

Real and Simulated Interaction in Distance Education

Introduction

Effective communication, both real and simulated, is the backbone of Distance Education. It plays a vital role in distribution of the information, appropriate feedback and proper assessment of knowledge. As the technology is improving, interaction between an instructor and a student is getting better. Some ways of communication although very primitive are still effective in today's digital world.

Types of Communications are divided into various categories.

A synchronous and Synchronous Communications (Bates, & Poole, 2003, pg. 54)

Communication using different types of mediums. (Bates, & Poole, 2003, pg. 53)

Student- teacher and student-student communications. (Holmberg, 2005, pg. 75, 82)

These are often integrated with one another to develop an effective teaching strategy.

A- Synchronous and Synchronous communications

In A-synchronous communication, the instructor and students are in a different place and time and the delivery of information is via text and multimedia. This is one way communication where exchange of information occurs in one direction from the instructor to students. The main advantage of this is flexibility and convenience while the lack of immediate feedback is a huge drawback.

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In synchronous communication, the instructor and students are in a different place but are in the same time and the distribution of information is through text or multimedia, live. This is two-way communications where the exchange occurs both ways through synchronous training. The drawback is an inconvenience and inflexibility but the immediate feedback is a main plus point. This gives students an opportunity to discuss the topic in detail with their instructors.

Using different types of media.

“Media is means of communication” (Bates, & Poole, 2003, pg 48). Technology is a vehicle that delivers media. In their book “Distance Education- a Systems View,” authors Moore and Kearsley have organized the journey of distance education in five periods as five generations. During each period, a different medium was used for communication. During the correspondence period, the method of interaction was mainly text. An exchange of materials took place via post. This was a slow process, yet effective during that period.

Tremendous development in the electronics field gave birth to stronger communication, broadcasting. Radio transmitted audio lessons. Television delivered audio-visual lessons through ITFS, Cable TV and telecourses. This one-way communication was not very effective as the assessment was not very efficient.

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Open Universities were the next generation which used printed materials, audiotapes, telephones as well as radio and television to deliver lessons and also maintained the quality and cost effectiveness.

The next generation was teleconferencing. Both Audio and Video modes were used to transmit data. Two-way audio-visual communication became possible with satellite technology.

Internet was the most recent addition in the field of education. Using different educational software or using a learning management system programs, virtual classrooms were created. This was indeed the fastest and easiest form of communication.

Communication among course participants.

Teacher-Student Communication is critical in distance education. According to Baath (Holmberg, 2005, pg 76) three key elements in the success of distance education are feedback, motivation and evaluation. An effective communication helps reach these goals efficiently.

Student-Student interaction is promising in this era of Internet. Simulated interaction is achieved through chats, emails, instant messages, mobile texts, cell phones and PDA's.

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Web 2.0, which includes blogs, wikis, social networking sites, audio-video sharing sites and hosted web sites are a rapidly developing phenomenon.

Conclusion

Technology has helped in shaping of current distance education programs. Synchronous and A-synchronous communications offer advantages when used properly. Real interaction delivers contents and simulated interaction triggers the thinking process. Apt planning of the lesson plans with accurate management and appropriate delivery method is a key to an effective distance education course.

References:

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