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[OMDE 601]

[Describe and analyze the three categories used by Michael Moore in his theory of transactional distance]

Transactional distance describes difficulties in distance education that result from physical and geographic separations that exist between teachers and learners (Moore, 2005, p.223). The theory focuses on explaining changes in teacher and learner behavior that result from this separation, as well as changes in learner environment (p.224).

Transactional distance theory seeks to explain dialog and structure in distance education and how those two variables relate to learner autonomy (p.234).

Moore (2005) explains dialog as the interplay between the teacher and the learner, when one teaches and the other confirms learning by responding (p.224). Moore further explains that environmental factors including the size of a learning group, language, and medium of communication influence the amount of dialog in a distance education course (p.225). For example, there may be increased dialog in a web-based program compared to a program delivered via DVD. Or there may be higher chances of engagement in dialog for a foreign language speaker in an asynchronous text-based web program compared to a real-time teleconference (p.225). The ultimate goal of dialog between a teacher and learner is to shift not only knowledge but also the pace of the learning process to the student (p.226). Peters (2001) notes that dialog is not only a help function but can also be viewed as an independent form of learning, contributing to learner autonomy (p.35). Peters further explains that nearly 94% of learners want personal discussions and that funds must be allocated in distance education programs that prepare for, and reflect the importance of dialog (p.65).

The second aspect of the theory of transactional distance is course structure. A course consists of learning objectives, content themes, information presentations, case studies, pictorial and other illustrations, exercises, projects, and tests (Moore, 2005). Peters (2001) feels that rigid course structure neglects learning through participation and reflection and is too teacher-centered, reducing complex learner-oriented teaching to a one dimensional and streamlined process (p.43). Moore explains however that if dialog is reduced, course structure should become more rigid in order to carry the learner through the program by using carefully prepared lesson plans (2005, p.226-227). Such course design should have: a well-defined structure and clear objectives to tell the learner what is expected of them, small units, planned participation that ensures each student interacts with the teacher, a high level of completeness including information beyond text books, repetition, synthesis, stimulation and variety to prevent the student from getting bored, open-ended assignments that allow students to adapt knowledge to their own circumstances, and feedback and evaluation (p.125).

The third aspect of transactional distance theory is learner autonomy. Peters (2001) explains that autonomy is “natural behavior for adults” and that “those who educate use actions whose aim is to be no longer necessary and that those who are educated must learn to do for themselves what others have previously done for them” (p.47). This may lead the learner to make their own decisions about study strategies, and decide when, how, where, and to what extent to study (Moore, 2005, p.227). While course structure and dialog tend to be variables of teaching, Moore (2005) points out “a theory of distance education that only considered the variables of teaching would be flawed” (p.227). Moore believes that in distance education, independence of learners

should be considered an asset and not a distraction or hassle (p.228). Moore envisions learner autonomy to include the learner integrating new ideas into his or her own existing framework and therefore generating meaningful knowledge (p.230). Learner autonomy does not mean each learner must be solitary. Researchers have noted a dramatic difference in completion rates between learners who collaborated vs. those that worked alone [90% vs. 22%] (Moore, 2005, p.231). Peters states that expository teaching and receptive learning are outdated and it is best to prepare learners to be autonomous and to make this their typical learning habit (2001, p.94).

Transactional Distance is a very important aspect of distance education; as it increases students perceive their learning to be lower (Moore, 2005, p.232). By taking into account the degree of a learner's autonomy, providing the appropriate level of course structure, and adjusting the level of dialog, success in distance teaching can be achieved (p.234). All three aspects positively affecting transactional distance are scarcely found in everyday university teaching so work remains to be done in this area (Peters, 2001, p.32).

References

Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2005). *Distance education: A systems view*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Peters, O. (2001). *Learning and teaching in distance education: Analyses and interpretations from an international perspective*. London: Kogan Page.