Melissa Smith
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Dialog, Structure, and Autonomy

Describe and analyze three categories used by Moore & Kearsley in their concept of distance education. Explain why they made use of them.

Moore's Transactional Distance Theory

Moore's Transactional Distance Theory provides a hypothetical framework for Distance Education.

Transactional Distance Theory was developed by Michael G. Moore. Before the development of this concept, definitions of distance education revolved more around the idea of the spatial separation between tutor and learner. Moore's theory suggests that "distance is a pedagogical phenomenon" and is not as concerned with geographical location (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 200).

Moore proposed the concept of Transactional Distance – a distance of understandings and perceptions that may lead to a communication gap or a psychological distance between participants in the educational setting. He believed that Transactional Distance must be overcome by tutors, learners, and educational organizations in order for effective learning to occur. Moore also described how the degree of Transactional Distance that is present between tutors and learners, and among learners themselves, greatly depends on the extent of dialog or interaction that occurs, the stringency of a course structure, and the extent of the learner's autonomy (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 200).

How does one overcome this distance? Moore & Kearsley (1996) discuss a need for individualized organizational and teaching behaviors, depending on the level of transactional distance (pp. 200-201). The mental separation that exists in Transactional Distance shapes how tutors plan, present content, and interact in significantly different ways than in the face-to-face environment (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 200).

How to close the communication gap? Three key elements

There are three key variables to consider regarding transactional distance: Dialog, Structure and Learner Autonomy. These three terms are essential components for the successful administration of effective distance education.

Dialog

Moore & Kearsley (1996) define dialog as a term that "helps us focus on the interplay of words, actions and ideas and any other interactions between teacher and learner when one gives instruction and the other responds" (p. 201). The nature of the dialog is determined by:
- Viewpoint of the individual(s) responsible for the instructional design of the course
- Personalities of teacher(s) and learners

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- Course subject matter
- Environmental factors (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 201).

According to Moore & Kearsley (1996), the environmental factors which affect dialog are the number of participants in the learning group, the language used, and the medium of communication (p. 201). The type of distance education course will intrinsically control some of these factors. For example, videotelecourses have very little or no dialog involved, while computer conference courses tend to be highly dialogic (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 202).

Holmberg, as well, discusses the importance of dialog in distance education. He conceptualized "internal didactic conversation" and defines it as guided, two-way communication between tutor and learner, where learning is facilitated (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 202).

Structure

In addition to dialog, a second set of variables influences Transactional Distance: Structure. Structure refers to how the instructional program is designed. Structure is the extent to which materials and learning objectives within the distance education environment are pre-planned. For instance, the tutor decides early on what course materials will be needed, how many projects to assign, how the learners will be assessed.

Structure determines how rigid, or flexible, the course's objectives, teaching strategies, and assessment methods will be. It illustrates the extent to which course components can accommodate or be responsive to each learner's individual needs (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 203).

Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy, Moore's third category, addresses how each individual learner can take charge of his or her own independent learning. The level of learner autonomy depends upon the individual learner's sense of personal responsibility and self-directedness (Peters, 2001, p. 29).

Drawing conclusions

Depending on the individuals involved, the interaction of these three elements can vary. For example, high levels of learner autonomy would demand lower levels of teacher control. An instructional situation is considered more distant if there are lesser amounts of dialog among participants and less structure. For less distant situations, the converse is true (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, pp. 206-208; Peters, 2001, pp. 28-29).

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By describing Transactional Distance not as fixed, but instead, as variable, resulting from the interplay between dialog, the structured nature of the learning program, and the self-directedness of learners, a persuasive explanation is provided of the vast flexibility of this form of academic teaching (Peters, 2001, pp. 28-29).

References

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