often to develop directed learning opportunities in an independent learning environment. However, an independent learning environment is not the same as an isolated learning environment. One the benefits of online distance education that makes it superior to the older correspondence models, is that students can still learn in an academic community, albeit a virtual one.

Some might argue that distance education, by its very nature, requires self-motivated students to work well and therefore the students should be responsible for creating such interaction events. After all, some instructors within the traditional model simply show up for class, deliver their lecture to a sea of note-taking students, and then leave. Besides, it is typically the distance learner who is isolated, and not the instructor who is usually located on a university campus. Failure to address the social and relational dynamics within online courses may result in greater feelings of isolation among the distance learners, reduced levels of student satisfaction, poor academic performance, and ultimately increased attrition. Successful online facilitators face the challenge of finding ways to connect with students and for students to connect with other students in meaningful ways. More often than not, most students wait for the professor to "do" something that magically knits or binds them with others in meaningful ways. As a result, we believe that online learning puts an added responsibility on the instructor to foster a communication-rich learning environment. An understanding of social dynamics, including instructor immediacy and classroom community, can assist online instructors as they seek to develop the communal scaffolding necessary to support an effective learning environment.

## Social Dynamics

Mehrabian (1969) developed the concept of immediacy, which he defined as “those communication behaviors that enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another” (p. 203). Someone who demonstrates high immediacy behaviors such as maintaining eye contact during a conversation is likely to produce a more favorable affect and thus communicate more effectively. Immediacy has often been examined as a nonverbal construct marked by behaviors such as leaning toward another, assuming a position close to another, and looking into another’s eyes. Verbal behaviors can also contribute to a sense of immediacy. Similar to nonverbal immediacy, the use of verbal immediacy behaviors such as asking questions, using humor, addressing individuals by name, and initiating discussion increases psychological closeness.

A limited number of researchers have attempted to examine the role of instructor immediacy (or, more typically, social presence or high interactivity) in the online classroom. Gunawardena (1995) concluded that online communication can be perceived as interactive, active, interesting, and stimulating by conference participants, depending on the kind of interactions and sense of community by the participants. Furthermore, Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) found that social presence alone accounted for 60% of the explained variance when examining overall participant satisfaction in a computer-mediated conferencing environment. Vrasidas and McIsaac (1999) found that interaction was influenced by the structure of the course, class size, feedback, and prior experience with computer-mediated communication. One example of the negative effects of nonimmediacy was evident in their studies of feedback. “Students felt that the lack of immediate feedback in the online portion of the course was discouraging and contributed to their limited participation in the online discussions” (p. 33). They advised that teachers provide timely feedback to ensure high levels of interaction in the course.

Harasim (1990) stated that the computer-mediated classroom is an environment rich with the potential for interaction and collaboration among the participants. Palloff and Pratt (1999) declared, “Even in this virtual or electronic community, educators must realize that the way the medium is used depends largely on human needs . . . these needs are the prime reason that electronic communities are formed” (p. 23). They proposed seven basic steps for developing academic communities in online distance classes: clearly define the group’s purpose, create a distinctive online gathering place, promote effective leadership from within, define norms and a code of conduct, allow for a range of roles, permit and facilitate subgroups, and permit students to resolve their own disputes (p. 24). Since the word community comes from the root *communicare* (“to share”), they suggest creating collaborative learning activities to enable students to share common experiences during the course of the online class.

McLellan (1999) postulated that the development of online communities would strengthen the online learning experience by fostering a sense of social presence among course participants (p. 40). Moller (1998) similarly encouraged the development of learning communities in asynchronous online courses. She stated that “the potential of asynchronous learning can only be realized by designing experiences and environments which facilitate learning beyond the content-learner interaction. To that end, it becomes necessary to create learner support communities” (pp. 115-116). Such online learning communities provide a framework for social reinforcement and information exchange while girding the learning experience with academic, intellectual, and interpersonal support (p. 116).

### Developing Communal Scaffolding

Communal scaffolding recognizes that successful online instructors must structure social support if they are to maximize learning benefits for their students. Scaffolding is commonly used in building construction to provide support for the structure, add an element of safety to the project, and provide a secure place to stand for the workers. Similarly, communal scaffolding encourages and reinforces cognitive development in the context of social connection and facilitation. As interpersonal dynamics are fitted into the existing course and institutional structures – through various online and offline strategies – learners are able to extend their range of learning opportunities by collaborating with others to achieve goals and complete assignments not otherwise possible. Finally, the scaffold helps instructors and others isolate individual student needs and customize communication to address a range of learning styles and socio-cultural variables.

The idea of scaffolding has been used by others to describe the facilitation or transfer of knowledge from cognitive to practical applications in order to maintain optimal levels of challenge for students (Greenfield, 1984; Harley, 1993). In those instances it has been used to describe the relationship between written and oral communication and the skill levels can be bridged.

When we talk about communal scaffolding here, we are referring to bridging the gap of another kind – the gap between the task (cognitive, intellectual) and interpersonal (social, interpersonal) requirements of online learning.

In light of the social dynamics found within effective learning environments, here are several online strategies students that we suggest to develop a solid communal scaffolding:

- ❖ Personal Discussion Folders – We encourage you to begin your online experience by creating folders titled “Autobiographies,” “Introductions,” “Ice-breakers,” or “Name and Face,” where your e-personality can be posted. If possible, complete the passport effect by including a personal photograph. We’ve found that students report feeling closer or more connected to other students in the course when they can see their photographs. This is one of the reasons that we include our personal photographs as part of the faculty homepage.
- ❖ Immediacy – To give your classmates the impression that you are “present” with them, respond to e-mail or threaded discussion in a timely manner. We also recommend using the other person’s first name in your reply to create greater interpersonal awareness. Even if you are just checking in to catch up on the day’s postings, stop by one or more of the rooms and let your presence be known in some way, shape or form. Consider it akin to simply “showing up” for an on-campus course.
- ❖ Live Chat – If “virtual (live chat) office” hours are available through an online chat function, we recommend that you schedule an appointment at least one time a semester with your instructor. Students tell us that live chat of this kind helps them connect with us – at a safer distance than a phone call – early on in the semester in ways that e-mail or voicemail cannot.
- ❖ Personalized E-mail – Another way to connect with faculty and other students is to send personalized e-mail outside of regular class time or required course discussion. Personalized e-mail might be used to encourage a fellow student who made a solid contribution in one of the required discussion formats.
- ❖ Audio/Video: We’ve found that our tone of voice can be used to set the right mood for future communication. It becomes a perceptual framework through which subsequent communication (whether textual or otherwise) is filtered. The tone of an audio message sent just before an exam or final paper to another student can even help reduce anxieties. All you need is a microphone and a plug-in such as RealProducer, which is a free download on the Web. If you’re really daring, you can use RealProducer or Microsoft Windows Movie Maker and add video.
- ❖ Create Private Places – This might sound strange at first blush, but to the extent allowable by the instructor and course management platform, create a separate private area for you and your assigned discussion group apart from general class discussion. This is the same idea as the personal discussion folders mentioned earlier, but for individual groups only. This is a space that the instructor may not enter unless invited. It is a group “safe haven.”

- ❖ Regular Updates – Everyone likes to see fresh, new content, which is an important indication that value is constantly being added to your learning experience. As instructors, we send weekly updates to students related to course content and procedures. Some students adopt a similar model and send brief weekly updates to us about their progress on group projects and theses.

Group Discussion and Discursive Style – Last, but certainly not least, one of the most basic, but often most underestimated, online strategies you can use to build connectedness revolves around participation in required group discussion formats. If you're not careful, your discursive style in online discussion may prevent you from connecting with others. While it's valuable to critically challenge ideas, watch that you avoid accusatory language or leading questions that indicate your biases. Feeling "safe" to express one's views is an important part of building community. Safety is further enhanced by establishing early on in the course rules for appropriate engagement and conduct within required discussion folders.

### Conclusion

So, how do we encourage active engagement on the part of teachers and learners, and how do we contribute to the kind of communal infrastructure that makes learning fun and exciting? Perhaps when it is all said and done the final answer resides in some of the key indicators of community. For example, do you know each other's names and are you comfortable engaging classmates and instructors in conversation? Does the conversation extend outside of the traditional instructional context? Do you share common goals and aspirations? Is there a sense that the "classroom" provides a safe environment for exploration and discovery? Are the learning outcomes ones that make sense to you and can you relate to them on a personal level? Have both students and teacher made an emotional commitment to the course? Is there a sense of shared responsibility? If most of these are present it is a good indication that your communal scaffold is a strong one and that you are well on your way to experiencing a rich learning community. It should be noted that there are no shortcuts to developing community. It takes time, and there is no substitute for time spent in communication with others—whether online or offline. Of course, time alone is insufficient. The time spent with classmates and with the instructor must be structured in such a way to facilitate the all-important transfer of intellectual and emotional capital.

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