

## **Learner Interactions: Considering the Research and Implications From the Field**

Kay Shattuck, D.Ed., Quality Matters

Haijun Kang, Penn State University

Learner interaction is one of the most common research themes that help to promote our understanding of distance teaching and learning processes (Saba, 2000). More than one hundred years ago, when correspondence education was the only option for delivery of education at a distance, learner interaction solely occurred asynchronously between teachers and learners mediated by print-based instructional materials. One hundred years later, the diversification of communication technologies has greatly enriched the content of learner interactions. Particularly, participating in today's rapidly evolving diverse and social networking cultures, distance education researchers and practitioners are finding the issue of learner interactions becoming increasingly complex. What is the place of learner interactions in designing today's distance education courses?

Building on Moore's Transactional Distance (TD) theory (1980), distance education scholars are making efforts to improve perceptions of today's technology-rich learner interactions in the context of diverse and social networking cultures. "Technology" is considered as having great potential of engendering high levels of learner interactions in a "Community of Inquiry" model proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000). Taking advantage of Web 2.0 technology and various social networking tools, current field practice has been giving more and more attention to the increase of learner-learner interaction. While many people have been showing great excitement about integrating various technologies into distance and web-based education to enrich learning experiences, many researchers and practitioners have expressed their concern of the real educational value of these technologies including wiki, blog, twitter, IM, podcasting, Multi-User Virtual Environment, etc.. If learner to learner interaction is to stand out of all learner interactions and if technology does have the added value to improve learning outcomes through engendering high levels of learner-learner interactions, the added value of the various technologies is to be fully evaluated through research.

Further, learners' cultures, not only ethnic and national cultures, but also the social networking cultures are also becoming an important component to the understanding of today's learner interactions (Shattuck, 2005). Kang and Gyorke (2008) argue that to understand learner interactions, one needs to extend mediation from traditional TD's approach to include other artifacts – "anything that is used within an activity system," such as language – into consideration (p. 208). Highly structured courses in TD's definition do not necessarily mean low dialog in today's technology-rich online courses. They also emphasize that the learner is a "communal individual" who lives in a multi-society. This nature of the learner greatly affects the outcome of learner-learner interactions as "the rules the student follows, the community the student lives in, and the division of labour the student is involved in are the factors that formulate individual differences" (p. 211). If learner-learner interaction is as equally important, if not more important, as to learner-teacher interaction and learner-content interaction, learners' rapidly

changing diverse and social networking cultures are to be included in today's design of distance and web-based education.

The current cry for the inclusion of learner-to-learner interaction in online course design is found in the "how to" literature and from "the field", but, as course designers and instructors do we know why and how to design for it and even if it is necessary to improve learning? Shouldn't we look at all the tools and the models from a teaching and learning perspective? We believe that today's distance education can best be improved when grounded in antecedent research and scholarly discussion. Those involved in online or eLearning would benefit by discussion of the historical roots and existing research around the issue of interaction especially in light of today's technology and accessibility to culturally diverse populations.

### References

- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105.
- Kang, H. & Gyorke, A. (2008). Rethinking distance learning activities: A comparison of transactional distance theory and activity theory. *Open Learning*. 23(3): 203-214.
- Moore, M.G. (1980). Independent study. In R. Boyd & J. Apps (Eds.), *Redefining the discipline of adult education* (pp. 16–31). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Saba, F. (2000). Research in distance education: A status report. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*. 1(1). Retrieve on April 20, 2009, from: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/4/337>
- Shattuck, K. (2005). Glimpses of the global Coral Gardens: Insights of international adult learners on the interactions of cultures in online distance education. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

### Author Summaries

**Kay Shattuck** is the Director of Research for Quality Matters and an assistant (adjunct) professor at Penn State. Her D.Ed., from Penn State is in adult education with a specialization on distance education. Her interest in the e-poster session is related to one of the Quality Matters standards related to learner engagement.

Contact information:

E-mail: [shattuck@qualitymatters](mailto:shattuck@qualitymatters)  
kay.shattuck (SKYPE)  
Phone: 717-387-2741 (mobile)

**Haijun Kang** is a doctoral student in adult education at the Pennsylvania State University (PSU). His research focus is on distance learning and web-based education. He has a master's degree in higher education with a focus on distance education and has worked in the field of distance education and online learning for ten years. He currently works on his graduate assistantship with the PSU's World Campus and has been engaged in the creation of technology-enriched online learning environments.

Contact information:

E-mail: [xk229@psu.edu](mailto:xk229@psu.edu)