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Does Your Student Know? Being Intentional With Quality in Designing Online Instruction

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This article guides instructors to incorporate intentionality as a communication construct when designing a learning experience, especially online. Intentionality is communication planned around a learning goal by the instructor through cognitive decisions. Based on the research, the author shares the details of a faculty development course she created.

Introduction

Online education is growing at colleges and universities in the United States. Nearly 70 percent of chief academic officers at U.S. higher education institutions reported that online education is critical to their campuses' long-term strategy (Allen et al. 2016). The online learning trend has grown to include entire academic programs, and some universities have established online campuses (Kelly & Westerman, 2016). Further, a 2017 survey administered by the U.S. Department of Education shows that 33.7% of college students took at least one distance education course (Department of Education, 2018). The necessity and demand for online teaching and learning catapulted to greater heights during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the possibilities of online education. However, the growing demand for online courses raises the question: How intentional are instructors when designing their lessons to support learning objectives?

Interpersonal communication constructs such as rapport and presence, among others, have tremendous applications for instruction. Intention, however, has been pursued minimally in scholarship in the instructional context. Since 1990, when Stamp and Knapp attempted to summarize scholarship on the major perspectives of intention, communication scholars have debated the nature and interpretation of this construct. Intention is central to the teaching of communication (Stamp & Knapp, 1990), making it important to study for instructional purposes.

However, the construct of intention is conceptualized differently across the disciplines — such as psychology, philosophy and education — and as such, is nuanced. Several definitions of intention were considered for this article, with the focus on how intention influences relationship-rich education in teaching and learning. According to the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) online dictionary, *intention* refers to what one has in mind to do. A related term, *intent*, suggests formulation or deliberateness. Stamp and Knapp (1990) cited from a 1984 edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*: **Intention** is the general word implying having something in mind as a plan or design. Motley (1986, p. 3, as cited in Stamp & Knapp, 1990) noted that intention to communicate occurs “when we select the option to act upon the goal by encoding a message for reception by another.”

Given these distinctions, intention is regarded in the instructional context, and in this article, as *communication that is planned or designed around a goal by the encoder through cognitive decisions*. This places the onus on the encoder, the instructor, where the emphasis is conscious activity, although the decoder (student in the instructional context) plays a critical role with attribution of intention as a result of observable behavior (Bowers & Bradac, 1984, as cited in Stamp & Knapp, 1990). The instructor, therefore, initiates the teaching and learning process by charting a clear path for the learner to start and follow successfully. This article will guide instructors to incorporate intentionality as a communication construct when designing a learning experience through the instructional lens of online delivery, but such a construct is important regardless of the modality. Intentionality is communication planned around a learning goal by the instructor through cognitive decisions. Based on this research, this article will outline some of the literature surrounding intention followed by details of a faculty development course created around the construct.

Literature review

While this article concentrates on instructor intention, acknowledging the scholarship on the construct of intention in other areas is necessary to show the disparities. One area was student feedback and participation. To determine tutors' intentions when providing feedback, since such intentions might not be accurately perceived and acted on by students, Orsmond and Merry (2011) learned that student conceptions of the role of feedback included providing guidance, identifying what the tutor wants and giving meaning to the work to develop learning. An analysis of tutor feedback styles indicates that tutors were focused

on giving praise and correcting misunderstandings in the present assignment. Since developmental aspects of students' learning were rarely addressed in tutor feedback, these findings suggest some misalignment in feedback provision.

Lala and Priluck (2011) explored the factors that influence students' intention to complain after a bad classroom experience using a customer service framework from the marketing literature. In an online survey of 288 undergraduate students, predictors of intention to complain differ based on the target of complaint behavior (school, friends, or unknown others) and the mode of complaint (in person or using the web). Specifically, the more dissatisfied students are, the more likely they are to complain to the school and friends either in person or using the web but not to the general public. Students complain to the school only if the effort involved is minimal and they believe the school will respond. Students complain to friends and unknown others in person if they feel the school will respond to negative press. Personal characteristics also influence intentions to complain. Students with a propensity to complain broadcast their negative experience via the web, grade-conscious students tell their friends but only in person, and heavy social media users inform their friends using the web.

In addition to student feedback, intention as an instructional construct has been studied in online education. Hancock (2018) studied the relationship between students' perceptions of the quality of online instruction as measured by perceived levels of teaching presence, verbal immediacy, and online instructor competencies related to the students' intent to persist in school. No significant relationship was found between students' perceptions of instructor competencies and students' intent to persist in school. Meanwhile, Tomasetto (2004) determined from a study involving university students that a democratic style induces more direct agreement with the source than the authoritarian one when the targets were already orientated toward an activity. Yet, a complementary effect emerges; the authoritarian style, more than the democratic one, increases the intention to participate in the activity by students who were not previously orientated in this direction.

Intentional communication with students and teachers is a main component that Fatout (2015) studied in an initiative known as the Personalization of Academic and Social-Emotional Learning, created to observe the construction of teacher leadership through intentional communication. Gronlund and Stewart (2011) concluded that intentionality is purposeful, especially when teaching children, and advocated the need for teachers to plan activities that are tied to standards and learning objectives and document their observations of children's performances.

To identify instructional gaps in meeting students' learning goals and their acquisition of skills, McDonald (2019) focused on five years of archival data, with positive findings of relational pedagogy and student-centered engagement emerging in the analysis.

Overview

The themes observed in the literature review helped to support intention as an interpersonal construct in the instructional context, bringing the definition of intention outlined earlier to greater focus. Intentionality establishes direction in communication, serving as a foundational construct for other variables or behaviors to occur. For instance, before assigning a project to students, an instructor must know *why* (the intent) the activity is important for students to complete. The instructor can confirm his or her intent by making sure the project aligns with the learning objectives. After doing so, the clarity of intention can be designed for the learner through the specific task instructions. It could be argued that intent is synonymous with teacher clarity. Both constructs are related, but intent negotiates clarity in the instructional context.

If the instructor is the initial figure in the instructional communication process, ensuring the intention of the lesson, assignment or other academic expectation is clear before informing students, then how could the scholarship of teaching and learning assist in the study of intent? What are strategies to enhance the clarity of intention? One model that has surfaced in recent years is the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) framework, which is explained on the TILT Higher Ed website (www.tilthighered.com). Under this framework, *purpose*, *task*, and *criteria for success* are communicated to learners. The link between intent and the learning domains (affective, behavioral, cognitive) has not been explored extensively in the literature. Even before communication of student work under TILT or other paradigms can begin, the instructor must describe the intent — the *why* — of the activity. Additional opportunities for intent as an interpersonal communication construct in instruction — even to include intentions of choice and use of instructional materials — are needed to shape expectations more precisely to improve learning guidance that will enhance student success.

Teaching Online Intentionally: A Faculty Development Course

The above research on intention served as a guide in the creation of an online self-paced faculty development course, titled Teaching Online Intentionally. The course,

promoted through the author's faculty development center on campus, involves five instructional modules:

- Introduction to Intention
- Using Learning Objectives to Reflect Intention
- Designing Assignments That Demonstrate Intention
- Creating Rubrics to Support Intention in Assessment
- Integrating the Right Technology to Reinforce Intention of Lessons

Each module was guided by specific learning outcomes and featured these five elements: an overview of the lesson, learning guidance and content, a discussion prompt, an assignment, and a brief summary. The TILT method was used in writing the discussion prompts and the assignments. At the end of the fifth instructional module, faculty participants may submit their complete intentional online lesson plan that was built throughout the faculty development course to earn a digital certificate, serving as evidence of an instructor's professional development. In addition, participants are encouraged to complete an online survey so that their feedback can inform any modifications to the course.

Implications

Having a faculty development focus on interpersonal communication constructs can help inform pedagogy. The Teaching Online Intentionally course produced insights to guide instructors to consider whether they are intentional in designing online courses to help students meet learning objectives. The results from this and subsequent efforts could have implications for learning management systems (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle) and other instructional technologies, determining whether improvements to features or internal tools are required to enhance the online teaching and learning experience. Further, the results would offer information that could help shape opportunities for faculty development or lead to additional resources that could support instructors in using technology with greater intention to connect with the learning objectives.

Technology, particularly, presents both an opportunity and a challenge for higher education instructors who teach online courses which rely on technology tools either through the learning management system or external apps and digital tools. Student learning can be improved with appropriate technology that aligns with specified learning objectives, but instructors might choose technology for other reasons rather than whether the technology will help to improve learning

objectives. Technology decisions might be influenced by perceived ease of use and/or perceived usefulness. Through this research, capturing the degree of instructor intention in the alignment of technology choices with learning outcomes in university and college courses could offer insights and perspectives that would contribute not only to technology enhancements and improved pedagogical development for faculty, but also additional research opportunities to increase knowledge of how instructors connect their teaching with technology. The grand picture from this entire line of inquiry is that for higher education to grow effectively, instructors must be more intentional in their pedagogical decisions — content, readings and materials, learning activities, assessments, and technology tools — to help students meet the learning objectives.

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