Understanding Participation in Online Courses: A Triangulated Study of Perceptions of Interaction

Abstract

This presentation reports the results of a study that explored instructor and learner perceptions and attitudes toward interaction in online courses. Participants included faculty and learners involved with an online course as well as other faculty and learners who have expressed reluctance toward participating in online courses. Analysis of data revealed that although perceptions regarding interaction varied among all interviewed, upon reflection all course participants agreed that the interactivity was at least adequate in learning.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, our goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions shared by learners and faculty that are reluctant to enroll in online courses or those who withdraw early in the experience. Second, we wanted to explore instructors' and learners' attitudes and perceptions of interaction after they had experienced an online course.

Research Questions

1. How do learners and faculty (both participants and non-participants of the course) perceive the value of interaction in online courses?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between learner-learner and learner-instructor in the online class?
3. What strategies did the instructional team design to promote interaction?
4. In what ways did the instructional team address learner-interface interactions, and how did the learners perceive this form of interaction?
5. What pattern of interaction developed?

Methods

This study was based on data gathered from interviews, online course documents, and computer transcripts. Participants included 3 faculty (1 course instructor and 2 non-course participants) and 15 learners (11 learners who were enrolled in Engaging with Technology (EWT) and 4 who either chose not to enroll or withdrew after the first session).

The online course documents included an analysis of the course syllabus, a participant's guide and other materials that supported each of the learning activities. Transcripts of online communications captured threaded and chat discussion among learners and the instructor.

The analysis of the transcripts used a 5-step discussion analysis technique devised by Henri (1992).

Analysis and Preliminary Results

The interviews revealed the following about the four types of interactions: Interaction between the learner and the course content—most of the learners found that the course content was appropriate for the stated objectives of the course and was presented in a clear and concise manner.

Interaction between the learner and the instructor—most of the learners found their online interactions with the instructor (through the chat room and discussion board) to be very helpful.

Interaction between the learner and other learners—most of the learners thought that interactions with their fellow learners were very helpful in doing assignments, and clearing up questions and doubts.

Interaction between the learners and the interface—most of the respondents said that they were for the most part satisfied with the interface of the online course.

Computer Transcripts Analysis

We analyzed the average length of a student's post. For example, in Week 2, the learners replied to the instructor's messages and posted on average 55 words or about 5 sentences. For later weeks, learners seemed to post more than the average of the first week because they were looking for help in terms of course projects, and computer and technology–related problems. Also, some of them needed help in order to implement technology in their teaching in their school districts.

We found that most of the messages that were posted involved the course content, computer and technology skills, and the course projects. Not only did the learners share knowledge, but content analysis indicated that the learners were posting messages at a very high cognitive level. Furthermore, after reviewing the messages each week the researchers were able to distinguish some of the learners' characteristics in both the discussion board and the real-time chat room. For instance, many learners who are sociable in nature posted more messages and demonstrated high cognitive skills. Moreover, they added the comparison of the messages between themselves and the other classmates. Some learners, however, posted quite short messages.

Summary

Analysis of data revealed that although perceptions regarding interaction varied among all interviewed, upon reflection all course participants agreed that the interactivity was at least adequate. Detailed discussion analysis substantiated these perceptions, showing that deep levels of processing and interactivity were achieved.

Reference

Henri, F. (1992). Computer conferencing and content analysis. In A. R. Kaye (Eds.), Collaborative learning through computer conferencing: The Najaden paper (pp. 115-136). New York: Springer.