Introduction

Holmberg (2005) proposes the idea that an empathetic approach to DE can positively impact real and simulated interaction by supporting the learning experience (p. 37). He explains that real interaction involves communication between "students and their tutors and others belonging to the support organization" (p. 35). Simulated interaction occurs when a conversational approach in subject-matter presentation is used and the student is motivated to discuss learning content with themselves (Holmberg, 2005, p.35). This paper seeks to examine real and simulated interaction and their purposes for the learning experience inside an empathetic framework.

General Purpose

Because DE presupposes that students and teachers are not meeting face-to-face, personal relationships with both tutor and learning content are developed using real and simulated interaction (Holmberg, 2005, pp. 37-38). The empathy approach, which utilizes "personal, friendly interaction between students and tutors and conversation-like presentations of subject matter," facilitates connection thus encouraging learning (Holmberg, 2005, pp. 38, 121).

Real Interaction

Student-tutor and student-organization communication do not exclusively comprise real interaction. Student-student interaction is another form of real interaction used in many DE courses, but will not be discussed here. Student-tutor and student-organization communication play a strong support role in student learning where that interaction is encouraging, motivating, practical and prompt. Encouraging and motivating interaction details what is expected, creates feelings of connection and guides students toward ways to address issues, problems and questions (Holmberg, 2005, pp. 76-77). Another way to look at encouraging and motivating interaction is that "its chief purpose is to help students by explanations based on their work and generally to facilitate their learning and in this and other ways to support their motivation to learn" (Holmberg, 2005, p. 76). Specifically, "frequent and friendly [real] interaction between students and tutors, the latter functioning as supporters and advisors who help students by suggestions and explanations and do so without delay, has proved very effective" (Holmberg, 2005, p. 88).

Counseling, by both tutors and educational organizations, another type of real interaction, provides practical interaction and communicates those things required for "course completion, general success and study pleasure" (Holmberg, 2005, p. 89). Students need practical and personal advice, as many are adults with competing interests. Counseling can also support motivation by "sending encouraging letters" when students are not meeting course requirements to get them back on track for their identified plan of study (Ibid., p. 89, 92).

Simulated interaction

Simulated interaction is the conversation that students have with themselves about their learning materials (Holmberg, 2005, pp. 38-42). Some ways to adopt a conversational approach to subject matter presentation are using advance organizers, tutorials in print and pre-produced course

materials (Holmberg, 2005, p. 40, 41, 51, 55). All of the aforementioned use a "conversation-like way of writing [which] may include attempts to involve the student emotionally, to make him/her develop a feeling of belonging, inviting personal comments, questions, etc." (Holmberg, 2005, p. 38). The purpose of this type of interaction being to support the learning experience by engaging the learner with learning content (Holmberg, 2005, p.121).

Conclusion

In DE, real and simulated interactions, enhanced by the empathy approach, are used for the purpose of encouraging and motivating students with the eventual goal being to facilitate student learning. As Holmberg (2005) states, "speed, frequency and empathy together should characterize interaction in distance education" (p. 88). Whether that interaction is real or simulated, students will be motivated to learn and encouraged to engage with learning content.

References

Holmberg, B. (2005). *The evolution, principles and practices of distance education*.

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