Enriching online learning experience: the three 'presences'

Ephraim Mhlanga, SAIDE, September 2009

Introduction

The invasion of education by new communication technologies has raised the key question of whether or not technology can teach. There seems to be consensus amongst researchers that specialised delivery technologies are merely vehicles through which instruction can be conveniently delivered, but do not themselves influence learner achievement. Drawing from studies in the field, Clark (1983) argues that the learning benefits students derive from learning through audio-visual or computer media is not a result of the technology used, but rather of the instructional strategies that are built into the learning materials. This assertion is supported by Schramm (1977) who suggests that learning is influenced more by the content and instructional strategy in the learning materials than by the type of technology used to deliver instruction. Ally, M. (2004:3) argues:

> To promote higher order thinking on the Web, online learning must create challenging activities that enable learners to link new information to old, acquire meaningful knowledge, and use their meta-cognitive abilities; hence it is the instructional strategy and not the technology that influences the quality of learning.

It is clear from arguments on e-learning that whilst technology is a valuable medium of learning, the human element is critical in terms of creating the right environment for learning to take place. The role of the teacher in structuring Web content, in designing learning activities that promote high order thinking skills, and in providing an opportunity for sharing and collaborating remains central in online learning. This brief grounds online learning in a theoretical framework that is underpinned by three 'types of presence' which interlink to form the hallmark of online tutoring.

Teacher presence

The role of the teacher in learning is to mediate between the learner and what is to be learned. This entails creating a learning environment where learners reflect upon their experiences in order to master more complex academic knowledge that cannot be picked spontaneously. Vygotsky (1978) underscores the notion of mediation, where a more competent peer or adult assists performance by bridging the gap between what the learner knows and what she/he needs to know. This gap between unassisted and assisted performance is what he terms the zone of proximal development, and this is where teacher mediation is critical. In a learning encounter, teacher presence manifests itself through the design and construction of course content, learning activities, and assessment framework. Online teaching makes provision for selecting vast quantities of content available on the web, and structuring the content and learning activities to suit

the unique needs of learners in a given context. Teacher presence is also about stimulating, guiding, and supporting independent learning- enhancing Holmberg's (1989) "guided didactic interaction". The discourse of 'knowledgeable others' is to draw the learners beyond the known into the unknown – showing the learner 'paths into the unknown' is a key role of the teacher. The idea of guiding and directing evokes the old traditional notion of the role of a teacher as a pedagogue, a knowledgeable and mature adult who accompanies a child (for security)to a place of learning. The role of the teacher in a learning process is to influence the content, direction and form of thought of learners. This is what online support should strive to achieve; to provide the right scaffolding that enables learners to extend their knowledge and to try something they would otherwise not manage on their own.

Social Presence

Learning is a social activity that involves collaborative construction of knowledge. The greatest danger in distance education is for learners to be isolated and endure the burden of learning in very prohibitive 'learning spaces'. In his theory of transactional distance, Moore (1997) suggests the notion of distance as a constraining factor in a teaching –learning process. In his view, there is always transactional distance in any instructional encounter, and this is particularly true of distance education systems. This distance is a result of the separation between the teacher and the learner which results in special patterns of learner and teacher behaviours. "With separation there is a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner," (Moore, 1997:22). Where learning is mediated in a way that maximises dialogue, this distance is significantly reduced, and the converse is true. Moore suggests that in distance educational environments the learning transaction occurs at a distance without the relevant mediation through conversation and dialogue. It is this distance that poses the greatest threat in distance teaching and learning and therefore needs to be bridged by introducing 'other humans' in a learning process. This view takes learning as a process of sharing; we learn by reflecting upon and building on others' thoughts. Social presence is about collaborative learning and in online learning this occurs both synchronously and asynchronously, in a virtual sense.
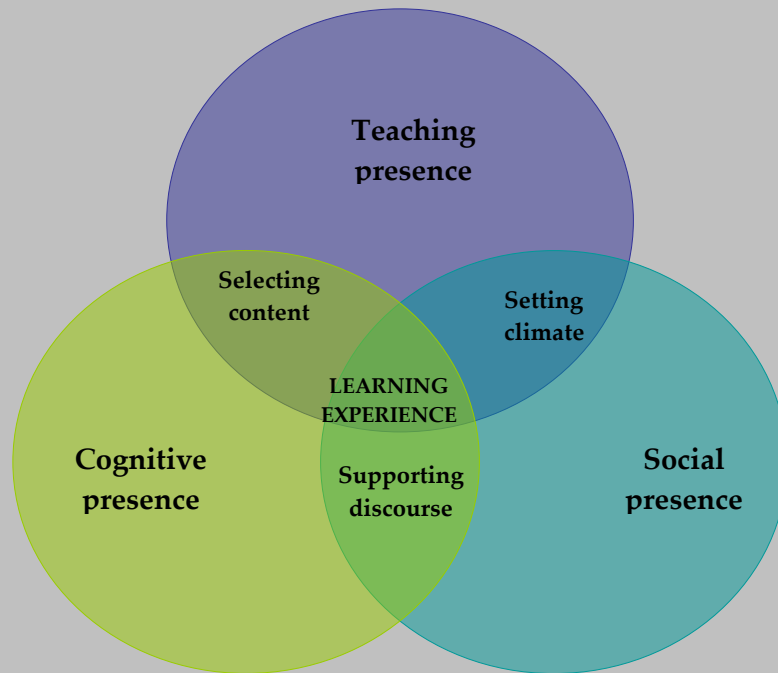
Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is an act of the mind; it is about mental processing of information perceived/gained through experience and reflecting upon that information in order to construct new knowledge. Reflection is triggered off by developmentally-conceived learning activities that encourage the learner to think about what he/she has done or said or written in a critical manner. For this to happen, the teacher needs to create conditions that involve learners in mental action. Whether online or face-to-face, learning involves mental processes.

The three types of presence discussed above are represented in Fig.1 below, and a good balance of them makes the best recipe for a learning experience, whether online or face-to face.

The 'three presences' theory provides a sound basis on which to anchor online teaching and learning activities. It guides both online structuring of content and the designing of learning activities so as to integrate pedagogic mediation, sharing and collaborating, as well as critical reflection during the learning process.

Fig 1: Enriching learning experiences

Teaching presence

Selecting content

Setting climate

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Cognitive presence

Supporting discourse

Social presence

Source: Anderson, T. & Elloumi, F. (2004:275)

References

Ally, M. (2004) Foundations of educational theory for online learning. In Anderson, T. & Elloumi, F. (eds.) Theory and Practice of Online Learning, pp.3-31, Athabasca University, Athabasca.

Holmberg, B. (1989) cited in Anderson, T. (2004) Teaching in an online learning context. In Anderson, T. & Elloumi, F. (eds.) Theory and Practice of Online Learning, pp. 273-294, Athabasca University, Athabasca.

Clark, R. E. (1983) cited in Ally, M. (2004) Foundations of educational theory for online learning. In Anderson, T. & Elloumi, F. (eds.) Theory and Practice of Online Learning, pp.3-31, Athabasca University, Athabasca.

Moore, G. M. (1997) "Theory of transactional distance". In Keegan, D. (ed.) Theoretical principles of distance education. Routledge, pp22-38 http://www.aged.tamu.edu/research/readings/Distance/1997MooreTransDistance.pdf [Accessed 15/07/2009]

 Schramm, W. (1977) Big media, little media. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) cited in Hardman, J. (2005) Activity Theory as a framework for understanding teachers' perceptions of computer usage at a primary school level in South Africa. In *South African Journal of Education, Vol. 25(4) pp.*258–265.