Transactional Distance within the E-Learning Environment: Using Structure and Dialogue to Bridge the Gap

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Abstract

Distance learning opportunities have grown by leaps and bounds since the 1990s. The emerging challenge for online learning is not how to recruit students for online programs but how to create an effective retention program and retain online learners to course and/or program completion.

Teachers are challenged to create interactive, structured, real-world, scaffolded learning experiences which lead to specific successful outcomes that minimize student anxiety and frustration which generally lead to reduced attrition and motivation problems. Online instructors face a similar challenge when designing and implementing online instruction; however, their challenge is compounded by "transactional distance."

In distance education, students and instructors experience a sense of separation that is caused by more than the existing simple physical distance inherent to online learning. "Transactional distance" is created as a result of the geographically-dispersed learners and instructors interacting via combination within an asynchronous, text-based online learning environment. Consequently, "transactional distance," a psychological and communications gap, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructors and those of the learners, emerges that exists for all participants within the e-learning experience. This phenomenon, particular to the online learning environment, may lead to students' increased feelings of isolation due to lack of effective interaction. Therefore, when designing and implementing e-learning experiences, the instructor must factor in two variables that affect transactional distance: a) structure, the flexibility or rigidity of the instructional methods and strategies used in the e-learning experience; and b) dialogue, the interaction patterns between/among instructor and learners during the e-learning experience.

Specific examples of interactive online adaptations (synchronous and asynchronous) were contrasted with onsite interaction activities and will be shared via handouts. These adaptations were specific to the online learning environment and emphasize collaboration, interaction, and project-based learning in order to minimize the effects of "transactional distance" within the e-learning experience.