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Bridges over Transactional Waters

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Abstract

In online learning, transactional distance is the space between a student and an instructor, fellow learners, and the course content. Reducing and bridging that space increases student satisfaction. This research examines how to reduce that distance when teaching online, and in particular teaching a course that requires self-disclosure and trust. Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance guides this exploration, and examines learner to content, learner to fellow learners, and learner to instructor.

Introduction

As education continues to migrate online, it becomes obvious that some courses require additional tinkering or, in fact, should develop for their own particular needs. Some courses require more discussion and it may be discussion that involves more delicacy in the posted forum threads. As time passes, an astute instructor begins to notice patterns that emerge with how the students proceed through the course or how student discussions unfold in online course forums. Ethics is one such course and after several years of teaching it, the researcher noticed certain qualities emerged. Certainly with ethics, the discussions are about large issues, often with no immediate correct response, and a nakedness of thought is exposed. However, patterns did emerge.

A few prominent examples would include response delays, waiver terms, time factors, and opinion ownership. For example, the delay time between opening a discussion question and posted responses was often longer, much longer, than with a typical straightforward online course. Waiver terms like probably, likely, and possibly appeared more often in posts. A time factor raised its head in posts like *...this is what I think right now, but I want to think about this a bit more*. Ownership of opinions was strong. If students were assigned a side to argue for an ethical case study and they did not agree with the assigned position, frequently they would respond appropriately with a logical argument, then finish with a postscript sharing something like *...This is not what I really think but this is the side I was assigned. What I really think right now is...*

As time went on, this researcher began to seek an explanation for the patterns observed in the online ethics course; and to find ways to encourage student self-disclosure. Self-disclosure, based

on the work by Jourard (1972), is the process of revealing something about one's self, usually private, and in general, some type of reciprocity is required. Self-disclosure takes time and the importance of the subject matter is a significant variable. So the problem becomes immediately obvious. How does an effective instructor have students open up and self-disclose, with no initial promise of reciprocity, lacking a guarantee of trust, and across a transactional distance? One caveat offered early is that this research assumes a competent instructor, a useful syllabus, and a logical course organization already in place. The purpose of this research is not to suggest course content helps nor is it to provide a checklist of ways to teach effectively.

This research is for those courses where a degree of personal sharing and self-disclosure is prominent. Courses that exemplify this might be philosophy, critical thinking, critical inquiry, social issues, or ethics. The research question examines how an instructor can reduce the transactional distance, shorten it in an efficient amount of time, and do so without sacrificing trust and engagement. When concrete techniques are suggested, they are based solely on reducing the transactional distance. There is extreme complexity in trying to strike a balance between structure, learner, and instructor (Falloon 2011) and a study of transactional distance requires holistic analysis (McBrien, Jones, and Cheng 2009).

Transactional Theory

Michael Moore developed a theory that explored the space that lies between learner and teacher, as is typical in asynchronous distance education. In 1993, Moore defined distance education as “the universe of teacher-learner relationships that exist when learners and instructors are separated by space and/or by time” or “where the teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors” (Gorski and Caspi 2005, 2; Moore 1993, 37-38). Moore then described *transactional distance* as “the psychological and communication space” between the learner and the teacher: *It is this psychological and communication space that is the transactional distance* (Moore 1991, 3). In his early research, Moore indicated that the distance cannot be measured in terms of time or length but more as a function of learner autonomy and dialog (Moore 1973). Learner autonomy is related to individuation, the extent to which the learner could exercise autonomy over the course structure. The looser the structure, the more autonomy is given to the learner. So dialog and structure are transactional distance variables.

Those two variables, dialogue and structure, function like sliding scales. Structure here refers to the rigidity or flexibility of the course organization and course delivery (McBrien, Jones, and Cheng 2009). A highly rigid course with little dialogue will result in an increase in transactional distance. An increase in dialogue offsets a rigid structure, increases flexibility, and will decrease the amount of distance. This will yield an increase in teaching effectiveness (Offir, Lev, and Bezalel 2008). As dialog increases and there is effective communication in an online course, distance between instructor, student, and content decreases (Shearer 2010). Essential to minimizing the distance between learner and content is a well-organized course (Shannon 2002). Moore later postulated that transactional distance could be seen in three types of transactional interactions: learner to content, learner to learner, and learner to instructor (Moore, 2006; Benson and Samarawickrema 2009). Content here refers to course structure and characteristics of course structure include goals, teaching strategies, evaluation, and congruence between the course content and the students (Offir, Lev, and Bezalel 2008). Characteristics of learner to learner dialog can be seen in discussion forums, whereby students respond to each other's questions,

help each other better understand, and spontaneously and organically raise questions that are not directed by the instructor. Finally, learner to instructor are all those opportunities, either captured or lost, for dialog between the student and the instructor.

Moore's theory will be applied to teaching ethics online and each of the three elements: learner/content, learner/learner, and learner/instructor will be explored. The basic organization of any online course is left to other research. This research only considers those courses where students must emotionally and cognitively expose themselves early and often.

Learner to Content

One aspect to Moore's transactional distance involves the learner to the content. Essential to minimizing the distance between learner and content is a well-organized course (Shannon 2002). In Moore's original theory, learner to content meant the degree of organization to the actual course, the course structure. Characteristics of course structure include goals, teaching strategies, evaluation, and assessment, flexibility, and congruence between the course content and the students (Moore 2007; Moore 2007a; Offir, Lev, and Bezalel 2008). It is beyond the scope of this research to evaluate the logic and flow of a syllabus, but an instructor can easily create a basic table that evaluates course learning outcomes to module content, scheduled assignments, readings, planned discussions, and finally any relevant professional competencies. Any blanks in the table would indicate a failure to adequately cover a course outcome and can be remedied by rethinking the design. Another test for learner to content is to have the course teaching assistant examine the assignments for any areas not fully explained. Examining course evaluation student comments from the preceding semesters will also highlight any disconnect between the learner and the provided content. During the first module, ask students to post any course related questions which will immediately inform an instructor of incomplete areas. Research by Gioissis et al., (2009) suggests that transactional distance is the distance in understanding between teacher and learner. An instructor who graphs outcomes, questions current students, examines comments from previous course evaluations, and seeks the perceptions of the graduate teaching assistant, is an instructor attempting to gauge mutual understanding. In a course where engagement and self-disclosure are vital, seeking common understanding will help reduce transactional distance.

Finally, ask students to respond to any course changes or get their suggestions for ways to explain something more clearly. Research by Akin (2012) found students more than willing to respond to pre and post tests on course structure, organization, and rubrics. Not only were students willing to share their opinions, but they often came up with clear and helpful ideas that improved the course organization.

Particularly with course content such as ethics, philosophy, or critical thinking, a first element to provide is a theoretical foundation. Students can become more acclimated to the content if theory and background are provided that supports or challenges ethical foundations and beliefs (Smaldino 2008). Obviously any instructor is going to include theory, but in this case, it should be done very early and very succinctly. The entire semester can be spent adding more in depth information to the theories but they should be offered early and often.

Why? By offering theory early, an instructor can employ theory as a mask for discussion posts. In other words, students will be directed to respond to a case study by adopting a particular

theoretical perspective. This frees the student from exposing personal beliefs prematurely, thus allowing the student to participate and engage yet still offering a degree of privacy of thought. Theoretical masks also offer students a learning opportunity with the relevant theories and it gives the instructor a chance to evaluate how well the students are learning the theories and putting them to work.

When self-disclosure is eventually necessary for course content, an instructor may wish to post a statement that for the entire semester, the course belongs only to those enrolled. There are no guests and no observers. Students can feel free to express themselves as ‘what happens in this course, stays in this course’ or something along those lines. Be truthful and upfront. While such a statement will not span transactional space, it is a start.

Learner to Other Learners

In the case of courses that cover issues that may be strongly and personally held, and deeply felt, communication between learners has to be developed. Chen and Willets found that two variables had significant direct effects on the learners’ perceived learning outcomes: the greater the transactional distance, the less likely the student learning outcomes, and the frequency of in class discussions had a positive effect (1998). It needs to be noted that the Chen and Willets study found that in-class discussion was more effective than asynchronous discussion, but the findings support overall the use of engaged class discussion.

Any good online course needs to have thoughtful discussion questions but in some cases, a wide variety of types of questions will give intermittent relief from deep personal sharing. If a discussion question is posed that forces students to reveal personal beliefs, then the next discussion forum can, and should be, a more straightforward discussion. This gives students the sense that the depth of their contributions is acknowledged, and that respite comes periodically. Clearly case studies work very well in ethical or philosophical discussions (Spinello 2003; Maurino 2006; Goold and Caldwell 2005).

Obviously at some point in the semester, students will have to begin sharing and debating the rightness or wrongness of some act or idea. But they are not going to do this with an expanse of un-negotiated space between themselves, each other, and the instructor. The suggestions here are designed to facilitate early engagement, decrease transactional space, and increase trust and community building.

When using the theoretical masks, the rule of thirds is useful. One pattern that emerged was a sense of ownership of opinion. When students had been assigned a ‘way’ to approach the case study or discussion question, often after the students provided a response, they then went on share comments like *This is not what I really think but this is the side I was assigned. What I really think, at least right now, is...* In order to minimize these postscripts, the rule of thirds was applied. For discussion questions where ‘theory masks or sides’ were assigned, one third of the class received a free choice. That meant they could approach the problem exactly as they saw fit, without an assigned perspective. Once students realized that their turn would come to have a free choice discussion card, they stopped adding postscripts to their responses. Their free choice discussion could still be theoretically directed, but they were free to select the theory, it was not assigned. It goes without saying that an instructor who is going to implement the rule of thirds

needs to commit to it, and be fair with it. Why? Students will watch for signs of unfair treatment or favoritism, which is of course, unethical, reduces trust, and increases distance. Another pattern seen in responses was an element of time as seen in posts like *...this is what I think right now, but I want to think about this a bit more*. Reflective questions give students the chance to reconsider their previous statements in light of the previous discussion (Smaldino 2008; Akin and Neal 2007). Certainly using reflective questions is nothing new; what is suggested here is a timing issue. In a course requiring self-disclosure, the reflective question is most useful the week or two immediately following a probing case study. It gives students a chance to reconsider, respects all fellow student contributions, and indicates an intuitive understanding between student and instructor. Such small building blocks construct bridges and reduce distance. In the way that a practiced instructor might plot out assignments to student learning outcomes, an astute instructor might actually consider mapping out the discussion questions for the semester with a view to timing, depth, and content.

Despite the varying types of discussions, one pattern that may be common is the slow posting rate. In researching a course on critical thinking, researchers found that students appreciated the time to prepare a response and that it simply took longer. Students and instructor felt that a deeper level of thought took place (Arend 2009). Deeper levels of thought take more time to process, and then compose. Add an element of self-disclosure and a possible explanation for the slowness of postings is revealed.

Finally, the notion of allowing anonymous postings needs to be considered and presumably this is up to the instructor. In a case study about learner identity choices, Freeman and Bamford (2004) stated that learner identity choices can be considered a strategic learning variable in online discussions. Their research indicated that the preference for anonymous posting was generally for clarification of expectations for a new course (Freeman and Bamford 2004). However, a later 2013 study surveyed 131 psychology students who completed an online survey and indicated that about one quarter of respondents (26.7%) preferred to post anonymously. The research also found that students were more likely to post when anonymous posting was allowed (Roberts and Rajah-Kanagasabai, 2013). In the Freeman and Bamford study, the researchers acknowledge drawbacks such as 1% of students posting 50% of the anonymous messages, students responding to their own anonymous posts and cases of peer impersonation (2004). An individual instructor can find a curriculum based way to try anonymous postings, draw their own conclusions, and as always, ask their students what they thought.

Learner to Instructor

The third element to Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance is the distance between the learner and the instructor. Because courses like critical inquiry or social issues often consider philosophical perspectives and discuss sensitive matters, the relationship between the learner and the instructor is a delicate and significant one.

The first and most important action by the instructor should be constant and forthcoming engagement (Bird 2005, Camuse 2010). In 1998, Chen and Willets, using a path analysis, found that transactional distance between instructor and learners is related inversely to in-class discussion. As discussion increases, transactional distance decreases. In 2012, Goel, Zhang, and Templeton surveyed 280 online students and their findings stressed that dialog plays a central

role in e-learning outcomes, outcomes in this case meaning student willingness to take another online course. A 2006 research study which surveyed 237 online students, found a positive interaction between student-instructor dialog and student satisfaction with online learning (Burgess 2006).

Instructor postings that support and guide the discussion, done with respect and regularity, help create a sense of community and students are more engaged when they know the instructor is equally present (Arend 2009, Maurino 2006, Camuse 2010). Instructors also need to acknowledge student posts, regularly and reliably. If students know the instructor is reading and commenting on their posts, the more likely they are to continue. As stated before, the more dialogue, the less transactional distance.

One interesting question is whether an instructor should share personal opinions and values. On one hand, it might be concluded that personal sharing by the teacher will pave the way for community building and student engagement. Teacher immediacy is generally linked to increased communication and course satisfaction. McBride and Wahl (2005) state the self-disclosure by an instructor is one way to create immediate classroom environment. Later research by Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) observed, then surveyed 133 students examining Facebook posts by self-disclosing instructors with a finding that the self-disclosing professors had students rating their classroom climate as more comfortable. A 2012 dissertation using social presence theory surveyed students, and concluded that there may not be enough intimacy in the online courses to substantiate social presence (Marino 2012). Whether to disclose or not is left up to the individual instructor. On the one hand, research indicates it is one way to build immediacy. On the other hand, some might consider it unprofessional and leading to a discussion.

Conclusions

Moore's theory of transactional distance seems to require a slider with three controls, rather like an old-fashioned radio but instead of bass, treble, and volume, the instructor has content, learners, and teacher sliders. Depending on the course, an instructor can decide which to emphasize and which to minimize. In a course that requires student self-disclosure, by following existing research findings, an instructor will need to minimize the transactional distance in order to create a sense of community, trust, and engagement. The best ways to decrease transactional distance are to raise discussion among the learners, provide probing content and effective course organization to the learners, and to have an instructor engaged with the learners.

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