Dialogue and Structure reduce the distance in a course

https://educationrickshaw.com/2020/03/30/the-unproductive-debate-of-synchronous-vs-asynchronous-learning/

https://educationrickshaw.com/2020/04/22/reducing-the-distance-in-distance-learning/

Transactional distance theory (TDT, Moore, 1996) is a useful theory for online course design that proposes that the distance during instruction is transactional, not spatial or temporal (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005; Saba & Shearer, 2017). TDT suggests that if we work to reduce the psychological space between participants and instructors through pedagogy, it will likely lead to higher learning outcomes. One-way lecture hall and one-way Zoom calls are both transactionally distant.

The ideal design for a learning environment, regardless of the format, has a teaching agent who asks questions and elicits student responses (Rosenshine, 2012), provides feedback through short-cycle formative assessment (Wiliam, 2011), and guides students through practice activities to the point of automaticity (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson, 2015). When done right, these teaching activities inherently reduce the psychological and communications space between learners and teachers.

During this online period, we simply cannot change the fact that students are geographically separated from their peers and their teachers. What we can do is re-conceptualize *distance* by ignoring "constraints" like time and space and see distance more as a psychological construct that can be reduced by facilitating dialogue between teachers and learners, and attending to the structure of our courses so that navigation is not a barrier, but an asset, to social interaction.

Courses with high structure and high dialogue (+D+S) tend to be the most effective in reducing transactional distance.

Dialogue

A good online teacher facilitates a variety of forms of interaction between participants and instructors, such as instructor-learner and learner-learner interactions (Huang, Chandra, DePaolo, & Simmons, 2016). Even though online students are not in the physical classroom to engage in discussions, **teachers should use the discussion and collaborative tools in their learning management system to increase dialogue and interaction. Teachers should update their profile pictures, post video greetings, and stimulate dialogue between students through the use of written, audio, and video comments.**

According to Moore (1993), dialogue should be "purposeful, constructive and valued by each party. Each party in a dialogue is a respectful and active listener; each is a contributor, and

builds on the contributions of the other party or parties… The direction of a dialogue in an educational relationship is towards the improved understanding of the student" (p. 24).

Ways to increase dialogue

1. Online forums

Participation can happen in many ways. Instead of asking students to raise hands to share a long-form answer, they could also do so in an online forum. In this way, the teacher is left with a record of what students have said, and who has and hasn't participated. When teachers can see the responses either in real-time or after class, they can give feedback on the ideas and have students go back and edit their ideas for clarity. Students can continue the conversation at home, alone or with their parents, and you can always go back to the conversations during your conferencing. Instead of "who would like to share", have everyone share.

2. Commenting and Liking

I'm a big fan of using aspects of social media to engage students in learning. Commenting and liking, similar to what can be done in online discussion forums, is a way of collecting all of the answers on a shared platform so that everyone knows what everyone has said, and everyone feels compelled to participate. Instead of, asking for hands-up on "what are your thoughts, predictions, observations, etc.." have everyone comment and like.

3. Surveys and Polls

Sometimes it is a good idea to get all of the students thoughts on a topic on one form. An added benefit is when these surveys and polls turn into graphs and can really give teachers an idea of what their students are thinking. Again, my point about surveys and polls is not that they are a silver bullet solution to hands-up, but instead a simple recommendation that their inclusion in the class engages students and holds students accountable to participating. Instead of, "Hands-up if you think….", engage students with an online survey or poll and then share the results with the class.

4. Shared Boards and Documents

I have been using Padlet for some time for a variety of reasons. Perhaps its greatest use would be to have students share their responses in real time. The great thing about a platform like Padlet is that it takes just as much time to post a sticky as it does to think, raise your hand, and call out your response.

I promote a variety of forms of interaction, including:

- instructor-learner interactions
- learner-learner interactions
- Audio, video, written, meme/gif communications

I've integrated a variety of discussion and collaborative tools, including:

- Forums
- Chats
- Wikis
- Shared docs/walls/slides

Structure

Structure refers to the level of guidance and direction provided within the course design, as well as the level of responsiveness of the course design to accommodate individual learners' needs (Huang et al., 2016). A rigid course structure may disrupt organic and creative dialogue, but novice learners dealing with novel information may require higher levels of structure than experts (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Huang et al., 2016).

Structure "expresses the rigidity or flexibility of the programme's educational objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods. It describes the extent to which an educational programme can accommodate or be responsive to each learner's individual needs" (Moore, 1993, p. 26).

I've designed a highly usable course:

- Navigation is easy and automatic
- Course structure enables dialogue

I've set it up so that I'm accessible and available:

- Students know how to get help from me
- I regularly update my profile pic
- I send regular greetings so that students can see my face or hear my voice

I avoid rigid, dialogue-prohibiting structures:

- I allow students to ask questions in unusual times and places
- I've created backchannels simply for socializing
- I modify the course structure in response to student feedback

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