

OMDE 610 Assignment #1

by Heather Michel

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Heather Michel
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The Relationship between E-learning Theory and DE Practice

Theories concerning how people learn electronically, based on differing definitions of knowledge, are the basis for choices distance educators make in which practices to employ.

Saba said that “understanding the whole involves understanding the parts ... ” (2003, p.11) So, to break e-learning into its parts, there are two major theories of learning from the 20th century which still hold sway and two major theories of learning that have made an impact already in the 21st century. The two earlier theories that survived the test of time are the behaviorist and the cognitivist theories. The behaviorist learning theory, focusing on objective actions that could be empirically measured, derived from educational psychology and was in essence a reaction against the emphasis of the subconscious by Freudianism (Harasim, 2012, p. 31). The cognitivist learning theory developed when it was seen that behaviorism could not “explain most social behaviors” (Harasim, 2012, p. 47). The two current learning theories are the constructivist and the online collaborative theories. “Constructivism refers both to a learning theory (how people learn) and to an epistemology of learning (what is the nature of knowledge)” (Harasim, 2012, p. 60) which both posit that knowledge is constructed through an individual’s interaction with environment. Online collaborative learning (OCL) theory “emerged with the invention of computer networking ...” (Harasim, 2012, p. 80) and focuses on the knowledge building process between people more than replicating textbook information (Ally, 2008, p. 15).

It is important to understand the theory of knowledge, epistemology, underlying a theory of learning because learning is the internalizing of knowledge. In order for educators to

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understand how a learner internalizes knowledge, that educator must first understand what knowledge is. There are currently several theories of knowledge that learning theories can be drawn from, including authoritative (usually divine authority), objectivist (knowledge is a substance in the mind), and constructivist (knowledge has yet to be built by interaction with the world) (Harasim, 2012).

Behaviorist learning theory, using the objectivist definition of knowledge, began showing up in education in the 1900's when teaching practices emphasized assessing student learning in terms of measurable objectives (Bates, 2005). The practice of using objectives is still employed today in distance education. One weakness of this theory that came to be revealed is its inability to explain and accurately predict social behaviors that were observed (Harasim, 2012). Cognitive learning theory grew in answer to this weakness and began to manifest in education in the second half of the 20th century as focusing more on the thought processes that went into the measurable action. This theory also uses the objectivist view of knowledge, holding that truth exists waiting to be discovered by knowledge-seekers. One weakness of this theory is the testimony of students describing how certain knowledge was formed within them in response to their situations and their environment. Thinking about what teachers said or what was written in textbooks was not their only source of knowledge; rather, people learned from reflecting on sensory input in informal learning situations as well. This gave rise to the constructivist concept of knowledge and learning theory. The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st saw a growth of distance education online as it changed to employing practices catering to the constructivist learning theory, such as project-based activities, increased research assignments, reflection, discussion, and analysis essay assessments (Bates, 2005). More specific constructivist online DE

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practices include supplementing the teacher's presentation (usually Power Point uploaded to the Learning Management System (LMS) with teacher-chosen Web resources (ideally multi-media or interactive), holding class discussions online via an LMS, asking students to do Web searches, or using textbook Web sites or accompanying CD-ROMs for multi-media study aids (Bates, 2005). The common factor among constructivist educational practices is that the learning is student-centered rather than teacher-centered.

In order for the constructivist learning theory to operate most effectively, distance educators must not overload students with unnecessary information, and must provide quick feedback to help ensure learner's stability (Bates, 2005). Including links to every resource found on a topic creates an overwhelming amount of information to access from the course content page, even if some resources are labeled "optional". An instructor's role includes sorting through the information and presenting the class with the best, with what s/he determines they ought to know or access (Lefoe, Gunn, & Hedberg, 2002). Some educators tend to be slow in their feedback. Students lose interest in previous assignments, including feedback, with every time they come to class. For the distance student, this means that every time they access the virtual classroom, they lose a little more interest in that feedback (Lefoe, Gunn, & Hedberg, 2002). If it takes five days for the professor to grade the assignment, students might have logged in to the course ten times already. Logging in ten times and not finding feedback leaves students with little interest in the feedback. Learner stability is based on this feedback, so it is vital for the DE instructor to grade and return assignments immediately.

"The Web was not applied in any systematic way to education until 1995" (Bates, 2005, p. 152), so the OCL Theory informed DE practice only in the 21st century.

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“Online forums provide the opportunity for students to test ideas and build and construct knowledge through collaborative learning” (Bates, 2005, p. 140).

Bates (2005) cites Jonassen (1999) as declaring that learning is more effective when undertaken with other learners rather than as a singular, solitary activity and that such forms of learning lead to higher quality learning outcomes.

The CoI framework seeks a more integrative understanding and practice of DE through recognizing the importance and possibility of richer, reflective communications amongst teachers and students focused upon the shared pursuit of knowledge (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2010, p. 6).

1-way vs 2-way communication btwn learner & teacher and among learners.

Synchronous web-conferencing

E-learning theory has informed recent distance education practice in several ways, and in turn e-learning theory has been informed by observation of distance education practice. Not only do technologies change, but learners change as well, especially as more ideas are added to their thought-process by learning. Prof must keep abreast of both types of changes (Ally, 2008, pp. 16-17, 38). Actions of learners in turn affect future theories and technologies.

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