Virtual Classroom Discussions versus Traditional Classroom Discussions

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Abstract

The author of this paper designs, develops, and teaches online courses. This paper examines the students' constructive sociocultural interaction in which learning occurs. This paper compares the classroom discussions in virtual and traditional classrooms and analyses the virtual communication in greater detail according to their content.

1: Introduction

Online education should not be understood as the downloading of information followed by the passive and solitary activity of staring at a computer screen. Instead, online education advances the pedagogical principles of constructive learning through the facilitation of discussion with the instructor as well as other students. Virtual students are asked to actively participate and collaborate in, for example, solving theoretical or practical problems to improve their current K-12 classroom situation [1].

The author of this paper designed, developed and teaches an online course called Educational Foundations for the Department of Teacher Education at National University. The main objective of this course is to have students evaluate varies educational goals and philosophies. For accreditation purposes, the course content, the reading requirements, the assignments, the visual aids, etc. were kept as similar as possible to the traditional course.

2: Conversations About Educational Goals

One of the first activities in the course Educational Foundations is a discussion about the priority of different goals of education. In almost all courses, the students mention some politically correct terms but no further explanations can be given. Thus, the instructor presents the students with the following five different goals of education:

1. To develop students' ability to think clearly, to use intellectual reasoning, to solve problems, and to make rational decisions.

2. To nurture the individual child's unique potential, to allow full development of his/her creativity and sensitivity, and to encourage personal integrity, love of learning, and self-fulfillment.

3. To diagnose the learner's needs and abilities, to design instructional strategies, which develop skills and competencies, and to produce trained people who are able to function efficiently in our ever-changing complex technological society.

4. To transmit to young people the basic knowledge, skills, traditions, academic concepts, and values necessary to interpret, participate in, and further the heritage and traditions of our country.

5. To create a future world condition of peace, harmony, equality, and love; and to foster a new society with humans who can live together in balance with their environment and with each other.

The students are asked to rank these five different goals of education in the order of importance to them. Excerpts of the subsequent discussions in the virtual classroom as well as in the traditional classroom (as transcribed from a videotape) are provided in the following.

3: Online and Face-to-Face Communication

The course Educational Foundations in the traditional face-to-face situation is a one-month intensive course of two meetings a week from 5:30 p.m. until 10:00 p.m., followed by a Saturday session. In July 1999, the author of this paper taught this traditional face-to-face course with 19 students.

In April 1999, the author of this paper taught an online course with 20 students. The course also is a one-month intensive course without any synchronous meetings.

The analysis of the classroom discussions is based on two examples (April 1999 and July 1999). Even though the instructor, the topics, the textbooks, the assignments, etc. were the same, a direct comparison can not be made since the students were not randomly assigned to the two different groups – traditional versus online students. Nevertheless is a summary of the conversations interesting.

From the 20 students in the online courses, 17 students actively participated in the discussion with 40 comments.
Whereas in the traditional classroom only 8 of the 19 students participated in the discussion. The students in the online course embark more in a conversation with each other than in the traditional classroom where students only respond to the instructor's questions but not to each other's comments. In the online course, the instructor made 8 comments (17 percent of all comments) whereas in the face-to-face course, the instructor made 38 percent of the comments (5 from 13 comments).

The students in the virtual classroom engaged in a discussion by supporting their postings. Some students even provided materials for further discussion, which was appreciated by the classmates. In the traditional classroom, however, most students made a brief statement without any explanation of their thoughts. One student in the traditional classroom made an extensive comment about an issue do not directly related to the topic and had to be stopped by the instructor.

Once again, this numerical comparison only gives an overview of who actually participates in the classroom discussion. This, however, does not give clues on the quality of the comments, which is more important than a quantitative overview.

4: Analysis of the Virtual Communication

Today we are concerned if and how meaningful interaction between a teacher and students as well as among students can take place online. Reinmann-Rothmeier and Mandl [2] from the University of Munich, Germany have conducted an analysis of virtual conversations in a Masters of Knowledge Management program. The following analysis of the virtual discussion about different educational goals is based on their proposed method.

From the 40 comments made by the students, 2 comments were questions asking for clarification of the content. The theory presented in this course was addressed and evaluated in 16 comments. These 16 comments were followed by 20 comments from classmates that were involving in a discussion about the contents with their classmates. One student even continued the discussion through relating the theory to an event that had happened to her with her own school children. Another student provided supplemental information.

5: Conclusion

Asynchronous conversation allows every single student to participate in the class discussion without being forced to an immediate response, without being interrupted by another student, or being cut off by the sound of the school bell. Students have time to think before responding to their class members' opinions and they do not have to wait for the next class to express their views and opinions or to ask questions for clarification, yet they can participate in the communication when they are in "top form" rather than during a preset class hour that follows a long day of work or a long night at the campus party. Since the discussions are text-based, students can easily save entire conversations and access them at a later time.

In conclusion, the initial experiences with online teaching and learning The online conversation confirms what Reinmann-Rothmeier and Mandl [2] had predicted to be central aspects of successful virtual discussions, such as a cooperative environment in which students are responsible for their own learning but also develop a class identity where learning occurs through discussions not only with the instructor but also in between the students.

Nistor [3], however, noticed in his analysis of virtual discussions that the active involvement declines over time. Further analysis of extended virtual classroom discussions might reveal statistically relevant factors that lead to learning.

12. References

