What is Online Learning Theory?

Many established traditional learning theories recognize the value of activities like dialogue, discussion, and reflection. Social constructivist, connectivist, and transformative theories all share the notion that building communities of learning based on such activities allow learners to develop deeper understandings and gain knowledge (Wicks, n.d.).

Online learning environments offer significant opportunities to reap the benefits of research conducted on traditional learning. Online Learning Theory applies values recognized by traditional learning models and theories to online delivery. In addition, Online Learning Theory aims to address unique challenges faced by online learners.
Why is it important to understand Online Learning Theory?

**Inform online teaching strategies**
Online Learning Theory can help inform the design of successful online teaching strategies. For example, much like their traditional counterparts, online learning communities can help develop deeper understandings. But in addition to this, they can also help overcome some of the obstacles faced by online learners, helping them feel more connected to their peers and instructors (Snyder, 2009).

**Appropriate focus on the learner**
By focusing on learning theory, you are less likely to focus on the technology and more likely to focus on the learner. Specialized delivery technologies can provide efficient and timely access to learning materials. But technologies are merely tools to help deliver instruction. By remaining focused on learning theory, you can aim to use technology as a means to your end of ensuring highly effective learning on the part of your students.

How to Use Online Learning Theory in the Classroom

**Apply Online Learning Principles to address traditional learning theory issues**

According to Heinecka, Dawson, and Willis (2001) the following six principles can be used with constructivist-focused, online teaching, interactive learning, collaborative learning, facilitating learning, authentic learning, learner-centered learning, and high quality learning. The following table provides examples of various online learning principles, a traditional learning theory they align to, and an example of their application in an online environment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Learning Principle</th>
<th>Traditional Learning Theory</th>
<th>Online Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Petraglia (1998) acknowledges learners draw on prior knowledge and experiences when approaching learning.</td>
<td>Since individuals learn and work collaboratively in their everyday lives – often remotely – you can use similar interactions between learners to build knowledge of content among your students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Collaboration leads to shared knowledge and higher critical thinking skills.</td>
<td>Your students may enter into either synchronous or asynchronous collaborative discussions throughout the course via chats, blogs, wikis, threaded discussions, or email.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating</td>
<td>Course instructors must maintain the accuracy of the learning.</td>
<td>Your role as an instructor is to facilitate learning, support your students, monitor their learning, and to provide them directions and guidelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic</td>
<td>Authenticity creates meaningful knowledge and adults value the learning process.</td>
<td>Your students need authenticity in activities that directly relate to their work experiences and real life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner-centered</td>
<td>Huang (2002) stresses learning must be learner-centered. Adults need to take ownership of their learning, but not all adults know how to do this. As Cercene (2008) points out, some adults need help learning to be self-directed.</td>
<td>Instructors can support adult learners by providing assignments early in the course that are short and directed to help the reluctant learner see the value of an online course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Quality</td>
<td>Huang (2002) states “online learning should involve high-order thinking skills to learn how to determine the authenticity and quality of information by assessing the authority of the source and validating it from other sources” (p. 34).</td>
<td>Have your students engage in constructing knowledge from multiple sources while using their life experiences. Also encourage reflecting on what is learned to develop higher-order thinking skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sources Consulted:


