

Learner Interaction – Online and Otherwise

Many of you will be familiar with FKA's insistence upon the important of incorporating interaction into your instructional design and facilitation efforts. We have long used an acronym—VIVE—to represent our beliefs in this area. The acronym stems from the French word 'vive' meaning lively. In short, lively, engaging instruction embodies:

Variety
Interaction
Visuals
Examples

Respecting the specific theme of interaction we've recently read an interesting article and want to share a review and our thoughts with you.

The article, entitled **The Importance of Interaction in Web-Based Education: A Program-level Case Study of Online MBA Courses**¹ presents a literature review and research study that explores the importance of interaction in web-based education. The comprehensive literature illuminates the “messy...confusion” between interaction and interactivity that has resulted from the rapid development of computer and internet technologies into the world of teaching and learning. In general the confusion stems from the fact that some people use the terms interchangeably where others make a distinction between the terms. The distinction that is drawn, uses 'interaction' to describe more process-oriented activity that is focused on dynamic issues (e.g. questioning or group work) and 'interactivity' to describe more feature-oriented and dependent upon technology (e.g. answering polls, participating in chat). We favor the approach with distinction.

With definitions in place the article then reviews the 'types of interactions' that occur in teaching and learning environments.² The very familiar three part interaction scheme is presented: 1) learner-instructor, 2) learner-learner, and 3) learner-content. These have long been central themes in our design workshops and, of course, we practice the facilitation of all three in our basic and advanced instructor training workshops. The research cited support the view that learner-instructor interaction is “essential and desirable by many learners”; that learner-learner interaction is desired by learners; and

¹ **The Importance of Interaction in Web-Based Education: A Program-level Case Study of Online MBA Courses**; Bude Su, Curtis J. Bonk, Richard J. Magjuka, Xiaojing Lui, Seung-hee Lee, Journal of Interactive Online Learning, Volume 4, Nuber 1 Summer 2005 (ISSN:1541-4914)

² While the perspective is an online perspective we do note that elements of the literature review preceded the 'on-line explosion' and that many of the on-line interaction 'types' have been appropriated from the traditional face-to-face environment. This, in turn, reminds us of other research that shows that teachers and instructors, rather than approach the on-line strategy creatively, tend to simply transform their familiar face-to-face methods to the online environment. But that's a subject for another newsletter perhaps.

that learner-content interaction, while well recognized, garners less discussion in the literature. We will continue to support all three themes in our workshops.

Most interestingly, the article presents from the literature two types of interactions that are not as widely discussed: namely, *vicarious interaction* and *learner-self interactions*. Instructors, of course, are very familiar with the *vicarious* learner who chooses not to overtly engage but who clearly performs at the knowledge or skill level. The research says that these *vicarious* learners do interact but they do so internally by silently responding to questions or by internally reflecting on discussions that they hear. In the face-to-face environment there are universal and well practiced communication techniques that allow us to identify and respect the vicarious style—sometimes ‘drawing-in’ less participative learners, and sometimes not. When these vicarious learners move into the on-line environments they do not change their interaction styles— choosing, for example, to observe rather than actively participate in online discussions and debates, or choosing not to access the questioning functions or to participate in chat. In on-line environments (both asynchronous and synchronous) vicarious learners are sometimes pejoratively labeled as ‘lurkers’ even though their style (reading and reflecting on others’ input) is no different on-line from what they practice in the face-to-face environment. What is different online, of course, is the absence of two-way visual cues to guide facilitator actions and, the technologies that available in the software. The report points to bandwidth improvements supporting the increased use of streaming video and video conferencing to help in this area. We look forward to further research.

With respect to technologies that aid the general learner population the research shows that while there are numerous technologies available to promote interaction, the overall lack of training and preparation for online instructors means that many of these technologies are not being used. Aggravating this lack of formal training is the tendency of online instructors to “translate more often than to transform’ when they move online. In effect this attitude which says “this is what I do in the classroom, so how do I repeat that in the virtual environment” limits the learning experience. Encouragingly, the research notes innovative encouraging exceptions to this general rule and points to the use of virtual office hours, online cafés, expert chats and online introduction forums as examples.

Overall though, and accepting the inexorable growth in online learning, the research calls for increased support for formal instructor training and preparation. FKA, through our Facilitating eLearning and Presenting Over the Web workshops has been contributing to the development of online instructors and presenters for several years. Additionally, we’ve migrated several elements of our methodology to an online format in both asynchronous and synchronous formats making it possible for us to offer our design workshops in a blended format. Most recently we’ve been offering our Effective Assessment workshop online and efforts are ongoing to develop online offerings of the Needs Identification phase of our instructional systems design methodology. We’ll strive to be innovative with our designs and look forward to updating you on these new offerings in the near future.