



## Discussion Forum Efficacy in an Online Course: Dialogue vs Interaction

**Emmanuelle Bernardin**

Audencia – PRES LUNAM (France), Boston University (USA)

[ebernardin@audencia.com](mailto:ebernardin@audencia.com)

### Abstract

As online courses become an essential delivery format in higher education, course designers and instructors tend to focus on the best way to deliver knowledge to students who still have their in-class education as a base of comparison. In order to reduce the difference between both delivery methods and to handle the feeling of isolation students may have to face, discussion forums are often set up. The objective of these forums is twofold: facilitating the relationship between students and instructor about the course organization, and fostering learning.

If the first objective is usually not difficult to achieve, it is more complicated to evaluate the second. How does a student learn from a forum discussion? How should the instructor interact with students to improve their learning experience? To examine these questions, we will use the concepts of *Dialogue* and *Interaction*. Even if they look similar, a difference in term of learning construction can be made. Interaction occurs when two or more people participate in two or more reciprocal events that mutually influence one another. In a distance learning environment, interaction is often considered as the way students interact with the instructor, as well as with the system and the instructional content. This interaction is not always meaningful in terms of knowledge construction, but can support the learning process. By contrast, a dialogue has a purpose, each party building the content step by step, this construction aiming at improving understanding of the student [1]. Therefore, a dialogue is more demanding for both parties, and usually more stressful for students.

In this paper, we examine students' relations with peers and instructor, in the context of an online graduate course on Project Management, developed and delivered by an American university. We try to qualify these relations as *dialogue* or *interaction*, then we link the results to learning outcomes (measured through students' progresses and final grades), and to their perception of the learning experience.

### References

[1] Moore, M. G., Kearsley, G., (2011) *Distance Education: A Systems View of Online Learning*, 3rd Revised edition, Wadsworth Publishing Co Inc, 432 p.