

Teaching the disembodied

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Problem

Disengaged distance learners on a postgraduate course in language education, missing out on the intensive seminar discussions that campus students were having. The prescribed asynchronous forum discussions weren't taking off.

**Action research
approach**



Photo by lel4and

Action research approach

Cycle 1

Invite distance learners to participate in campus classes via Skype, each on an iPad







Social presence
increased

Distance students
could ask
questions during
the class.

Distance students
could join in group
discussions (one
iPad-student per
group).

Campus and
distance students
got to know each
other a little.



Filtered sound
quality

iPad-students
needed help

Background noise
in the classroom
from other groups

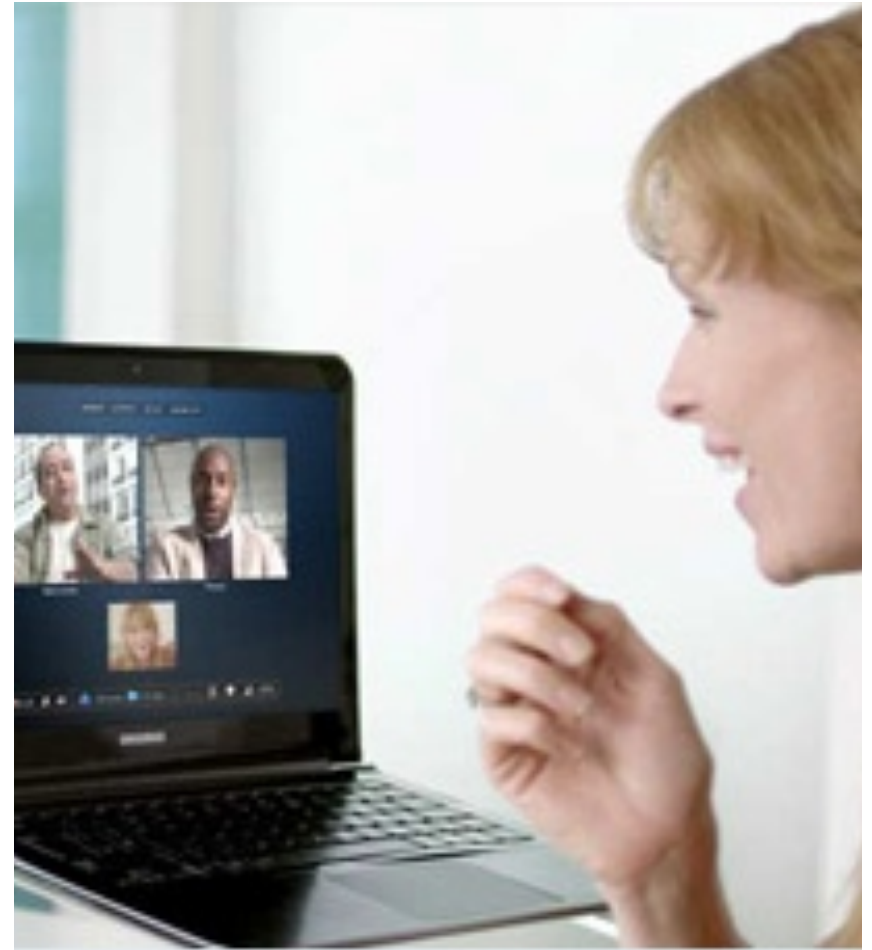
Not all distance
students joined
the group.

Forum
participation
declined.

Action research approach

Cycle 2

Move distance learners to a single Skype video conversation



Positive results

- Sound problems were less.
- During group discussions the distance students formed their own group.
- Social presence still fairly strong.



Negative results

- Distance students missed interaction with campus students in group discussions.
- Distance students missed social cues about turn taking.
- Some campus students resented the time given to calling up and sometimes reconnecting calls.
- Some distance students sometimes had children in the background not mastering the mute switch.
- Social presence less when each student didn't occupy a physical space via the iPad.

Student voice – what was positive about bringing distance students into the campus class?

Campus students

- Distance students as real people
- More ideas and input
- Mainly advantageous for the distance students.
- Make them feel part of the course.

Distance students

- Professional learning relationships
- benefit from hearing the ideas of other students and hearing the lecturer's discussion



Student voice – what was negative about bringing distance students into the campus class?

Campus students

- Noisy
- Screens can become the focal point
- Technical hitches
- They miss social cues
- They get too much attention

Distance students

- They ignore us
- I felt like a fly on the wall



Us and them by Varun Suresh

Multiple video calls on iPads

- Distance students needed to be looked after

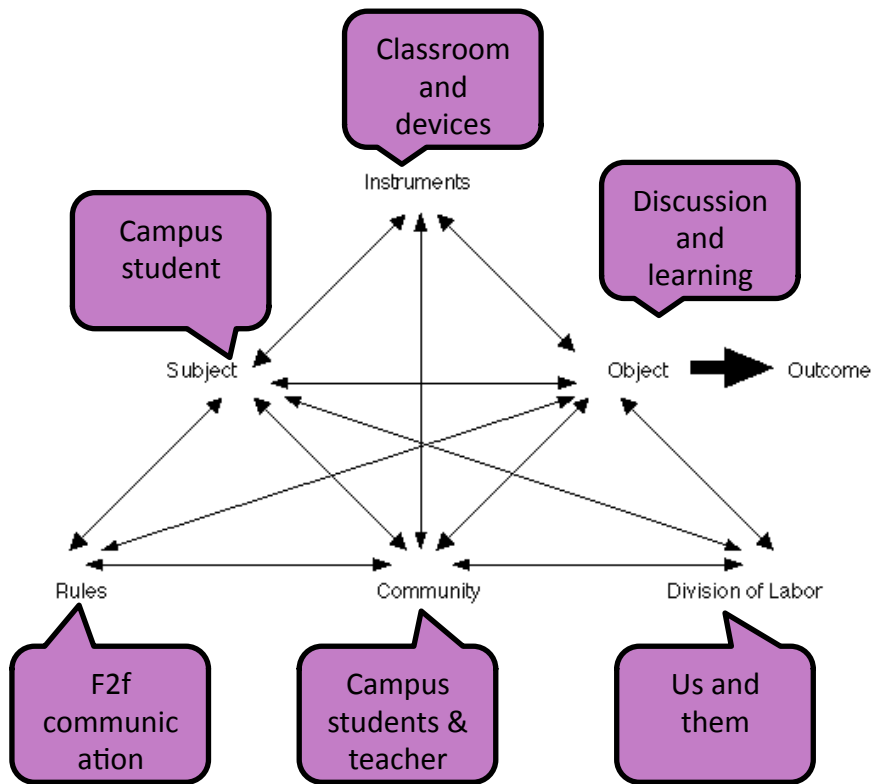
Single multiuser video call on a laptop

- Easier to hear and have small group discussions
- Distance students their own group, ignored by some campus students

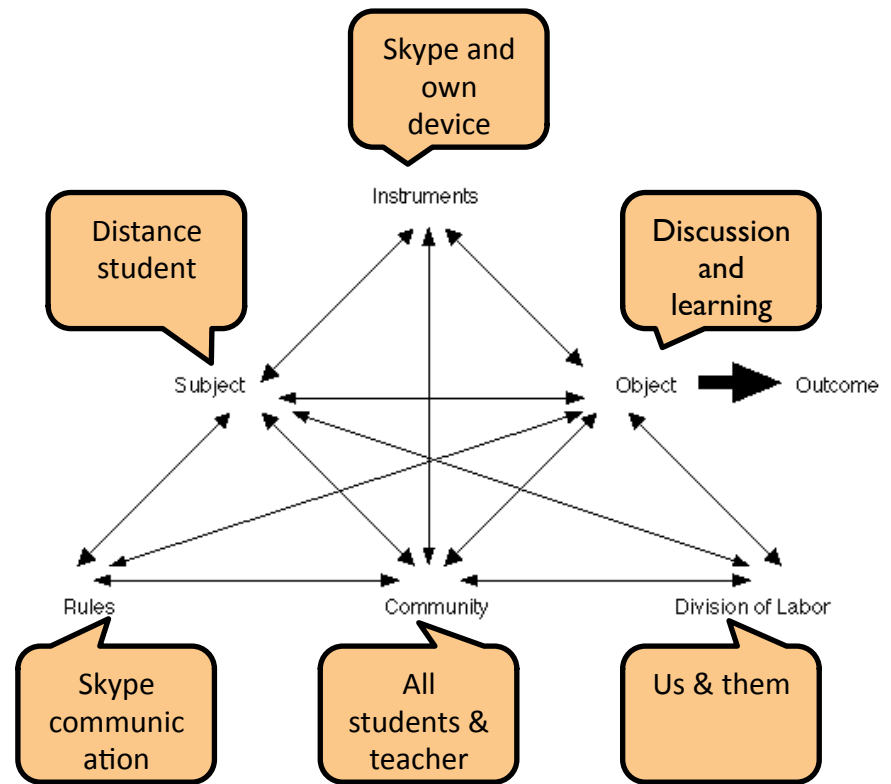


Explaining what happened with activity theory (Engeström, Miettinen & Punamäki 1999)

Campus students' activity system



Distance students' activity system



Differences

- Campus and distance students are working for the same outcome (discussion and learning) but they are not operating in the same community or according to the same rules.
- The rub is that the distance students believe they are part of the campus students' community, and the campus students expect them to behave like they do, even though their instruments are different.

References

- Roth, W-M (2004). Activity theory and education: An introduction. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 11, (1), 1-18.
- Engeström, Y, Miettinen, R. Punamäki, R-L (1999). *Perspectives on Activity Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press