Student-Faculty Interaction: Using a Webcam as a Teaching and Learning Tool

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Abstract: This action research project examined the nature of one-on-one interaction between the instructor and her seventeen students via Skype which allows live audio and video communication through a webcam. The goal of the project entailed identifying strategies that facilitate students’ cognitive and professional development during their internships in community-based social service agencies, educational programs, and faith-based organizations. Results suggest course manageability, the nature and frequency of interaction, and trust can impede authentic conversations between the students and instructor. Implications for practice include ways instructors can facilitate teaching and learning for students interning or participating in work-related training programs.

Introduction

The onslaught of computer mediated communication systems has changed the nature of teaching and learning especially at the post-secondary education level. More colleges and universities are using the Internet to deliver online courses to remain innovative and competitive, offer alternative learning formats, and enhance student-faculty interaction (Allen & Seaman, 2005). Online education requires different skills. This type of learning requires the ability to engage, interpret meaning, plus negotiate relationships in an environment void of facial cues and body language. Experts agree that online courses have to involve learners differently than face-to-face instruction (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Several researchers note that online learning places greater demands on students than the traditional classroom format (Moore & Keaarsley, 2003; Bates & Poole, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

Rather than to teach the course online, I decided to use my computer and broadband Internet connection to video and audio conference with each student enrolled in Administrative Leadership 630 Field Work in Schools, Agencies and Institutions (AD LDSP 630) is a three credit internship course that is designed to give students the opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge of their academic major in a work-related environment. Since the internship placements varied between academic programs, majors, agencies, and locations, using Skype enabled me to regularly interact with the students to discuss their internship activities and document their academic progress. I sought to increase the students’ sense of connectivity with the instructor and at the same time offer an innovative approach to teaching at a distance.

The impetus for the research project emerged from what occurred during the third scheduled set of Skype meetings. At that point, I noticed that the interaction with the students did not elicit meaningful discussions. Instead I was sensing that our synchronous interactions were strained and perfunctory. Consequently, I elected to use Action Research (AR) to document my own teaching practice in order to identify what strategies are most beneficial to the students’ successful and enriching internship experience.

AR is often associated with teacher empowerment because it enables the teacher to collect data and solidify the connection between research and application (Johnson, 2005).
Imbedded in the process is to develop an action plan or provide insight into the nature of the experience. The tenets to an action research project are to: 1) conduct a literature review; 2), identify a research question or interest area; 3) plan a method to collect the data; 4), systematically collect data; 5) develop an action plan based on the obtained information; and 6) share results with others especially colleagues (Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2005). One overarching question guided the investigation, collection of data, and analysis of my teaching and learning practice: How is live communication with my students via Skype influencing my teaching and learning practice?

Literature Review

For this action research project, I used seminal distance education literature to guide my investigation. Borje Holmberg’s (1995) theory of distance education reaffirms the importance of student-faculty contact. For Holmberg, quality in distance teaching and learning must be meaningful to the student and centered on the student’s interest. Involving the student in the learning process through personal relationships with peers and instructors increases the likelihood of personal involvement with the subject matter. Furthermore, through guided didactic conversations students are more likely to be motivated and thus the more effective the learning. According to Holmberg, the role of the teacher is to facilitate the process and to encourage critical thinking, not memorized (rote) and mechanized learning. The responsibility of the teacher is to act as compassionate motivator and to create for the student a sense of belonging. Holmberg contends that an engaging academic atmosphere and well-established sense of community encourage and motivate students to learn. The author refers to student-faculty interaction as a guided educational exchange of ideas comprised of active learning activities, structured reflection, and discussions.

Verduin and Clark (1991) also identify personalized communication between the student and instructor as paramount to effective distance education for adult learners. Verduin and Clark maintain that instructors should create an educational environment where exchange of ideas, discussions and differing opinions are shared without fear of repercussion. Furthermore, the authors encourage instructors to collect pre-assessment information such as academic background, employment history, educational goals and learning styles preferences and link the students’ characteristics with learning activities that are compatible and consistent with the students’ educational aspirations.

Context of the Study

The internship job descriptions varied by agency as well as by the intended learning outcomes identified by each student. Besides observing and participating in job-related activities under the supervision of an agency employee, the internship required the completion of 150 contact hours. Most students worked an average of 10 hours per week. They worked in such agencies as Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin, a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community resource and advocacy center, an Adult Basic Education program servicing the Southeast Asian and Latino community in the greater Milwaukee area, and an after-school reading program for K-6 grade students. Seventeen students enrolled in the class and they range in age from 22-55. There were nine females, eight males, and seven students of color. Skype meetings occurred on a bi-weekly basis.
The face-to-face portion of the course entailed: 1) attending an orientation workshop at the beginning of the semester on professional behavior in the workplace; 2) conducting an oral presentation to classmates at the end of the semester about their internship; 3) submitting a professional portfolio and a reflective summary of the internship activities; and 4) coordinating a site visit between the instructor, the student and site supervisor. A formal evaluation by the supervisor was completed during the site visit or mailed shortly after. Upon completion of the course the students were expected to:

- Describe the history, mission, philosophy, and management structure of the organization.
- Identify the connection between their academic major, courses taken, and theoretical underpinnings of the profession.
- Identify and discuss ways to expand and improve the internship experience for both the student and the sponsoring agency.

Methodology

The approach to this study was based on a phenomenological philosophy. The fundamental belief in phenomenological research is that reality is intrinsically subjective and relative to the circumstances (Moustakas, 1994). Understanding social interactions influenced the nature of the teaching and learning experience; thus, a qualitative study grounded in the phenomenological tradition was appropriate (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The first stage of the project entailed developing a mechanism to systematically collect the data. I developed a chart for each student which enabled me to easily insert notes during and after each discussion. The chart contained the student’s background information such as major, academic standing, synopsis of their intended learning outcomes, and a description of their duties. I also noted the length of each conversation including making sure to schedule the next Skype meeting. The average time for each discussion averaged between 15 to 20 minutes.

The second stage involved judiciously reading each discussion entry and immediately writing (free style) on my perceptions of the interaction. The third stage entailed a detailed analysis of the discussions with an emphasis on how I responded to their thoughts, feelings, and views on how their internship experience was progressing. After each entry, in a diagrammatic form I color-coded words, comments, and the responses the students made. Lastly, I created a concept map that enabled me to identify major themes, my reactions, and subsequent behaviors.

Findings

Two issues emerged that were influencing my teaching and learning practice: My urgency to complete the activities logs and the assumption that the social nature of teaching and learning via videoconferencing was easy, comfortable, and fluid.

My first aha moment was accepting the fact that course manageability was overwhelming and as a result I was guilty of mechanized instruction. Managing the class proved to be a daunting experience. I realized that the way I was interacting with the intern was delineating their responses. My emphasis was on making sure that their activities log were up to date and completed accurately. The conversations centered on how they were completing their assigned tasks and following the agency’s procedures. Issues revolving neatness, timeliness, attention to detail, following directions, and the quality of the work encompassed my conversations with the interns. When I spoke with the students, I wanted to know if they were keeping busy, looking for
things to do, and showing interests in improving their skills. I was also very concerned that they kept their supervisors abreast of their activities.

The second eye opening experience happened when I looked back at how the orientation session was conducted at the beginning of the semester. I recalled that we did not discuss the internship sites in-depth or the reasons why the students selected them. The focus of the orientation was on professional expectations and issues revolving confidentiality. As I re-read my journal, I concluded that visual and voice interaction in real time was not enough to create a sense of connectivity and trust with the students. Authentic conversations with my students take time and patience. I also had to acknowledge that for some students using Skype as a means to engage in the course content was disconcerting because they were used to a face-to-face classroom mode of instruction.

Changes

Changing my interaction to some extent occurred by chance. I had scheduled a meeting with one of the students which turned out to be during his dinner hour. As we started the conversation, he informed me that he was cutting up the vegetables and would need to move around as we spoke. Needless to say, I felt that he was not taking the class seriously since his attention was not on the course content. As the discussion progressed and I relaxed, he informed me that he was having a very difficult time navigating the culture of the organization. After that meeting, I e-mailed the next student and suggested having our Skype chat over coffee. The nature of the subsequent conversations changed dramatically with all of the students. For some students, scheduled conversations worked best because of their multiple commitments. Other times, I e-mailed the students informing them that I planned to be on Skype during specific dates and times and that we could meet as the calls came in. This technique proved to be very viable. In certain instances, the student just wanted to check-in and others wanted to reflect on the week’s events including how they were able to participate in professional development workshops and conferences.

I did not abort my documentation process, but instead made concerted attempts to ask questions about their activities and how they related to previous course work and their lived experiences. Below are some of the questions that changed the nature of my discussions with the students.

- What tasks do you believe are out of bounds for you during your internship? How are you handling the situation?
- What do you do if you are asked to do work that is outside of the scope of the internship?
- How are you managing cultural differences in the workplace?
- What assumptions did you bring to the internship? How are they changing?
- In what ways, can I help you maximize your internship placement?
- How are you applying your classroom learning to a particular situation?

As the class progressed, students of color consistently commented that they appreciated and valued the one-on-one interactions with me. One student mentioned that she had never sat down and talked to any of her instructors during her undergraduate years. Another student discussed the difficulty she was having with her site supervisor. She believed that since she was at least twenty years older, he felt uncomfortable giving her directions and feedback. In certain
instances too, there were personality conflicts with the site supervisors that the students needed guidance or at least to have the opportunity to be heard.

**Conclusion**

Besides using action research as a lens to document my experiences, I was also guided by Brookfield’s (1995) work on becoming a reflective teacher and Freire’s (1985) critical pedagogy. One of the most critical reflection points entailed situating the project with emancipatory social theory which emphasizes that reality is socially constructed by political, economic, and social forces. Concomitantly, my interpretations and experiences acted as points of transformation in my roles as teacher, researcher, and practitioner. I highly recommend using Skype and other videoconferencing software to supervise students interning. The following techniques were particularly relevant to my interaction with each student.

- Involve the student in how the supervision process is to occur.
- Teaching can be more efficient and effective by reducing the number of activities (discussion topics) that are to be addressed for each meeting.
- Ensure that students are aware of the time commitment outside of the internship hours.
- Clarify the roles between the instructor and site supervisor.
References


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