Online Teaching Strategy: A Position Paper

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Abstract

This article discussed the online teaching strategies and the pedagogical aspects of online teaching. This author's position is that an effective online learning environment includes the use of online teaching strategies that incorporate dialogue as part of the pedagogical design. Based upon the information researched and discussed in this article, the use of virtual teaching strategies that incorporate effective dialogue as part of their pedagogical design are in the best position to provide an effective online learning environment.

Keywords: Online, Teaching, Strategy, Position, Paper, Pedagogical, Design, Dialogue

Introduction

A critical element of an online learning environment is dialogue incorporated as a teaching strategy (Wojnar, 2002). This author's position is that an effective online learning environment includes the use of online teaching strategies that incorporate dialogue as part of the pedagogical design. Pedagogy refers to the art or science of teaching; education; or instructional methods (Random House Webster's, 1999). Conceicao (2007) stated, "An online course is not simply a traditional course translated into a Web language. The instructor needs to rethink the learner role, the teacher role, and the design of instruction in this new environment" (p. 5). An online teaching strategy needs to take into account a variety of pedagogical factors. That strategy should include collaboration and interactivity. It should be learner-centered, feedback-oriented, problem-based, process-oriented, and flexible (Menchaca and Bekele, 2008).

Literature Review

Relevant literature was reviewed in order to discuss online teaching strategies and its pedagogical aspects. As the landscape of higher education changes, the need to incorporate technological advances into a schools pedagogical design has become more pressing. The characteristics of an effective online teaching strategy have been an area of debate and discussion for researchers. Smith and Ferguson's (2002) performed a study on the differences between online teaching and classroom instruction. The researchers performed an ethnographical study with the state universities of New York (SUNY). Their sample included 21 instructors who taught in both the traditional face-to face and online learning formats. The researcher's study provided insight into the need for qualified instructors in both settings. The researchers argued that most instructors were trained in traditional teaching strategies and lack the experience and training to be effective in an online environment. Smith and Ferguson suggested that instructors that were not trained and experienced in online teaching felt that their skills were no longer valued by their organizations. These feelings transformed once highly effective teachers to less effective teacher's that feel threatened by the new learning environment and its associated teaching strategies.

Wojnar (2002) preformed a study on the best practice model of online teaching and learning. The researcher performed a qualitative case study that included a sample of six students. The researcher triangulated the sources of data collected, which included student journals, papers and synchronous chats. Wojnar argued that many online courses do not have a pedagogical design or emphasis. The researcher reviewed her findings with Principles of Best Practices and Bloom's levels of cognitive activity: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The researcher

indicated that pedagogical design is a critical factor in developing an effective online learning environment.

Menchaca and Bekele (2008) performed a qualitative study on learner and instructor success factors in distance education. Menchaca and Bekele's article discussed the need for researchers to understand the environments required for online teaching. The researchers noted that significant differences exist between traditional face-to-face teaching and online teaching. Menchaca and Bekele suggested that five factors exist in developing a framework for an effective online learning environment, which include human factors, course factors, leadership factors, technology factors, and pedagogic factors. The researchers believed that these factors provide an effective and challenging environment that supports the need for interactive teaching in an online environment.

Argument

It is this author's position that an effective online teaching strategy is to present specific discussion questions to learners for their response. The discussion questions should be part of the course curriculum and designed to initiate interactive dialogue between the learners, along with the teacher. Answering the questions should require research on the part of the student, collaboration with fellow students, and should be problem-based. Parameters should be established by the instructor for: length of response, designation of appropriate resources, format of response, and timeframe for response.

This online teaching strategy reflects the pedagogical factors identified by Menchaca & Bekele (2008). Timm and Stead (1996) argued, "Communication skill building arises from constant learning or attempts to create clear understanding coupled with the awareness that you really can't control communication. Yet you can, and must, seek to influence it" (p. 43). Therefore, the exchange of ideas through discussion and debate promotes a higher level of learning that should not be bridled unless unacceptable boundaries have been broken. Online discussions can provide a great deal of benefit to an e-learning environment, but it has to be productive and exploratory (Palmer, Holt & Bray, 2008).

Counter Argument

Some educators believe that there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction that occurs in the traditional classroom (Shin and Lee, 2009). They noted that these educators believe that an online learning environment cannot meet the needs of the student. Cunningham (1996) stated,

> Teaching in the distance mode is more difficult in some ways, the major challenge being to develop means to compensate for the absence of regular face-to-face contact between teacher and learner. While a desirable (information) gap is created, so is a void where facial expressions and other non-verbal communications are not readily shared (p. 1).

Cunningham's concerns are echoed by Blair (2002) who noted that some online teachers complain about feeling isolated in an online learning environment.

Smith and Ferguson (2002) argued that the sole reliance on a text-based communication network cannot be as successful as face-to-face instruction. In face-to-face dialogue, the instructor can provide visual cues and orate with inflection to highlight key concepts and ideas to the students; this is not possible in an online learning environment dialogue group. In addition, an experienced instructor can gauge whether the students are gaining an understanding of the lesson being taught by their reactions and cues given. Blair (2002) noted that online teachers lose the energy generated in a live classroom dialogue. She argued that this energy leads to interactivity between the students and instructor that cannot be replicated in an online learning environment.

Resolution

Smith and Ferguson (2002) suggested that an important part of an online learning environment is its ability to provide both synchronous and asynchronous forms of dialogue. Having both forms of dialogue provides a better way for the student to gain a deeper understanding of key concepts and ideas that provide a quality education. Smith & Ferguson also suggested that asynchronous dialogue provides the students with a broader and deeper understanding than that of a synchronous dialogue in a face-to-face classroom setting.

Brookfield and Preskill (1999) noted, "Unlike live, face-to-face conversation, asynchronous exchange permits learners a relatively leisurely review of everything that has been said" (p. 241). They suggest that the additional time allows the student an opportunity to reflect on the discussion and seek out supportive or contradictory information that will add value to the learning environment. When this happens, the students will develop a deeper level of dialogue and understanding than in the traditional classroom. Smith & Ferguson (2002) echo Brookfield and Preskill's comments, "The learning appears more profound as: the discussions seemed both broader and deeper, the students are more willing to engage both their peers and the professor more actively" (p. 65).

Concerning synchronous dialogue Wojnar (2002) stated, "Evidence of more complex thinking was most obvious in the online synchronous chats, especially when the discussions were printed and observed" (p. 4). They suggested that the synchronous dialogues in an online learning environment cause the student to defend and justify their positions as well as rethink and strengthen their commitment to a position based upon new information presented in the dialogue (Wojnar, 2002).

Blair (2002) also argued that in a face-to-face setting only a few students actually engage in dialogue through a course period while the others remain anonymous. Blair argued that in an online learning environment every student must participate in dialogue with their peers as well as with the instructor. Due to this increased frequency of engagement with those students, their level of understanding of the course content should be greater than that of a face-to-face classroom environment. Blair also noted that some online instructors develop stronger relationships with a broader base of students due to the increased dialogue in the online learning environment.

Conclusion

This article discussed the online teaching strategies and the pedagogical aspects of online teaching. An online teaching strategy needs to take into account a variety of pedagogical factors such as: being collaborative and interactive, being feedback-oriented, problem-based, process- oriented, learner-centered, and flexible (Menchaca and Bekele, 2008). In essence, the online learning environment must provide the means for students to collaborate in an open environment to share their ideas, reflect, and explore alternative perspectives. Based upon the information researched and discussed in this article, the use of virtual teaching strategies that incorporate effective dialogue as part of their pedagogical design are in the best position to provide an effective online learning environment. The use of asynchronous and synchronous dialogue establishes a good foundation for an effective learning environment. Though visual and verbal cues are not part of an online learning environment, a properly developed teaching strategy provides the appropriate options so the student makes the connections necessary to learn.

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