Online and face-to-face discussions: what's the difference?

The importance of talk in learning is well recognised in educational research. Talk among students seems to benefit all learners. Inevitably, the point of computer mediated communication (CMC) is to facilitate 'talk' among students.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) note that much of the then-available research on CMC assumed it was a replacement for speech, i.e. that its purpose was to overcome barriers to communication for distance learners:

There is now a substantial body of literature about the use of CMC for facilitating an educational experience. However, within this literature it is most often simply assumed that, for educational purposes, written communication is essentially equivalent to verbal discourse, with only the carrier of the communication (sound waves or paper/computer screens) changing.

One can still see such tacit assumptions being made in the design of text-based discussion activities today. But clearly, discussing online in text is different to discussing face-to-face. This has important implications with regard to student learning. Because they are writing, discussion forums can be useful for promoting higher order learning say Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001):

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that writing has some inherent and demonstrable advantages over speech when one person or a group is engaged in rigorously thinking through a problem.

There are some very practical considerations in trying to facilitate students online 'talk'. Not the least of them is that an online tutor who lets him/herself be the focal point of a forum discussion will soon be overwhelmed by the amount of writing they need to do simply to respond even briefly to student queries! This observation leads inexorably to the conclusion that e-moderators should design discussion activities in which their students need to interact with each other rather than the tutor.

McConnell (2000) identifies and classifies a variety of differences in teaching and learning between online and face-to-face group work. Here is a far from complete list to think about:

- differences in level of tutor control and impact over participants' behaviour;
- permanence of online discussions and impermanence of face-to-face ones;
- online discussions may have several simultaneous foci, whereas face-to-face ones usually work on one issue at a time;
- differences in group dynamics, with difficulties for interpretation of behaviours online due to lack of non-verbal cues;
- differences in levels of anxiety;
- psychological stress of rejoining a group is much higher online than face-to-face;
- feedback on other's work is much more detailed online than face-to-face;
- people can't hide online;
- the total effort of the group is likely to be greater online than face-to-face.

Can you add to this list? Can you draw any conclusions from these differences regarding the design of online collaborative activities?

References

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