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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Overcoming “transactional distance”

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There’s a term for the anxiety many novice instructors feel about the online teaching-learning environment. It’s called “transactional distance.” This relates to the dissonance of feeling “distant” or disconnected from students when one is used to only the experience of the face-to-face classroom experience.

Tisha Bender, in *Discussion-Based Online Teaching To Enhance Student Learning* (Stylus, 2013), identified the pedagogical components that can mitigate the discomfort of transactional distance (something that potentially affects both teacher and student online). Interestingly, but not surprising, they are the same things that are applicable in the classroom learning environment. Arguably there is as much, if not more, transactional distance in a traditional classroom experience as there is online. I’ve done classroom observations where I witnessed over half of the students spending *most of their time on Facebook, Instagram, and shopping sites while an oblivious professor lectured on.*

Here are the things we know enhances student learning:

For the student:

- Experiencing a sense of belonging
- Having a safe place where they can risk learning
- Having the opportunity to learn from others
- Feeling self-motivated to learn
- Receiving feedback from the instructor

Understanding and feeling comfortable in the social environment of the learning context.

For the instructor:

Practicing hospitality in the learning environment

Providing a place where respect and affirmation of others' opinion is affirmed

Providing opportunities for collaborative learning

Giving feedback

Creating the conditions for learning (interest, curiosity, challenge, and meeting student needs)

Understanding and managing the social environment of the learning context (classroom or online).

All that to say, one way to overcome anxiety about transactional distance is to remember:

- • Learning is learning, in whatever context
- • Learning is a social phenomenon; pay attention to the important “non-instructional” dynamics of the learning environment and experience
- • It is the application of sound pedagogy that makes the difference in the effectiveness of learning (context and modes are secondary)
- • The context of learning matters, but no context is perfect and learners have great capacity for being resilient when it comes to contexts of learning
- • Pedagogically sound course design can mitigate the challenges of the online environment that create transactional distance
- • The role of the instructor is critical to effective learning. The two absolutely necessary components for successful online learning are: (1) teacher engagement, and (2) student participation.

Whether you teach in the traditional classroom environment, design a hybrid course, or facilitate an online learning experience, how well are you paying attention to transactional factors for successful learning?

<https://wabash.center/2019/12/overcoming-transactional-distance/>