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OMDE 610: Short Response Paper

Making Connections: On Theoretical Reflection

Introduction

As an Instructional Designer (ID), my ultimate goal is to design and develop online learning experiences and to maximize the effectiveness of information processing so that learning can occur. This reflective essay will discuss my educational philosophy in my role as an ID, explore my preferred theory of online learning, and finally, will describe the strengths and limitations that I bring to my engagement in the online learning environment.

Part 1: My Educational Philosophy

Behaviorism? Cognitivism? Constructivism? All three are important approaches.

I am a behaviorist. The behaviorist approach to teaching and learning highlights the study of observable behavior. It is concerned with determining the relationships between an object of motivation and its corresponding responses in order to predict and control behavior (Ally, 2004, para. 16). When I design an eLearning module, I am governed by Bloom's Taxonomy (Morrison, Ross & Kemp, 2004, p. 109) and by Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction (Morrison, Ross & Kemp, 2004, p. 136). I must analyze the

learning situation and set a goal. Measurable learning objectives are a necessary component in an effective learning environment. It is necessary to break down individual tasks and evaluate the participant based on the established objectives. I must rely on my subject matter experts (SMEs) to determine what is important for the participant to learn, and then I attempt to transfer that knowledge to him by way of a solid, design based approach.

I also see validity in cognitivism. A cognitive approach involves the study of the nature of intelligence and stems from the premise that the mind is an information processing system. It aligns with holistic processes (Ally, 2004, para. 21). I am influenced by the cognitive approach in my work, specifically, in the sequencing and chunking of information so that the natural progression of knowledge gained grows from the simple to more the complex.

And what about the constructivist approach? I do believe in the constructivist approach as well, although there is no room for such an approach in my role as an ID. Because of the divergent, subjective nature of constructive learning, it is easier and more cost effective for me to design from a behavioral and cognitive stance. A pure constructivist approach involves a learning situation that is more facilitative in nature than prescriptive, and unfortunately we do not have the time or money to devote to such a learning environment. We just do not have the support system for it.

With that being said, I do agree that there are definite benefits to the constructivist approach and, as a learner, I know that I do learn more by having the ability to reflect on the information that I am receiving and apply it to my own experiences under real world

conditions. I try my best to do this each time I create a journal entry for this course, or post a response to an article.

The constructivist theory of learning acknowledges that individuals are active agents; they engage in their own knowledge construction by integrating new information into their schema, and by associating and representing it into a meaningful way. It puts students at the center of learning process, where they should be. The premise that an individual participant must actively "build" knowledge and skills, and that information exists within these built constructs rather than in the external environment definitely has its place in the world of learning theory and practice (Ally, 2004, para. 47).

Part 2: Two Theories of Online Learning: Moore and Mayes

One of the first theories that I learned about in the MDE program was Michael Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, which provides a hypothetical framework for distance education. For me, this theory is the foundation. All other theories that resonate with me seem to have a foot hold in this theory. I understand Transactional Distance to be defined as a distance of understandings and perceptions that may lead to a communication gap or a psychological distance between participants in the educational setting. Moore responds to this communication gap through three key elements:

1. **Dialog:** Moore and Kearsley (2005) define dialog as a term that "helps us focus on the interplay of words, actions and ideas and any other interactions between teacher and participant when one gives instruction and the other responds" (p. 201).

2. **Structure:** Structure is the extent to which materials and learning objectives within the distance education environment are pre-planned. It illustrates the extent to which course components can accommodate or be responsive to each participant's individual needs (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 203).
3. **Learner autonomy:** Learner autonomy, Moore's third category, addresses how each individual participant can take charge of his or her own independent learning. The level of learner autonomy depends upon the individual participant's sense of personal responsibility and self-directedness (Peters, 2001, p. 29).

I feel that Moore's three elements lay the basic foundation for online learning to occur. Learners must converse and engage each other in meaningful way; learners must have a structured, supportive environment; learners must put the effort in to see the results.

A second theory that has become a favorite of mine is one that I have discovered in this class. Terry Mayes (2006) discusses the use of interactivity in eLearning and describes three stages of interactivity: Conceptualization, Construction and Dialogue (p.10). In this article, he includes various themes which deeply resonate with me.

The interaction between past knowledge and what is to be learned is very important. The way we interpret learning materials based on what we already know is what represents the essential interaction (Mayes, 2006, p.11). When I create an eLearning module, I always make sure to know the audience's level of knowledge and develop accordingly. If I am crafting a succession of modules, I keep in mind the prerequisite course, and build upon a particular knowledge base.

Mayes discusses making learning activities and any sort of hypermedia

meaningful to the learning (Mayes, 2006, p.12). I, too, feel that that imagery must be not only engaging but also meaningful to the learning experience. Making appropriate connections between content, activities and images is essential for the learner.

Mayes addresses the importance of feedback. He speaks from a constructivist view point and gives us the examples of:

- Ownership of tasks
- Coaching and modeling of thinking skills
- Scaffolding
- Guided discovery
- Opportunity for reflection (Mayes, 2006, p.14)

When Mayes discusses dialogue, he states that the interactions among peers, tutor and reflective thinking are all significant to the learning process (Mayes, 2006, p.17). Mayes counts the human factor as central. I believe this to be the most important part of the learning experience: the ability to effectively discuss an educational topic of interest, with your peers and your tutor. My ultimate goal is to share what I know, and in doing so, I will gain even more knowledge in return.

Lastly, Mayes discusses the significance of learning objects in his section on individual patterns of interactivity (Mayes, 2006, p.21). I am a believer in the concept of RLOs, and building a personalized learning path for each individual student, based on what they already know and what they need at that moment. I feel that using highly interactive simulations in "chewable chunks" will provide a personalization in distance education, and will further propel us into the next generation of eLearning. At my work

place, we have a proposal in to purchase a new LMS that will help us accomplish this very goal.

Part 3: Strengths and Limitations

It is imperative that any person who is designing and/or participating in the online educational experience be aware of the strengths that he contributes and the challenges he needs to overcome. Here are mine.

Strengths

1. I have learner autonomy and motivation. I am comfortable and thrive in a learner-centric environment. I am highly motivated, both as an Instructional Designer and as a learner.
2. I participate in professional development to keep up with innovative developments in the field. I am pursuing a degree in Distance Education to further my own knowledge and to better support my peers in the corporate environment.
3. I have knowledge of instructional design theory and practice. I have been working as an Instructional Designer for eight years. I design courses based on sound pedagogy and evaluation practice and I provide ample materials and activities to accommodate all learning styles.

Limitations

1. I lack experience in designing in a constructivist manner. My current instructional design system can not sustain a constructivist approach. The corporate learning platform can not support an educational system in which the content is not pre-specified. Assessment needs to be based on specific quantitative criteria.

2. I lack experience in designing reusable learning objects (RLOs). As I stated earlier, RLOs provide a personalization in distance education, and could be used to create a custom-made learning path based on the needs of the participant.

Conclusion

There is a place for the behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism in the world of distance education. Each philosophy offers its own benefits. Ally (2004) states “behaviorists' strategies can be used to teach the “what” (facts), cognitive strategies can be used to teach the “how” (processes and principles), and constructivist strategies can be used to teach the “why” (higher level thinking that promotes personal meaning and situated and contextual learning)” (para. 15).

I have explored my preferred theories of online learning, discussing Moore’s classic framework in transactional distance, and Mayes important work in interactivity. This exercise in reflection has helped me to ascertain both my strengths to be leveraged and the limitations I possess.

References

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