E-learning must synch or sink

January 30 2012, By Jamie Hanlon

(PhysOrg.com) -- According to one University of Alberta researcher, people looking to further their education through e-learning may want to look carefully at the conditions under which online coursework will give them the biggest academic return on their investment.

Heather Kanuka, director of the U of A Centre for Teaching and Learning, says that her research shows that online undergraduate classes using a text-based format can make it difficult to reach deeper levels of learning and facilitate a community of learners. She says that class contributions in a text-based online forum don't support engagement in a way that meets the needs of a community of learners.

The human factor

"I did a series of studies where I looked at reflection in an online class. One of the studies was content analysis of course transcripts to see if

there was evidence of reflection," she says.

Kanuka and her research assistants found little evidence of reflective engagement, and she noted that participants rarely went further than what was required of them. She says her findings showed little indication of students engaging with others, with students neither defending their positions nor responding to the difference of opinion of others. "One of my assistants labelled it 'communication lacking in joy, passion, flavour and urgency,'" she says.

Synch or sink

Kanuka says that the asynchronous text-based learning environment does overcome two major adult learning barriers: time and place. She notes that this model has become the blueprint for online learning despite advances in online communications capabilities. In light of some of these advancements, she would like to see instructional design for these types of courses integrate audio-visual technologies into the online classroom to better support and facilitate a community of learners. She says that holding a group discussion through the use of text-based forums in an age when real-time communication is possible makes little sense.

"Discussions are an essential condition to achieving higher levels of thinking – how we debate and banter ideas and call things into question," Kanuka says. "There is nothing about text-based, asynchronous forums that's a discussion. At best, it is a very quick correspondence between one or more people. Can we really call that form of communication a discussion?"

Self-directed learners still need direction

She says that, if the notion of providing opportunities to foster

meaningful lifelong learning is to be successful for online learners, course creators need to include greater structure with diverse instructional strategies as aspects of the design, development and delivery of each course.

“Yes, you want them to be responsible for their own learning, and support self-directed learning; these are good things to aspire to,” she says. “But my research shows that most undergraduate students taking online courses need structure and do not achieve higher levels of learning when self-directed.”

“How can we get our students to achieve higher levels of learning in the online classroom? They need strategically structured activities, and my research confirms that.”

Provided by University of Alberta

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