

Digging In: Designs that Develop Intersubjectivity in Course Room Discourse

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Abstract

The purpose of this roundtable discussion was to explore factors that influence the design of the initial discussion prompts in course-based, online learning. The initial prompt is one of the first pieces of scaffolding necessary for the knowledge construction requisite in a constructivist learning environment. As a means of stimulating conversation among conference participants, intersubjectivity was asserted as a quality standard that is different from the current state of discourse in threaded discussions. Intersubjectivity is the representation of knowledge construction achieved through a synergistic progression from individual contributions to sequences of interdependent contributions. The highly interactive format of a roundtable was sought in order to elicit feedback on what participants had found to be effective or ineffective designs in facilitating deep interaction and knowledge construction with the expectation that the roundtable conversations about best (and not-so-best) practices could inspire additional points of consideration for disciplined inquiry in the future.

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The initial prompt is one of the first pieces of scaffolding necessary for the knowledge construction requisite in a constructivist learning environment. Intersubjectivity is the representation of that knowledge construction achieved through the synergistic progression from individual contributions to sequences of interdependent contributions. Instructional designers should continue to recognize that the strength of the construction of knowledge, as evidenced in the threaded discussion, depends upon the strength of the scaffolding that supports that construction. This brief paper connects relevant theory to the practice of designing initial discussion prompts, summarizes the importance of intersubjectivity in threaded discussions, offers evidence of the current state of course room discourse, and suggests implications for instructional designers.

Connecting Theory and Practice

According to Lim (2004), the communication that occurs in any learning environment is the most important aspect of the educational process that happens in that environment. Lim's assertion is consistent with social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), which acknowledges that interaction through dialogue is crucial to cognitive development. Since the majority of the dialogue in the online learning environment occurs through the discussion boards (Jeong, 2003; Schwartzman, 2006; Thompson, 2009), learners who engage these discussion boards should be able to achieve a high level of cognitive processing (Thomas, 2002).

The term intersubjectivity has been used to describe the result of coordinating cognitive perspectives within the discourse of online learners (Dennen & Wieland, 2007). An effective means of determining the level of cognitive process is Bloom's taxonomy (Jorgensen, 2009). Effectively planning the use of discussion boards is important in achieving this high level of cognitive engagement (Tu & Corry, 2003), and one element of planning for cognitive engagement is the design of the initial discussion prompts (Asherian, 2007; DeLoach & Greenlaw, 2007).

Why Intersubjectivity is Important

Given the role of the threaded discussion in the construction of knowledge that occurs within an online course (Calvani et al., 2010), the interaction that occurs within threaded discussions is important to achieving the learning objectives of instruction situated within a constructivist environment. Successful knowledge construction requires "active and broad participation" (Sing & Khine, 2006, p. 254) occurring at a higher level than surface interaction, as noted by Dennen and Wieland (2007). Knowledge construction at this more advanced level of interaction occurs through the opportunities for cognitive engagement required for the higher-order learning processes indicated by Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956). Interaction alone neither produces nor

demonstrates knowledge construction consistent with a constructivist perspective. Thus, while interaction is inherent in constructivist learning, it is feasible to take interaction to a higher level known as intersubjectivity (Dennen & Wieland, 2007; Martin, Sokol, & Elfers, 2008).

Intersubjectivity represents the higher quality of synthesis represented in interactions needed to achieve the knowledge construction required in a constructivist environment and can be seen as the representation of knowledge construction achieved through a synergistic progression from individual contributions to sequences of interdependent contributions.. Intersubjectivity relates to the coordination of individual contributions during the activity, thereby creating “continuity in activity progression” through “building on each other's contributions” (Matusov, 1996, p. 41). Similarly, Bober and Dennen (2001) defined intersubjectivity as the development of shared understanding that relates one situation to another, relying on artifacts created by the ongoing conversation to develop new contributions to the discourse.

Current State of Course Room Discourse

However, as shown by the following studies, course room discourse among learners has consistently lacked this higher level of quality. Rather than the “sequences of dependencies” (Suthers, 2006, p. 4) required for intersubjectivity, researchers categorize student contributions as distinct presentations (Henri, 1992), information exchange (Salmon, 2000), exploration (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), shared stories (Romeo, 2001), serial monologues (Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003), consecutive online notes (Hewitt, 2005), or superficial postings (Bures, Abrami, & Schmid, 2010; Ke, 2010). The learners themselves share this disappointment in the quality of online discussions, according to Chang (2003), who found that two-thirds of students considered the discussions to be of insufficient value in supporting their learning.

Implications for Design

If intersubjectivity represents the higher level of quality needed to achieve the knowledge construction required in a constructivist environment (Hall, 2010), then the opportunity certainly exists to identify those elements which influence intersubjectivity within these course room discussions (Boulter, 2010; Wang, Woo, & Zhao, 2009; Wruck, 2010). As online course delivery continues to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2010), instructional designers will have increasing opportunities to design learning activities that promote quality course room discourse. Rather than relying on heuristics (Silber, 2007; Woo & Reeves, 2007), instructional designers would benefit from the development of research-based principles on which to design the prompts directing the initial course room discussions.

In conclusion, intersubjectivity is the representation of the knowledge construction achieved through the synergistic progression from individual contributions to sequences of interdependent contributions. As one of the first pieces of instructional scaffolding presented in threaded discussions, the initial discussion prompt holds an important place in the design of online, course-based learning within a constructivist framework. Design variables that are correlated with or influence intersubjectivity within threaded discussions are worthy of additional research. The purpose of the interactive, roundtable discussion at this conference was to share and solicit information about these design variables.

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