Interaction and Communication in Online Learning Communities: Toward an Engaged and Flexible Future

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The character of online distance learning, if viewed from space, could be identified by several outstanding and very visible conceptual centres. As well-known scholar Robin Mason noted two decades ago, “No concept so characterizes educational thinking in the 1990s as does interactivity” (1994, p. 26). Mason’s observation holds true today. Accepting as its basic premise that interaction and communication—the hallmarks of learning communities—are necessary, positive structures that enhance our well-being and health as learners, this chapter will elaborate on the nature of these related concepts, outlining their historical evolution and their contribution to our current understanding of online distance learning, as well as to contemporary practice. This discussion will culminate in a consideration of what’s next. Where will our current practice and research interests in interaction and communication in learning communities take us?
Scholars and writers spanning all aspects of the sciences and humanities have long been intrigued by Zola’s *condition humaine*. Not surprisingly, therefore, the stunning development of Internet technologies over the past several decades has been accompanied by explorations into the human condition by psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, educators, and technologists. Within our field of distance education, an early body of literature sought to make sense out of the dramatic leap to computer technologies, labelled at the time as the fourth or fifth generation of distance education, following on the earlier delivery formats of print-based correspondence education, broadcast technologies, audio and video teleconferencing, and limited forays into pioneering computer-mediated communication formats (Collins & Berge, 1995; De Kerckhove, 1997; Eastmond, 1995; Gackenbach, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Wallace, 1999).

The seductive combination of technological innovation and the recognition of a universal need for increased learning focussed early interest on the potential for online interaction among learners and their teachers. In 1994 Wagner described interaction this way: “Interactions are reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions. Interactions occur when these objects and events mutually influence one another” (p. 8). She also distinguished between human interaction and the term *interactivity*, which she saw as a characteristic of the technology itself, arguing that “interactivity may eventually be viewed as a machine attribute, while interaction may be perceived as an outcome of using interactive instructional delivery systems” (p. 26). Interaction is considered here to fall within the broader term *communication*, which embraces not only Wagner’s “reciprocal events” between at least two actors but also issues of language, rhetoric, immediacy, literacy, and culture—and a resulting array of analytic strategies and devices that is beyond the purview of this chapter.

In 1995, in an early but seminal investigation into distance learning, Eastmond raised issues around the tensions of interaction in his theme of “alone but together”; Turkle, in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), echoes that theme as she follows up on her earlier investigations into society’s fascination with computers and technology while moving us into 21st century considerations. Turkle explains our changing relationship with technology in this way:
I once described the computer as a second self, a mirror of mind. Now the metaphor no longer goes far enough. Our new devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of the self, itself, split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology. (p. 16)

Indeed, the metaphors describing past human–computer interaction are no longer adequate. Turkle’s realization parallels the evolution of the distance education field away from its initial fascination with the magic of technology to a more substantial interest in the human dimension. In the educational realm, that evolution was evidenced by the shift from what technology could do to what learners could do, to how they would enable their learning through the technology available to them—in other words, a shift from a technology orientation to a pedagogical orientation (Blanton, Moorman, & Trathen, 1998). Several key pieces of literature marked this important shift in thinking, which became more prominent as the distance education field became more comfortable with, and practiced in, online learning.

INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

An examination of relevant literature will focus on related twin themes that centre on learning communities, communication, and interaction. Those themes could be described this way: communication and its resultant interaction are key to online learning success; healthy learning communities engender appropriate and relevant levels of interaction.

Following on early theorizing on the nature of distance education, Moore (1989), Wagner (1997), and Anderson and Garrison (1998) first provided important early insights into the nature of interaction in computer-enhanced learning. Moore’s initial categorization of three types of interaction (learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-instructor) was expanded into all six possible types of interaction by Anderson and Garrison, who first broached the possibility of content interacting with content, foreshadowing semantic web developments (1998). Subsequently, discussions of the quality and quantities of interactive modes included typologies of types of interactions, domains of interactions (cognitive, affective), frequencies of interaction, gender-specific interactions, and cultural-specific interactions (Conrad,
In 1998, Wenger’s seminal work on communities of practice (CoP) laid the current foundation for the consideration of community-based interaction and communication in work settings. At about the same time, and building on the concept of community, Garrison, Anderson, Archer, and Rourke’s research on online presence initially brought forward a new schema for understanding the online dynamic in terms of cognitive, instructional, and social domains (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). From that research evolved the equally important theory of a Community of Inquiry (CoI), defined as “a process of creating a deep and meaningful (collaborative-constructivist) learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements—social, cognitive and teaching presence” (CoI website). The CoI model has subsequently launched another stream of investigative research into the effects and relationships of its respective parts (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Cleveland-Innis, 2010).

A parallel and not-unrelated research stream, also dependent on Wenger (1998), Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, and Dunlap (2000), Stacey (1999), Bullen (1998), and Wegerif (1998) and some of the early work of Gundawardena and her colleagues (1995; 1997), drew at the same time on adult education and learning theory literature to discuss community not as a learning laboratory per se but as an affective, social landscape. Tied most closely with Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s social presence literature (2000), this study of community focussed on relationship-based interaction, in which “like-minded groups of people share goals or special occasions” (Conrad, 2002). This approach to understanding community, taken from schools of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978), moved the communication and interaction discourse closer to Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman’s (1997) prescient work on online social networking and also capitalized on adult learning theories from the works of adult educators Cross (1981), Dewey (1938), Knowles (1970), and Wlodkowski (1999).

From the intersections of these discourses, there developed a body of literature concerned with the study of interaction within online learning communities. The evolution from online learning’s initial technology-based curiosity to a pedagogically-based concern with the nature of learners’ exchanges with one another and with instructors has benefited from two
recent theoretical centres—constructivism and blended learning—fuelled also by the fact of ever-developing Web 2.0++ technologies. Building on those foundational pieces, scholars from around the world have contributed to our current appreciation and understanding of the importance of interaction and communication in the teaching-learning exchange (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Dron, 2007; Kirschner, Strijbos & Kreijns, 2004; Mayes, 2006; Shih & Swan, 2005; Swan, 2002; Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam & Dunlap, 2004).

Learning Communities and Interaction: Theories to Frame By

Online learning communities comprise learners and their instructors who share purpose and virtual time-on-task. Learning communities nest within Web-based frameworks and are fuelled and sustained not only by the energy of the individuals who populate them but also by the many learning resources and objects that are brought to the community by both learners and instructors.

Recent theories that purport to explain qualitatively the online teaching-learning dynamic will focus on a number of key aspects in order to understand the nature and texture of online interaction. Issues of control, autonomy, content, learning styles, culture, and gender complement the general understanding of the Community of Inquiry’s three domain presences—cognitive, social, and instructional. What follows is a discussion of current theories and the issues that bind them to the central questions that direct this chapter: What is the nature of communication and interaction in online learning communities? What is its current state, and what is its future role in the continued quest for successful online learning strategies?

The field of open and distance education leans heavily on several prominent theorists. Ally (2008) traces the field’s debt, historically, to cognitive and behavioural theory, and, more recently, to constructivist and connectivist theories. In recent years, positivist approaches to education and learning that objectified learning have ceded place to constructivist views.

The constructivist paradigm, drawing on the works of Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978), among others, focusses on individuals making sense of their lived experiences. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture, language, and the social environment in learning. Online learning
platforms enable constructivist practice through their facilitation of communicative and interactive activities and the resultant building of community (Conrad, 2002; Rovai, 2002; Swan, 2002). As Garrison and Anderson argue, “The value of e-learning is in its capacity to facilitate communication and thinking and thereby construct meaning and knowledge” (2003, p. 6).

While constructivist thought firmly underpins our thinking in the here and now, other theories played substantially into our early understandings of distance education—notably Peters’ industrial theory and Simonsen’s equivalency theory (Simonsen, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009)—although it can be argued that our explanations of today’s open and distance learning have moved well past these theoretical bases. Moore’s theory of transactional distance, however, formulated in the early 1970s, continues to serve as a base for our current understanding of interaction and communication and their attendant issues.

Moore’s theory rests on the foundational concept that the separation of teacher from learner creates transactional distance, “the interplay among the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviours in a situation” (Moore, 2007, p. 91). On the basis of this premise, Moore highlighted the relativity of the transactional exchange, emphasizing structure, dialogue, and autonomy as key elements in the communication equation that resulted. His focus on learner autonomy within transactional distance became a centrepiece for Garrison’s early work on distance education (1989), in which he postulated a triad of control, autonomy, and responsibility to explain the range of communication possibilities among learners and teachers at a distance.

Garrison, in subsequent work alone (2000) and with others (Garrison & Baynton, 1987; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000), continued to examine the interplay of communication factors centred on the elements of autonomy and control within the framework of distance learning. Ancillary factors of independence and interdependence, support, and power also played into the mix and were recognized for their ability to create shifts in the negotiation between content and activity, and to enhance autonomy and control (Anderson, 2004). Following on the constructs of autonomy and control, Dron (2007) moved the conversation forward theoretically and broached issues of communication and interaction in an example such as this: “A message on a discussion forum is not just the information that it contains, but contributes materially to the way that the environment is presented to

The Community of Inquiry framework, presented earlier in this chapter as an important link in the connection of workplace-based Community of Practice theory and online learning theory, highlights a structured educational environment that brings together the core elements of social, cognitive, and teaching presence for the purposes of critical reflection and discourse (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). In so doing, it places communication and interaction functions into the crux of the learning process and permits their viewing through the key lenses of social exchange, cognitive process, and instructional presence.

Meanwhile, in 1986, in his theory of interaction and communication, Holmberg had highlighted seven broad assumptions, which he later expanded in 1995 into eight equally-broad parts. The seed of Holmberg’s initial thinking, however, is this: “The medium used to bring about empathy is normally friendly conversation. This is the very simple background of my theory of teaching-learning conversations in distance education” (Holmberg, 2006). Holmberg expanded on this humanistic-oriented concept contained in the 1995 revision, by explaining:

Personal relations, study pleasure, and empathy between students and those supporting them (tutors, counsellors, etc.) are central to learning in distance education. Feelings of empathy and belonging promote students’ motivation to learn and influence the learning favourably. Such feelings are conveyed by students being engaged in decision-making; by lucid, problem-oriented, conversation-like presentations of learning matter that may be anchored in existing knowledge; by friendly, non-continuous interaction between students and tutors, counsellors, and others supporting them. (Simonsen, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009, p. 48)

Holmberg’s additional theoretical principles also encompassed cognition (“deep learning”), lifelong learning, societal benefits, and flexible delivery formats—in short, the whole spectrum of factors necessary to explain the phenomenon of learning online. His emphasis on the importance of communication and interaction has been highlighted here to illustrate his
Contribution to the model of online interaction—the Community of Inquiry—that holds most sway in our current thinking. Holmberg also noted the role of the media in at least partially creating empathic motivation for learning through the use of a conversational tone that he referred to as *guided didactic interaction*.

That said, theorists have put forward other models to explain the phenomena of online interaction and communication, which is not surprising given their prominence in the learning dynamic; in fact, Mayes concluded a 2006 article by asking if interactivity could be interpreted as a synonym for learning. From Europe, Kirschner, Strijbos, and Kreijns (2004) suggested a model for “integrated electronic collaborative learning environments (IECLES)” (p. 24), in which they featured a “unique combination of the technological, social and educational contexts” (p. 26) and stressed the importance of designing learning environments around what they defined as the important features of the collaborative learning environment: “task ownership, task character, and task control” (p. 31). Although a complicated model, it nonetheless does not add much to our understanding of interaction and communication as viewed through the CoI model.

Blended learning, however, described as “the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences” by Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p. 5), is purported to represent an important intersection of engaged face-to-face learners with Internet potential. The trajectory of blended learning has resulted from educational queries regarding the imposition of new technology on old paradigms as well as from economic and social pressure on institutions to adapt and change to meet 21st century higher education learning needs. For the purposes of this chapter, the trend toward blended learning serves as a catalyst and an aid, not specifically in the interests of redesign, as outlined by Garrison and Vaughan (2008), but in the search for understanding the current positioning and meaning of interaction and communication in online communities. If blended learning represents the best possible marriage of face-to-face classroom learning with online learning, it is important to recognize the strengths of both and to thus create innovative opportunities for learning. The blended learning approach, therefore, in maximizing interaction and communication among learners to an optimal, collaborative, and accessible state, underpins 21st century innovation and future potential in defining community, presence, and all notions of space-and-place. However, it should be noted that blended learning restricts
access through geographic constraint and obligation—precisely the challenge met by earlier generations of distance education to expand access.

WHERE TO, NOW? NEXT?

Our 21st century romance with technology and with the educational processes that depend on technology has been well documented. From pioneers in education (Eastmond, 1995; Garrison, 1989; Rheingold, 1993) to those exploring facets of communication (de Kerckhove, 1997; Rose, 2000; Wallace, 1999) and even those who have looked more broadly at society’s attempt to deal with and understand itself during changing times (Menzies, 2005; Rheingold, 2002), we have studied our progress with varying degrees of interest and alarm. Turkle’s 2011 exploration of our societal relationship with digital technology and its effect on how we understand community and each other notches the conversation one step further as she explores the questions raised by interaction and communication issues as a metaphorical structure of two stories, naming them as
today’s story of the network, with its promise to give us more control over human relationships, and tomorrow’s story of sociable robots, which promise relationships where we will be in control, even if that means not being in relationships at all. (p. 17)

Turkle’s look to the future circles back to foundational issues of community, control, and communication. We understand, conceptually and theoretically, the interplay and dynamic of those critical factors. Garrison and Anderson, almost a decade ago (2003), called for more quantitative measures to establish the validity of online formats as sound pedagogical structures. Since then, the field has recognized online learning’s potential with numbers (Jeong 2007; Jeong & Frazier, 2008); we recognize and celebrate its successes; and we understand more fully how online technologies can integrate with face-to-face options to create multi-dimensional blended models (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). While the purview of this chapter does not include a discussion of technological innovations, software, hardware, or Web 2.0++ developments, it does need to address—having upheld the place of interaction and communication in online learning communities from historical and conceptual perspectives—its ongoing and potential role as a critically important learning condition.
There is no evidence, at the time of writing, that academic support of and interest in interaction and communication is not thriving; in fact, on the contrary, the literature indicates a healthy state. A random review of journal articles published in the world’s most widely-read online ODL journal—The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (IRRODL)—shows that in a recent issue (Vol. 12, No. 6, 2011), 4 of 10 research articles examined interaction and communication from various perspectives (hearing-challenged learners; social media collaboration; applying the CoI framework; applying constructionist principles). Three of four book reviews addressed Web 2.0 teaching-learning-engagement topics. IRRODL’s issue Vol. 12, No. 5, 2011, addressed issues of communication and interaction in three of its nine research articles; and a special issue (Vol. 12, No. 3, 2011) concerned itself exclusively with the design and delivery of social-networked learning (Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker, & Vogt, 2009).

Communications guru Marshall McLuhan fairly accurately predicted the cyber-future in statements such as this: “each form of transport not only carries, but translates and transforms the sender, the receiver, and the message” (1995, p. 90). How will online learning address and accommodate the implications of change given recent advancements and additions to its forms of transport? In consideration of this question, the following discussion will consider several elements of current practice, including open educational resources (OERs), social media and networking, and mobile learning.

**Open Education Resources**

Open educational resources (OERs) are learning materials that are made freely available for use. OERs can include entire courses or parts of courses—course materials, modules, tests, and videos, to name a few. As resource objects, their presence and the anticipated increase in their use among online and traditional learners give rise to speculation about changed expectations or realities in online interaction, exchange, and communication. In the online medium—where instructors encourage interaction, where communication among learners and between learners and instructor is valued and nurtured, and where social presence and community serve as the glue cementing the learning environment across time and space—could the availability of disparate or discrete OERs potentially lessen the volume or quality of communication among learning groups? If, as the newly-formed
Open Educational Resource University (OERu) envisions, global learners are able to select resources from myriad providers and cobble together their own learning packages, which will either be granted credit by an accrediting body or made available for assessment by an accrediting body or an assessment service, could the expectation of community-oriented communication and the CoI model that has developed over the past two decades lose prominence? Early questions about the structure of OERu have so far concerned issues of organization, administration, funding, and the fact of OERs’ potential challenges to open and distance institutions (Bates, 2011).

Although there has not been much formally published literature on OERu pedagogy, learning, and communication, there has been considerable discussion about these important issues among early adopters (private correspondence with OERu Foundation, 2011) and plentiful informal discussion on blogs and other online venues. In considering communication, OERu partners, for example, have used the interaction typology of student–student, student–teacher, and student–content to formulate workable avenues for communication using peer-support models, design, and technology to ensure the inclusion of appropriate levels of interaction and communication among learners, and between learners and instructors.

Within the OER movement, the increasing popularity and presence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) again raises issues of interaction. MOOCs, by definition, may potentially enrol thousands of learners. Is any level of interaction or useful communication possible? These are early days with no solid empirical evidence yet available. Postings of comments on Chronicle of Higher Education articles, however, offer the following views (Carey, 2012):

“[these courses] strike against teaching as an intimate process . . .”

“The pedagogy reported here . . . is probably higher education at its worst.”

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1 The Open Educational Resource University (OERu) is a loose consortium of 30 (at time of writing) partner institutions. OERu aims to “provide a route to formal accreditation through the study of free open educational resources” (Bates, 2011) developed by accredited institutions around the world. OERu will not confer degrees but will collaborate with accredited institutions that will provide assessment services for a fee. Athabasca University is a founding member of OERu.
“It’s the old sage on the stage, passive learning, parrot it back on a few tests, forget it, and on to the next cycle.”

To many educators, this writer included, the interactive pedagogical model described in this chapter is of key importance to the academic validity of MOOCs. Currently, however, higher education as a field is more focussed on the potential of the accreditation of MOOC learning to learners’ degree programs at recognized institutions.

**Social Media as Engagement Tools: Crossing Boundaries**

In the face of proliferating social media such as Facebook and Twitter, is in-class interaction among learners in peril? In fact, the opposite appears to be true, according to recent college-level studies investigating learners’ use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Davidson, 2011; Rice, 2011a, 2011b). Research findings indicate that learners are incorporating coursework questions into social media-hosted interactions with other learners, advantaging themselves of instant and continual access to their peers. Davidson (2011) described a 2003 Duke University initiative with iPods that demonstrated “students who had grown up connected digitally gravitated to ways that the iPod could be used for collective learning. They turned iPods into social media and networked their learning in ways we did not anticipate.” From the same experiment, Davidson celebrated multi-tasking as “the ideal mode of the 21st century, not just because of information overload but also because . . . [on] the Internet, everything links to everything, and all of it is available all the time.” Duke’s experiment illustrates the changing nature of learning in a connected world that increasingly demands and values sustainability, flexibility, and openness. Creativity and access, two more qualities that underpin the popularity of social media, are also complementary to the continued facilitation of interactive activities in online learning.

The boundaries, however virtual, that have separated in-course learning from the rest of the world have become increasing blurred by social media. Online learners’ blogs and wikis, for example, once lodged within their courses, are making their way out of courses onto the Internet. In a recent presentation in which she explored these movements toward new forms of open, social, and participatory learning, Conole (2010) restated the importance of immediacy and community in communication while demonstrating ways in which new digital media can be personalized and made
interactive and collaborative. In other words, the core values of interaction and communication as humanizing factors, central to distance education's theoretical base, beginning with Moore and Holmberg and ranging forward to Garrison and Anderson, continue to be recognized for their importance although, in McLuhan's words, their forms of transport are evolving.

**Mobile Learning: A New Form of Transport**

Mobile learning (m-learning) “through the use of wireless technology, allows anyone to access information and learning materials from anywhere and at any time” (Ally, 2009, p. 1). A subset of both open and flexible learning and e-learning, m-learning personalizes the learning process to a “just enough, just in time, just for me” (Peters, 2009, p. 116) model of learning.

As blended learning blurred—deliberately—the lines between online and face-to-face modes of delivery (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), so too does mobile learning blur the lines not only between here and there but also between social networking, educational discourse, and content-driven learning. In other words, traditional understandings of formal and informal learning are increasingly muddied. Garrison, Anderson, & Archer’s *presences* (2000)—social, instructional, and cognitive—while still constituting a viable model for analyzing online and blended learning in formal contexts, have the potential to exhibit themselves in new ways. “Technology is unbundling the university. In five years, students will mix online and in-person courses, professors will rely on new course formats and modules from multiple colleges, and the library will be dispersed” (Parry, 2011). Parry's predictions have already, to some degree, come to pass.

Recent examples of this blurring of formal and informal abound. Students are encouraged to use Twitter to pass notes in class as idea-sharing and to continue to share their thoughts outside class. In-class blogs are interconnected by a mother blog, and blogs both inside and outside class are linked. “The commenting and linking are crucial,” a Baylor University professor recently observed, “as those activities are essential parts of being in the real blogosphere” (Gardner Campbell, qtd. in Young, 2011). The notion of a real blogosphere itself speaks to the exporting of community, communication, and interaction to a realm not only outside the classroom, whether bricks-and-mortar or virtual, but also outside the purview of formalized or organized learning. Like the cloud, the blogosphere exists out there and is available upon demand in a mobile and connected society.
The fluidity and instant accessibility of communications networks work both ways, however. Educators have long since become accustomed to being critiqued and rated online. Recently, teachers have taken to publicly critiquing their students using the same media—Twitter, Facebook, blogs. This newfound interactivity harks back to earlier calls for both caution and etiquette in the tweeting-posting world that remind us of the fundamental values underlying communication modes and urge users to strive for the creation of an online presence that is positive and professional (Posner, Varner, & Croxall, 2011).

INTO THE FUTURE, SECURELY CONNECTED

Just as we can expect and hope that civility will not vanish as interactive potential increases, we can assume that neither will courses nor curriculum will disappear in the face of technological and social innovation. (One recalls the sky-is-falling predictions that teachers would disappear with the advent of broadband capabilities and video-conferencing.) The changes that we are seeing—changes in who does what, how, and when—are changes that reinforce what we have learned about learning, namely, that in fast-moving and rapidly evolving societies, communication is essential, connection and interaction are both necessary and valued, and the need for flexibility is imperative (Menzies, 2005). Researchers report that, as a means of addressing these demands, mobile learning devices offer “unique educational affordances” (Peters, 2009, p. 117) of portability, social interactivity, and an unprecedented degree of connectivity, while still permitting scope for individual choice in designing customized and personal routes to desired information.

As educators and researchers still toiling within institutions, with eyes both on the present and the future, we ask ourselves: How can we accommodate current learning needs and preferences using new media and course design? And what should we investigate to better understand or create the future? In spite of futurists who decry barely observable rates of change in traditional educational systems, innovative educators and researchers are cognizant both of the positive potential of change and the challenges levelled by the voices such as Turkle (2011) and Arina (2011). We understand Arina’s call for moving “from static and pre-defined learning environments
to dynamic and self-organizing informal learning environments”—to what he calls serendipic learning (para. 7). The movement toward OERs will call upon the self-directed energy necessary to such learning, while the proliferation of mobile learning devices will facilitate that transition.

The trend toward both OERs and mobile learning converges with social media on the axis of interaction and communication. Describing the relationship and impact of technology on scholarly practice, Weller (2011) examines the role of a scholar’s traditional commitment to public engagement in the convergence of audiences through new digital media. In the definition of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, public engagement consists in "specialists in higher education listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with non-specialists," the public including "individuals and groups who do not currently have a formal relationship with an HEI [Higher Education Institution] through teaching, research or knowledge transfer " (qtd. in Weller, 2011, para. 2). As Weller points out, "much of what we currently aim to achieve through specific public engagement projects can be realised by producing digital artefacts as a by-product of typical scholarly activity" (para. 31).

Within open and distance classrooms, there is continued innovation in ways of communicating and interacting. One such innovation, termed pedagogical podcasting, is reported to improve learner engagement, as well as to offer support, to reduce learners’ feelings of isolation, and to enhance mobility, personalization, and relationship-building. Audio-streaming is not new, but Salmon reports encouraging research results in both cognitive and affective domains from the integration of more sophisticated and organized podcasts using Wimba voice boards. As an example, she sites the case of a professor who, given his other responsibilities, was not able to meet with his students on a weekly basis—or even at all. Nonetheless, as a result of his systematic and strategic use of podcasts, he was perceived by his students to be a “wonderful guy” who was very supportive and “gave great feedback” (Salmon, 2010). “He really helps you to understand things,” enthused his students, and the course attracted double registration numbers the next time it was offered. This endorsement of the positive effects of voice-contact reaffirms learners’ need for and appreciation of connection.
CONCLUSION: OF NOUNS AND VERBS

As the popularity of e-books soars, independent booksellers, like so many other retailers and service-providers in our society, are examining their strengths in order to determine the viability of their future positions in the scheme of things. They have decided that community is key (*National Post*, 2011). They have decided (or at least they hope) that by providing the opportunity for communication and interaction among customers, and with the help of a knowledgeable staff and a solid customer base, they can survive the e-juggernaut. Similarly, the continued creation and sustaining of a sense of community—the ability of online learners to engage with one another and interact personally and meaningfully with and within that community—will be central to the continued success and development of online learning. Over a decade ago, Rose (1999) declared that the concept of interactivity “has become so firmly entrenched within the discourse of educational computing that it is a truism to say that instructional software is interactive and that interactivity promotes learning, and a kind of heresy to dispute it” (p. 44). As it was then, it is now: we cannot dispute the value of interaction and communication as a critical facet of learning. Leading educational voices, including those calling for change in order to confront the problems besetting higher education in an economically stressful climate, hold to the importance of interaction and communication as sound online teaching strategies, maintaining that “continuous connectivity provides authentic collaborative learning experiences congruent with the development of critical and creative thinkers in a rapidly evolving knowledge society” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 154).

From another perspective, futurist Marc Prensky created a simple metaphor to describe *his* vision for the type of change that he feels is necessary in order for educators to contribute to, and assist in developing, a productive 21st century learning society. In his nouns versus verbs metaphor, the verbs are the “unchanging skills of education, such as thinking critically, communicating effectively, presenting logically, and calculating correctly” (2011, p. 7). The nouns are the tools of education, “the technologies that students use to learn and practice the skills” (Prensky, 2011, p. 7). Prensky points out that, while the nouns are changing—currently they include items such as Twitter, e-mail, blogs, Wikipedia, cloud computing, OERs, podcasts—the underlying verb concepts will not change. In fact, their importance is
such that our focus must remain on them in spite of the kaleidoscope of new nouns, or tools, that serve as vehicles for the implementation of verb actions, or concepts. It’s a simple, almost childish, metaphor that effectively captures, nonetheless, the wisdom of both change and stasis; of McLuhan’s medium and message, and of theoretical notions of interaction and communication as stated over the years by open and distance learning theorists.

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