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Self-assessment of Engagement in an Online Course

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MDDE 601 (B)

Introduction to Distance Education

July 19, 2015

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Introduction

This paper is a self-reflection on participation within an online course, conducted during the summer term of 2015 (May-July). Engagement is reflected upon, and examples of online forum behaviour are presented. A rubric provided by the course instructor is attached to justify the self-participation mark by the author.

Artifacts

Artifact #1: Picture your Classmates – Unit 1 Forum

“I come to this study of Distance Education with a unique perspective as I have just recently completed a MSc that was entirely on-line.  I completed my Masters in Rehab Sciences from McMaster University never having set foot on campus, nor having met any of my class-mates in person as we drifted in and out of each others lives taking courses in differing order. Ironically though, I chose to attend my in-person graduation.

1)  We still remembered constructive and conflicting interactions we had with each other during courses where we disagreed (the best learning takes place with heightened emotions in a sympathetic state)

2)  The individual personalities displayed as online posters mirrored the personalities of those people in real-life situations.

It really hit home to me that I probably hadn't missed out on much without that "face-to-face" interaction. Would be interested in hearing others' views on this, especially if others have taken on-line courses previously.” (Picture your classmates - May 3, 2015)

This post demonstrates an openness to share relevant experiences with class-mates and relied on previous experience having already completed an online Masters. Discussion in the beginning weeks of the course centered on how online learning differed from face-to-face learning. The importance of knowing what our classmates looked like was debated, as was the importance of their experience or frame of reference. I shared that I felt I hadn’t lost much of anything in terms of interaction through doing courses online rather than in person. My views on what type of people were also in the course was confirmed at graduation when our class finally “met” in person. I welcomed others’ experiences with online learning, which spurred on a thread of 7 relevant messages.

Artifact #2: Negative side to Web 2.0 Technologies? – Unit 4 Forum

“…I'm just wondering if anyone sees a negative side of using web 2.0 technologies?  I don't want to assume that these new technologies are without draw-backs.

I teach at the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, and as Chiropractors we need to interact in a face-to-face environment with our patients, and deductively reason courses of action and diagnosing our patients.  I'm seeing less of these "soft skills" in my interns these days, as they are far more comfortable texting, tweeting and composing arguments on a computer, rather than be involved in personal interaction.

Anyways, just wondering if anyone else has considered the impact of web 2.0 and technology on the way we communicate and learn in person.” (Negative Impact of Web 2.0 Technologies? June 21, 2015)

This initial posting set off a lively discussion of 12 posts, involving pretty much everyone in our section of the class. I challenged the assumption that all technology advances were positive, and resulted in better educational outcomes. It turned out that most in the class were also thinking the same thing, and were wondering whether the use of these new Web 2.0 technologies was a positive or a negative development. This challenge of the initial premise of the course in distance education technologies showed critical thinking and challenging of the social norm. It demonstrated that I was contextualizing my learning as I was going through the course, and reflecting on my experiences in my own work life. I continued this thread by posting additional questions, respectfully challenging the views of my class-mates. What ensued was a lively discussion on the positive and negative effects that Web 2.0 technologies had on our in-person interactions.

Artifact #3: Degree of Involvement – Unit 5 Forum

One of the main things that I've picked up so far with this course has to deal with the amount of involvement, and the type of involvement with regards to use of forums.

When facilitating a course, research has pointed to a "less is more" approach to teaching.  Interjection from a teacher in the online learning environment should be used sporadically, allowing the learning environment to self-regulate.  Minimal involvement can be most effective, and also that learners don't need to relate to or know much about the instructor (contrary to face-to-face).  Timely feedback is expected by on-line learners, and instructors should attempt to be as timely and constructive as possible.

In terms of a participant in online learning, the degree of involvement is also related to success.  Time should be put aside by the learner for regular posting and reading.  These habits need to be worked into a busy schedule so that the learner gets the most out of the course.

Vu, P., Cao, V., Vu, L., & Cepero, J. (2014). Factors Driving Learner Success in Online Professional Development. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 15, 120-139.

<http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1714/2907>

This posting was part of the “Toolbox for success” part of Unit 5, and I decided to post and comment on an article which I had found through my own readings. I found this article quite helpful in identifying the factors that lead to success in our learners, and also regarding the amount of involvement by the facilitator. I found it extremely interesting that in online learning, more involvement by the teacher can actually have a negative impact on the learning process and on the class. Having taught for years in person, it made me realize that to teach effectively in the online environment, less involvement was required from the instructor. Many of our class-mates had also taught in the face-to-face environment and had lots to contribute to the differences between the mediums.

Discussion

Two of the considerations of engagement in on-line learning is how much participation and what type of participation is ideal for successful outcomes. One study of high school teachers’ continuing education online habits found that the successful students accessed the website on average 39 days during the 42 day course compared to their unsuccessful counter-parts who averaged 15 login attempts. The successful students accessed all areas of the course site equally, whereas the unsuccessful students’ rates were quite low across all areas aside from heavy usage of the technical problems section. (Vu et al, 2014) Access at this almost daily rate was not seen with this course, with that likely being seen as students are working full-time and that the course ran considerably longer than the study’s 42 days. Logging in to the course website occurred consistently at 3-4 days per week, and sometimes multiple times per day.

Empirical research conducted by Rienties, Brouwer, and Lygo-Baker (2013) determined that successful students spent more time online watching course materials (4 hours and 59 minutes) compared to unsuccessful students (2 hours and 18 minutes). Time spent on-line is important for success in on-line learning, but so is the quality of the interaction. It is also important that posts be spread out through the week so that critical reflection can take place. Care was taken in this course to spread posts out through-out the time period, rather than posting at irregular intervals in large amounts. This lead to more critical thinking and reflecting on course content.

Conclusion

In applying the attached rubric and in consideration of the above artifacts, a final participatory mark of 13/15 was calculated. Online learning is predominantly student-driven, and I feel that I have learned an incredible amount because of my drive to contribute to my own learning and to others’. Contextualizing information is one of the hallmarks of adult learners, and I feel that my original posts helped bring a unique perspective to the content. I also critically reflected on the postings of others which helped me get the most out of this course. In looking at the research on predictors of success in distance learning, my patterns of use and the information I contributed to group discussion are emblematic of a successful student. I look forward to applying these habits to future courses in on-line learning.

References

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Rienties, B., Brouwer, N., & Lygo-Baker, S. (2013). The effects of online professional

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facilitation and technology. *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 29, 122-131.

Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2012). Teaching and learning at a

distance: Foundations of distance education. (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Vu, P., Cao, V., Vu, L., & Cepero, J. (2014). Factors Driving Learner Success in Online

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*Learning,* 15, 120-139.

**APPENDIX A: Marking Rubric**

**MDDE 601*: Introduction to Distance Education and Training -* Participation Mark (**15% of Final Course Mark)

Participation is required from the following asynchronous discussion forums: Welcome forum, Unit 2 Discussion, Unit 3 Discussion, Unit 4 Group Presentations (approximately 6-10 presentations in total), Unit 5 Discussion, and Unit 6 Discussion.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Exceptional**  | **Strong** | **Capable**  | **Developing** |
| **Involvement****\_\_\_4\_/5 marks** | Participated in all required Discussion Forums. Participates 4-5 times throughout the week. Posts a well-developed response that fully addresses and develops all aspects of the task. | Participates 3-4 times but postings not distributed throughout week. Posts well developed assignment that addresses all aspects of the task; lacks full development of concepts. | Participates 1-2 times on the same day. Posts adequate assignment with superficial thought and preparation; doesn’t address all aspects of the task. | Participates not at all. Posts no assignment. |
| **Quality of Content****\_\_5\_\_/5 marks** | Demonstrates analysis of others’ posts; extends meaningful discussion by building on previous posts. Posts factually correct, reflective and substantive contribution; advances discussion. Uses references to literature, readings, or personal experience to support comments.  | Elaborates on an existing posting with further comment or observation. Posts information that is factually correct; inconsistency in full development of concept or thought. Incorporates some references from literature and personal experience.  | Posts shallow contribution to discussion (e.g., agrees or disagrees); does not enrich discussion. Repeats but does not add substantive information to the discussion. Uses personal experience, but no references to readings or research. Includes no references or supporting experience.  | Posts no follow-up responses to others; or,posts information that is off-topic, incorrect, or irrelevant to discussion.  |
| **Contribution to the learning community** **\_\_\_4\_\_/5 marks**  | Consistent and respectful support for other students' learning. Questions of others are insightful; disagreements with content are delivered with care. Appropriate identification of reliable and useful resources. Connects and extends shared experiences of relevance to the required topic. Empathy clearly demonstrated. Humour used with sensitivity, if used. Contributes to discussion with clear, concise comments formatted in an easy to read style that is free of grammatical or spelling errors. Excellent use of APA. | Respectful support for other students’ learning. Questions of others or disagreements regarding content are delivered with respect. Frequently identifies reliable and useful resources. Connects to shared experiences of relevance to the required topic. Empathy demonstrated. Humour used with some care. Contributes valuable information to discussion with minor errors in clarity or mechanics. Good use of APA but with minor and occasional errors. | Inconsistent support for others’ learning. Questions or disagreements are avoided or awkwardly handled. Occasionally identifies useful resources. Occasionally connects to shared experiences. Empathy is inconsistent. Humour is used but not effectively. Communicates in friendly, courteous and helpful manner with some errors in clarity or mechanics. Use of APA is inconsistent or not properly executed. | No obvious regard for other students’ learning. Questions are demanding. Disagreements are personally challenging or disrespectful. No identification or sharing of neither resources nor experiences of relevance to the required topic. Empathy is absent. Humour, if used, is inappropriate. Posts long or unorganized content that may contain multiple errors. Posts may be inappropriate or rude. Use of APA is absent or consistently improper with major errors. |

A + (95-100%) A (90-94% ) A-(85-89%) B + (80-84%) B(75-79%) B-(70-74%) C + (66-69) See page two for letter grade descriptors.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_13\_\_\_ / 15 marks = 87 %** Letter Grade: A-

Name:

Comments: Please see embedded comments within your paper.