

Faculty, learners, learning experience and community

Initially, when I read chapter 3 in our textbook, I noticed that there was such an emphasis placed on learners in distance education courses and not a lot of focus was put on faculty. This led me to want to find articles that specifically outlined the two key players in distance education: faculty and learners. Along the way, while I searched out articles, I was reintroduced to learning experience, one element to Simonson's emerging theory of distance education and equivalence of learning experience. I was also made aware of the importance of community and how the sense of belonging to a community, can have an effect on learning experiences and sometimes influence completion.

I do however need to address one issue before delving into the assignment. As I read chapter 3 and the articles I found for my annotated bibliography, I realized that my reflection on Simonson's equivalence of learning experience needed correction. When I submitted my reflection for the module 2 assignment, I did not have as much bearing on the subject as I do now. To summarize, I stated in my reflection that Simonson's theory was rubbish and had no business being called a theory because equivalent learning experiences could not be achieved. Why? Because equivalence of learning experience had to consider everything that makes an individual an individual (i.e., background, socio-economic status, primary education, etc.). I argued that unless every individual has similar experiences, has the same kind of educational background from elementary, and has the same learning styles, learning experiences could never be equivalent. After this assignment I stand corrected and feel that equivalence of learning experiences is important to distance education. However, I do believe that emphasis of the learning experience cannot be solely the responsibility of the learner and should include the

institution and faculty. With that thought in mind, I begin with my reactions to the information I gained from the articles I found for the annotated bibliography assignment.

My articles: Influencing the practice of distance education

The first article I found dealt with the peer-to-peer interaction in a multicultural online learning environment. The study analyzed international students who took online courses with U.S. students at large research universities. The study emphasized the importance of culture, learning, mediators, and peer-to-peer relationships. With schools targeting international students, I think this study has a significant bearing to the practice of distance education. So much focus seems to be on learners but there is not much distinction made between the cultures of the learners. Before focusing on this article I did read a few that found that women did better in online courses compared to men, but I did not find many that spoke of cultural differences and how that element plays a role in distance education. One really important point that was made in the introduction of this study was the language barriers international students face and how slang (used by U.S. students), can sometimes be confusing. Luckily, the peer-to-peer relationship developed in the online course helped international students to identify the slangs and keep that communication pipeline open. The study provided other examples but I think overall, it addressed the need for instructors/faculty to design courses that encourage peer-to-peer relationship especially when international students are enrolled in the course. Communicating with international students face-to-face is sometimes difficult so imagine communication done via email or blackboard when cultural barriers exist, and how much more difficult that can be for everyone in the course.

Another important element that was addressed in my articles was the importance of community, social presence and interaction in distance education. Social presence was redefined

in the study as the degree of feeling, perception and reaction of being connected by computer-mediated communication. This study was a perfect segue into the first article I mentioned above since it dealt in large part about communication and fitting into communities. The research found that social presence is a vital element that influences online interaction. Social presence, according to the research, is connected to the belonging of community. For instance, in face-to-face traditional classroom settings, students enter the class and are immediately drawn to people they know. If a student walked into a class and did not know anyone in the class, they could still observe the class and identify with people who have similar characteristics or likes. With online education, social presence becomes difficult to achieve and an established community becomes non-existent. When people are not part of a community it becomes difficult to be invested in the goal of that community. As such, community and social presence impact students in distance education courses. Teachers need to understand this and design ways for students to introduce themselves to the group. This made me see why posting our introduction to VoiceThread was a great idea.

The last article took a turn but it was deliberate. I found so much information on learners and how to accommodate different types of learners but I did not see much information on faculty, or designers of distance education courses. I devoted hours to finding research that focused on faculty but when I finally found one, it was a bit outdated (2000). Interestingly, the research focused on faculty time and effort that is devoted to distance education courses. The researcher started off with what he called “conventional wisdom” which was, faculty put in more time and effort for distance education courses than they do traditional face-to-face courses. There was no surprise when the conventional wisdom hypothesis turned out to be supported but I began to wonder if that was the reason for few research studies done on faculty. I would think

that any faculty interested in teaching a distance education course may be turned off by the hours and effort required to teach the course. In my mind, this concept definitely has a huge bearing on the practice of designing distance education courses. The researchers trying to prove that the need for distance education exists, need to also consider faculty who are teaching these courses. If the product being sold is distance education, than emphasis needs to be placed on whether there are enough educators willing to offer the product.