

# ***HOW A NOVICE ADULT ONLINE LEARNER EXPERIENCES TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE***

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This naturalistic inquiry explored the theory of transactional distance by investigating how a novice adult learner experiences an online environment. Three themes that are related to how the novice learner reduces the transactional distance space emerged from an analysis of interview transcripts: creating a voice for learning, connecting in a space for learning, and creating a time for learning. Initially, instructors play a critical role in helping novice learners develop identities as online learners and work in that dialogic space.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

The first night I sort of had willies in my stomach—you know, the funny feeling you get. Gosh, I've never [chatted] before.... How do you do it? Is it easy to figure out?

As Pat, a novice adult online learner expressed, adult learners return to higher education with complex, contradictory feelings that help form their identities as learners (Wojecki, 2007). Online environments present adult learners with an “inevitable” identity adjustment because of changes in the nature of communication and interaction (Garrison,

Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2004, p. 61). The changes can be understood through the lens of transactional distance theory, which allows for the analysis of the experiences of adults who are becoming online learners.

Many adult learners are still novices in virtual environments. Instructors who regularly teach with technology may be unaware of the challenges novice users face in becoming familiar with course management systems and other electronic communications necessary to complete their academic work.

Novice online adult learners bring issues to the virtual learning space that can hinder learning and increase feelings of separation and dis-

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The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 10(3), 2009, pp. 305–311  
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ISSN 1528-3518  
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tance from the instructor and other learners. They may lack online literacy skills, which include creating an online identity; communicating a cognitive presence on text-based screens; posting comments that reflect favorably on their image as competent and intelligent adult learners; and constructing their own learning from comments received from other learners, the materials, and the content (Conrad, 2002; Dixon & Pelliccione, 2004; Dringus, 2002; and Zembylas, 2008). What do novice online learners experience as they develop online literacy skills and work through their willies?

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Transactional distance is a foundational concept in distance teaching and learning. Transactional distance theory holds that the physical separation of the learner and instructor can lead to psychological and communication gaps that create misunderstandings and feelings of isolation (Moore, 1997). The structure of the course, dialogue between the instructor and learners, and the extent to which learners are autonomous are dimensions of transactional distance.

The three constructs of transactional distance—dialogue, structure, and autonomy—have been studied as the building blocks for interaction among learners, instructors, materials, and technology (Chen, 2001). The goal of investigating the combination of these elements has been to reduce the chance for miscommunication and misunderstanding concerning the nature of the course, the intent of the instructor and learner, and the content itself. Dialogue has been seen as the primary tool for reducing chances of misunderstanding. Dialogue reduces the transactional distance, while structure by itself may increase transactional distance (Dron, Seidel, & Litten, 2004). However, Chen (2001) found that the model accounted for only 6% of the variance in the dependent variable transactional distance.

Researchers have been grappling with how to operationalize transactional distance. Chen and Willits (1998) attempted to define the variable as perceived distance of understanding and perceptions. Distance decreased as in-class discussion increased. Neither structure nor autonomy influenced perceived distance.

The usefulness of transactional distance as a theoretical model for teaching and learning as well as a model describing teaching practices has been challenged. Garrison (2000) describes the shifting of the distance teaching-learning paradigm. While transactional distance may have addressed the concern for organizing learning experiences for individual learners and one-way interactions, the introduction of interactive online tools has moved the paradigm to a more multi-interactive, integrative, and collaborative learning space.

The idea of a learning space is implied in Moore's (1997) definition of transactional distance. Transactional distance is a space crossed by learners and instructors to reduce miscommunication and psychological distance. Transactional distance is also described as the space where instructors and learners accomplish the work of learning in an environment that separates the principal actors in both time and geographic distance. Moore (2007) describes *transaction* as "the interplay of teachers and learners in environments that have the special characteristic of being spatially separate from one another" (p. 91). The transactions are assumed to be involved in negotiating course structure, dialogue, and autonomy between learner and instructor at the course level.

Tait (2003) further describes transactional distance as a space where learning tasks are also negotiated. Conrad (2002) suggests that a "good beginning" constitutes having worked out the concerns about instructional roles, course organization, and social acceptance and support from other learners (p. 215).

Considering the prevalence of collaborative and interactive tools, might transactional distance be redefined as the space where the work of preparing to learn online occurs, the place

where a learner works through the issues of how to learn by engaging with others in a new teaching-learning space? If so, what does it feel like to experience that space, to negotiate through and in that space in order to be connected and engaged in the meaning-making activities of the learning environment?

To date, the literature has not addressed what happens from the perspective of a learner situated in the distance gap and the learner's struggle to overcome feelings of distance. Perhaps transactional distance is the space where learners stay briefly to receive support, interact, and develop their identities in online environments.

## **METHOD**

This naturalistic inquiry study investigated the following questions: How does a novice adult online learner experience the transactional distance space? How does he or she negotiate in that space to close the transactional distance gap, which will result in learning? Data to answer these questions were gathered through online chat sessions of the 15 learners enrolled in a graduate-level course and in-depth interviews with 5 volunteers. Following the guidance of Hatch (2002), the researchers carefully read each interview and chat transcript and made memos of impressions, emerging analytic categories, and insights. A reading of the memos was done individually to generate patterns in the data. Patterns were combined to form themes. The researchers then discussed the themes and came to consensus. A composite case, "Pat," was selected as the way to represent the learners and present the story.

While we honor individual voices, the composite was used to tell an integrative story and to share our knowing of this particular reality through the use of creative analytical practices (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Pat is a graduate student taking her first course in adult education and her third online course. Pat's experiences have varied from high structure-low dialogue to the low structure-high dia-

logue course in this study. Pat's comments are instructive in that she can compare her experiences as an online learner across varying degrees of distance.

## ***The Teaching-Learning Space***

The 15 learners in this study were enrolled in a graduate-level course on adult education in American society. The course combined three face-to-face meetings with seven weekly online chat and threaded discussion sessions throughout the 10-week quarter.

For many of the students, this course was their first experience with online learning. Requirements for the successful completion of the course included weekly small-group discussions (held in online chat rooms), weekly online chats with the instructor and the rest of the class, an annotated bibliography, an oral history, and a written final examination.

## **NAVIGATING THROUGH TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE**

Three themes related to how the novice online learner reduces the transactional distance space emerged from an analysis of the interview transcripts: creating a voice for learning, connecting in a space for learning, and creating a time for learning.

### ***Creating a Voice for Learning***

Noting the various forms of communication available online, including instant messaging and synchronous and asynchronous tools, Spector (2007) describes *voice* as the skill involved in knowing when and how to communicate in an electronic learning world. Adults need to learn how to express themselves in online educational environments and to create a sense of their presence and identity as learners. Learners need to fill in the spaces created by the lack of visual and verbal cues. The effectiveness of dialogue in reducing transactional distance is moderated by text, the

use of language, and technical limitations of the online learning platform.

Dialogue was used as the primary means of learning. Through group interactions, members in small groups, and later in the large group, would come to create their understanding of the historical forces behind adult education in the United States. Finding voice while learning how to use a new online tool to communicate was Pat's first hurdle:

The first night I sort of had willies in my stomach—you know, the funny feeling you get. Gosh, I've never done this before, 'cause I never chatted anywhere. How do you do it? Is it easy to figure out? And it was. I'm not a fast typer, so that was an issue. It was my first time in any chat room of any type, so that was a growing kind of experience to begin with; but it was comfortable. It wasn't an uncomfortable thing. I got better at seeing where we were going and typing in. I was trying to type in *big* responses instead of smaller responses and keep adding to them. So I learned myself.

As the course progressed, Pat found that the chats and threaded discussions did contribute to helping her construct her own knowledge:

In this particular class, the dialogue caused us, I think, to really think through an issue because you weren't just making one-way communication, doing research, and throwing it back out there. You were being challenged daily by your classmates to try and put something positive together *and* by the people [in] the other [groups]. If they were on your team, they were challenging you to say, "Well, is that really what we want to put in our ... posting?" And on the other side, you posted it and somebody would tear it apart.

The single biggest thing I liked was the option to interact with other students. I can't imagine how you could ever do that to the extent we did without this type of communication tool.... We kind of learned from each other ... because [of] the dialogue. We would talk about something that I knew nothing about. And as I talked, it started to come to the surface, you know. You could almost see it.

Developing a voice and an identity as an online learner is a challenge for the novice adult learner. In their study of adult learners in an online training and development program, Dixon and Pelliccione (2004) found that competent workplace professionals became intimidated at first by the tools used in an online course and did not initially trust that individual learning would come about from collaborations with others. A similar finding was reported by Shank (2001) in a study of adult graduate students taking a first online course. Although learners were enthusiastic about the convenience and flexibility of online learning, they were concerned about their professional image as competent online learners. As a course progresses, however, novice online learners become comfortable with the dialogic features and become more reliant on their co-learners for support than on the instructor (Conrad, 2002; Shank, 2001).

### *Connecting in a Space for Learning*

Creating a space that encourages learner involvement can be disconcerting initially as learners transition from depending on the instructor for all the answers to working interdependently with others to construct their own meaning. Adult students need to learn how to learn from each other and come to value the contributions of others. The instructor's presence in meaning making is still a desired feature by learners who have not participated in highly dialogic learning experiences. Instruction that combines face-to-face and online learning can reduce some anxiety about the learning tasks and make the learning less distant. Pat relates an incident of how being "in distance"—that is, a 100% distance learning space, meant also being distant from the learning:

When I was lost and I felt I had a question, I just felt like I was alone. You felt very distanced from even the faculty who were right here on our campus. I still felt lost.... One night in distance I felt like I was bothering the instructor.

*Distant* can also mean that learners are not clear whether they are learning. As the course proceeded, however, Pat began to depend less on feedback from her instructor and to rely more and more on the comments from others as confirmation of her learning.

I think at first I didn't have a gauge for how I was doing until I could interchange and interact with other people, and then you had an idea of how what you were learning was similar or different to what other people were learning on their own. So I think that working with other people certainly helped, even though you know all of the reading was learning on your own, it helped to gauge how you were doing by talking with others.

The course structure helped create a working space in which learners constructed their own learning and developed a way of working together. Novice learners enter online learning uncertain of how to proceed, how to create understanding from discussion posts, how to interact with other learners and the instructor, and how to deal with the silence (i.e., the delay in responses) in an online course (Dringus, 2000; Zembylas, 2008). In an online discussion-based course, learners share the responsibility for creating a space for learning where they can connect with one another and where they develop and share resources for learning.

### ***Creating a Time for Learning***

Creating a time for learning involves helping adults realize that the responsibility for learning is theirs and that they must balance life priorities to accommodate online tasks, which are generally more loosely scheduled than classroom experiences. Rather than having an assigned time and place to meet as in a face-to-face session, Pat found that the flexibility may have encouraged learners to let other priorities emerge. Pat describes the difficulty in arranging for a chat among her small group to accomplish assigned learning tasks:

We all work full time in other jobs. And then when we would find time, not everybody

would be there on time and we wait. And if we would try it from home ... [the IP connection] would kick you out of the system every 30 minutes so that it was a hassle. It *does* require a little more of a ... self-motivated person to get on and do it.

Although the flexibility of online learning provides opportunities for learners to interact at a time and place controlled by the learners, the format also allows learners to restrict their interactions based on emerging life priorities. The issue of coordinating online learning with other life commitments, especially among group members, becomes a crucial issue for the learner. Adult learners drop out from online learning experiences not necessarily due to grades but from the failure to achieve balance among family, work, education, and other commitments (Diaz, 2002). Thus, the flexibility in creating a time for learning that online environments can provide is experienced by adult learners as both a facilitator and a barrier to engaging in group learning.

### ***TEACHING IN TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE***

The transactional distance gap can be a troublesome space for an adult trying to create an identity as an online learner. At the beginning of the experience, instructors need to be available to assure learners that they can work in a dialogic situation and that their thoughts are valued. As the adult's confidence in his or her ability to learn online increases, direct interaction with the instructor can decrease. Novice online adult learners need to learn how to support each other's learning through sharing resources, providing emotional support, and telling stories of how to manage in an online environment (Tait, 2003).

As instructors, we must remind ourselves that learners are not necessarily familiar with online educational environments. They may need our help working through the willies an online course can induce. The working out of the willies, we suggest, takes place in the space

separating learners, instructors, content, and technology. Rather than reducing transactional distance based on instructor actions, we further suggest that the chance for misunderstanding is reduced when learners, with the help and support of other learners and the instructor, find a voice, trust in the meaning-making processes involving colearners, and live and learn in a flexible and changing instructional environment. These tasks, which we suggest reduce transactional distance, are necessary before learning can occur.

Being aware of transactional distance from the novice user's point of view can help instructors understand how the learner moves from being dependent on the instructor to being interdependent and from feeling distant to feeling interconnected with others in the course. This understanding can assist in creating a more comfortable learning environment as well as in efforts to retain learners in online courses.

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