

Current Distance Education Practice: A Shadow of the Past?

“Computer-mediated environments are increasingly being used as educational platforms, fueled by drivers such as globalization, technological advancements, and demand from learners that have grown up in a digital era” (Goel, Zhang & Templeton, 2012). Hence, it can be argued that the theoretical traditions of andragogy and transactional distance have an influence on current distance education practice and application, more so in the online teaching and learning environment that has taken center stage in recent times (Sato, Haegele & Foot, 2017; Falloon, 2011).

Anderson (2010) states, “Good theories stand the test of time and continue to be of use because they help us understand and act appropriately” when designing and facilitating distance education courses (p.26). In this vein, Anderson adds that traditional theories are still relevant in the current landscape of tremendous technological advances in distance education, as course designers and instructors face similar challenges in providing quality education and interactions to students now, as they faced before technological advances influenced distance education. Moreover, Arghode, Brieger, and McLean (2017) add, “many instructional theories emphasize learning, but no single theory or model provides complete knowledge about adult learners, learning context, and learner understanding”, especially within online environments (p. 594). Therefore, by implication, various theories and/or models can be used to understand the e-learning environment holistically, starting with traditional approaches to distance education.

Moreover, despite the increased flexibility that distance education and online learning offers students, research points out that quality interactions are the key to student success rates and needs to be built into course structures (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014; Falloon, 2011). Learning

theories that emphasize regular, meaningful interactions between and among students and instructors in distance education are, therefore, important to consider in this regard. Therefore, it is argued in this research paper, that with the growing popularity of online learning amongst adults, the theories of transactional distance and andragogy, specifically, would guide the effective use of e-learning technologies in current distance education practices (Anderson, 2010).

Adult Learners in a Virtual Environment

Online courses are attracting greater numbers of adult students in higher education institutions; therefore, it becomes more important to understand the needs of adult learners in the teaching and learning transaction in this virtual space (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Tainsh, 2016; Freire, 2005; Hase & Kenyon, 2000). Despite the increasing appeal of online courses, the teaching strategies related to online course design and dissemination have not received the attention it deserves, as the simple use of digital platforms does not imply quality collaboration in the virtual learning space, (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016, p. 153; Falloon, 2011). The strategic implementation of teaching strategies within the digital space, coupled with an appropriate mix of online platforms is important in the provision of a superior learning experience for the growing adult student population in the distance education sphere.

In light of the above arguments, the theory of andragogy describes the needs of the adult student, which are fairly different from the traditionally younger learners in residential universities, and assumes that the adult student prefers to be self-directed and requires minimal supervision from lecturers and other faculty members (Arghode et al., 2017; Knowles, 1970). E-learning platforms are inherently flexible in terms of time and space and can provide various opportunities for self-directed learning for adults, with strategic guidance from instructors (Arghode et al., 2017; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016). The application of andragogical approaches for online

instruction, such as blogs, wikis, and other online tasks, would support self-directed learning activities (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016). These approaches would also facilitate the flexibility that adult students require to learn at their own pace and virtually construct knowledge in their own way, taking into consideration the different platforms of virtual interaction available to them (Arghode et al., 2017; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016).

Nonetheless, the theory of andragogy assumes that all adult learners learn in the same way, stereotyping adult learners by disregarding differences between them, which is not an accurate depiction (Arghode et al., 2017). In this respect, Stein, Wanstreet, and Calvin (2009) purport that “many adult learners are still novices in virtual environments” (305). Being new to the virtual learning space creates various challenges for the adult student, with a heightened perception of transactional distance being at the forefront of learning barriers (Stein et al., 2009). Having less than optimum digital literacy levels could hinder the collaborative construction of knowledge in the virtual space, even though adult students require more interaction and meaningful collaboration in their learning transactions, be it horizontal, vertical, or circular interaction between fellow learners and instructors (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Tainsh; 2016; Stein et al., 2009). Therefore, course facilitators need to consider these factors when designing courses, and not assume that all adult learners will be self-directed, requiring minimal instructor guidance and assistance.

The Adult Learner and Transactional Distance in Online Spaces

While andragogy provides insight into the specific characteristics of adult learning, transactional distance theory provides an understanding of the perceptions of ‘distance’ that students experience in e-learning courses (Arghode et al., 2017; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016). “Within any class, in any domain, information is shared and meaning is created between students

and a teacher through the give and take of information – a transaction” (Dockter, 2016, p. 76). Hence, the combined conceptualization of ‘transaction’ and ‘distance’ underpins the theoretical foundations of the distance education field, purporting that the geographical separation between students and instructors causes barriers to communication and psychological distance between the participants in this distance education interaction (Huang, Chandra, DePaolo & Simmons, 2016; Stein et al., 2009). The elements of transactional distance include course structure, dialogue between students and course facilitators, and learner autonomy (Huang et al., 2016; Moore, 2016; Stein et al., 2009). Stein et al. (2009) further explain, “Transactional distance is a space crossed by learners and instructors to reduce miscommunication and psychological distance” (p.206). The question is how valid is Moore’s delineation of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy in the current application of distance education practice?

Moore (2016) argues that the last few decades have been marked with tremendous pedagogic and technological changes, “the most obvious of which has been the evolution of online interactivity through the Web, and through social networks and mobile devices” (p. 131). Similar shifts in the approach to transactional distance theory have been noted, where instructors experiment with varying combinations of structure, dialogue, and autonomy built into course designs (Huang et al., 2016; Moore, 2016; Goel et al, 2012; Smith, 2002). The challenge is to find the correct balance between these three elements in the transactional distance paradigm, to ensure effective learning takes place in media-rich virtual spaces, which will differ across courses. Hence, opting for too much structure and too little dialogue in courses could result in increased levels of transactional distance, even if instructors utilize multimedia channels of communication (Dockter, 2016, p. 77). Similarly, affording too much autonomy to students and too little structure would also provide challenges to the effective attainment of learning outcomes, while over-structuring

content and interactions can result in greater transactional distance, despite the media platforms utilized in course delivery and facilitation (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Major & Sumner, 2018; Moore, 2016). Another aspect that could increase transactional distance in e-learning situations is the tendency for interactions between facilitators and students to be predominantly in written format and not varying communication channels and media (Dockter, 2016, p. 76; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005).

Moreover, Stein et al. (2009) argue that adult learners, more so those that are inexperienced in navigating online learning environments, can experience greater transactional distance in online environments as they are trying to establish a cyber-image among ‘virtual’ learners and instructors.. Additionally, there is a tendency for instructors to design online courses where the interaction between students and course content is greater than student-student or student-instructor collaboration, which could be problematic in that it increases transactional distance in the virtual learning space (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014, p. 425). As such, course designers (including instructors) also need to be cognizant of these perceptions of increased transactional distance that novice adult learners experience in e-learning courses and structure courses in a way that facilitates the feeling of interconnectedness to ensure student retention and throughout in online programs (Stein et al., 2009)

Conclusion

The theories of transactional distance and andragogy are still applicable in current distance education practice. While transactional distance theory provides insight into organizing online learning spaces in a way that optimizes effective learning and learning experiences for all participants in the distance education transaction, andragogy considers the needs of adult learners in virtual learning spaces (Stein et al., 2009, Arghode et al., 2017). Therefore, as much as the

theories of transactional distance and andragogy could be classified as dated, they are still relevant and applicable in current distance education practice, even within a rapidly advancing technological revolution that is reshaping the distance education arena. Current distance education is indeed a shadow of the past!

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