LEARNER AGENCY, MOTIVE, AND SELF-REGULATED LEARNING IN AN ONLINE ESL WRITING CLASS

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ABSTRACT

Online learning has become a viable popular alternative to traditional ESL writing classes over the past decade. However, the effectiveness and validity of online ESL learning remains controversial. Furthermore, most researchers have used surveys to assess student perceptions of online learning. This study presents a case study of two participants in an online ESL writing course at a university in the Northeastern United States. Using activity theory as a framework, I explore what makes a successful learner in an online environment and how learner agency, motive, and self-regulation impact student performance and academic achievement in the online learning context. Data from different sources were collected to provide a triangulated analysis. Results suggest that learners who employ good self-regulation strategies and are motivated to learn and adapt tend to benefit more from the online learning experience, while students who do not employ such strategies and are motivated solely to fulfill a degree requirement are more likely to be frustrated. The results also reveal that the physical distance created by technology could be a challenge for those who do not seek assistance from instructors or peers. In other words, learners need guidance and support on how to be self-motivated and self-directed in the online environment. I also discuss how to effectively design and deliver an online ESL course.

INTRODUCTION

Computer technology has been widely applied in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classrooms as a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face instruction. Different forms of computer use have been studied, such as writing with computers, the use of hypermedia materials (a mixture of graphics, sound, and characters), and synchronous (e.g., online group discussions) and asynchronous (e.g., emails and bulletin boards) computer-mediated communication (CMC). Research on the benefits of using computer technology in computer-mediated writing courses has revealed contradictory results. The reported benefits of CMC include facilitating communication, reducing anxiety, promoting cooperative learning, and creating egalitarian class structures (e.g., Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Warschauer, 1996, 1998; Yang & Chen, 2007). Other studies, however, have indicated that CMC may not lead to better writing (e.g., Braine, 1997, 2001). When it comes to student perceptions of CMC, the picture becomes a more complicated mix of satisfaction and disappointment (Hirvela, 2007; Boyd, 2008).

For technology-integrated learning, the literature has mainly reported the use of computer technology as a supplement to classroom-based writing courses. Few studies have investigated an entirely online writing context. Online instruction, also called distance education, is an important and popular mode of computer-mediated learning. It is carried out entirely on computers by using a variety of technologies such as email, word processing applications, online chat rooms, websites and other Internet resources. Online language classes have been widely accepted in higher education because they provide more learners with access to information by removing limits associated with time or location. However, an entirely online course is comprised of much more than a series of synchronous and asynchronous CMC activities. The new context requires learners to establish new learning routines, negotiate different meanings and relationships, and complete academic work using computers as a medium. Faced with the challenges associated with a new learning environment, some learners find ways to adapt and embrace these changes in order to derive maximum benefit from the new learning paradigm; yet, other learners struggle with the paradigm shift and fail to benefit. It is pedagogically imperative to investigate what constitutes a strategic learner in online learning so that instruction can be modified in order to facilitate a smoother transition to online learning for every student.

In this paper, I present a case study of two learners who were enrolled in an entirely online ESL writing course offered by a comprehensive university in the Northeastern United States. Based on extensive analysis of the data, I attempt to tease out their motives, perceptions, and selective use or non-use of learning strategies in the online course. The purpose of this study is not to generalize, but to understand learners as individuals with agency, strengths and characteristics that could be played out in startlingly different ways in online learning. I also suggest ways to design and deliver effective online ESL writing courses.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CMC in ESL Writing Classrooms

Many studies have compared traditional face-to-face classroom discussions and computer-mediated discussions in synchronous contexts. Contradictory findings have been reported on the effects of different types of technology on learner participation and achievement in ESL writing classrooms. For example, results of several studies have shown increased participation in electronic classroom discussions (Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Warschauer, 1996). After examining peer response through networked computers in writing classrooms, Kivela (1996) reported that online peer response is better than face-to-face feedback in terms of participation and discussion, quantity of feedback elicited, and increased confidence among students. Af-Jarf (2004) also investigated the effects of integrating multiple technologies including email, word processing applications and online chat into a traditional writing course, and found that supplementing traditional in-class writing instruction with online instruction was more effective than using traditional methods alone.

On the other hand, Braine (1997, 2001) produced a less promising picture of synchronous CMC. Braine (1997) compared ESL students' performance in a networked computer class and a traditional lecture-style class at an American university. The first and final drafts of student papers were scored holistically, and the number of interactions during peer-review sessions was analyzed. He found that although the online class generated more peer and teacher feedback, the traditional class yielded more improvement in the quality of writing. His later study (2001) of university EFL students in Hong Kong who took a writing class on a local area network (LAN) and others who took a traditional writing class revealed that the final drafts produced in the traditional class were superior in

quality and showed more improvement than those produced in the LAN class. In addition, students reported a preference for a face-to-face format when conducting peer reviews.

When it comes to student perceptions of their CMC experiences, a more complicated picture is depicted of the efficacy and validity of integrating technology into ESL writing classes. Although CMC allows students to engage in pre-writing activities, provides more opportunities for dialogue, and generates a large archive for future reference, research has suggested that the quantity of writing is less than expected in online courses and students do not engage in discussion as much as they do in traditional classrooms. In his investigation of three ESL students' perceptions of CMC in a writing classroom, Ware (2004) reported that the three seemingly comparable ESL students adopted or dismissed technology variably, which could be explained by their previous experiences with technology and writing, their views of themselves as students and writers, and their relative comfort level with class peers. Hirvela (2007) investigated the use of a writing course listserv on which second language (L2) students and the author of an assigned novel interacted to strengthen students' understanding of and writing about the novel. Mixed results were reported about whether using CMC enabled the student writers to improve their understanding of the text and their writing compositions.

Combining multiple technologies and using computers as the sole medium of communication in an entirely online class makes the learning context even more complicated. Boyd (2008) conducted a survey among students who took online and hybrid first-year composition courses to explore student perceptions of online learning and discovered several challenges faced by students in online classes. For instance, the online environment does not allow for familiar face-to-face interaction that provides crucial feedback to students. It was suggested that students did not understand the goals for the online work nor the significance of it, and regarded it as "busy work." Students also reported reduced opportunities to interact with their instructors. Armstrong (2011) also described some undergraduate students' experiences of online courses using data from interviews, observations, and online focus groups. Factors he identified as crucial to online learning included communication, course organization, the structure of the learning environment, and the nature of assessment. There is a clear need for empirical investigation of online ESL learners from an emic perspective, which will provide important insight into pedagogical decisions related to designing and offering online writing courses.

Activity Theory

Based on the thoughts and work of Vygotsky (1978, 1987), activity theory was developed by Leont'ev (1981) and expanded into a collective activity system by Engeström (1987, 1993, 1999, 2001) and Wertsch (1985). Activity theory maintains that the human mind derives from social interaction and depends on the social environment. By participating in cultural activities and communities of practice, the human mind appropriates culture and develops higher functions. Therefore, the task of scientific investigation is to determine how the mind develops during specific activities in specific contexts (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Activity, as mediated by cultural tools and artifacts, is the basic unit of analysis that unifies the external social life and the individual (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). According to Leont'ev (1981), human behavior can be categorized into three hierarchical levels: activity, action, and operation. Activity is a conceptual understanding of what an individual is engaged in. The defining feature of an activity is the motive that drives a person to act, adapt, and change. In the case of online learning, students in the same class may engage in different activities based on their primary motives. A student who studies for a grade is engaged in a different activity from one who has a strong interest in English writing and wants to improve his writing skills. Action is the process that one undergoes to achieve the goal. For instance, writing multiple drafts, participating in bulletin board discussions, and conducting peer reviews via email are some of the actions that students take in an ESL online writing course. Operation is the actual "doing" in the context of "the immediate social-material conditions at hand" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 216).

According to activity theory, changing the conditions under which an activity takes place has the potential to change the operational level of an activity. Take online learning as an example. The mediating effect of a computer in the learning process may affect student participation and engagement. Bateson (1972) proposed a stronger claim about the role of technology. According to him, the tool that people use to complete a task transforms the task itself. Understood this way, online learning, in which a computer is the primary medium of acquiring knowledge, carrying out writing tasks, and interacting with teachers and peers, may alter the patterns of student participation and engagement in qualitatively significant ways, depending on their familiarity with computer and online learning. Meanwhile, it is important to note that learners are agents with the capacity to actively adapt to local conditions, and modify their actions as goals and conditions change.

Learner Agency, Motive, and Self-Regulated Learning

Agency, as is construed in activity theory, is constructed through participating in the community of practice, which is constantly shaped and reshaped with other agents and the local context (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). The better one is at accommodating oneself in an activity, the more likely one is to progress. More importantly, agency "links motivation… to action and defines a myriad of paths taken by learners" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 145). In the face of opportunities and challenges posed by the new medium, some learners choose to adapt while others remain at the periphery of the online community of practice. It is therefore of great necessity to gain a better understanding about how learners behave, orient towards, and invest in the online learning environment.

Sociocultural theory looks at human activity as goal-oriented and driven by motives stemming from either biological or culturally informed needs. A motive is "the cultural-psychological-institutional impetus that guides human activity toward a particular object" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 218). The learning activities of students may not be identical if they are driven by different motives. Motives are socially embedded and influenced by social context. Lantolf and Genung (2002) discussed the fluctuating nature of motives in L2 learning in its social and cultural contexts through a narrative of an enthusiastic graduate student's failed attempt to learn Chinese as an additional language in an intensive summer language program. The student started out as an effective language learner who was highly motivated to master the language. Her motive gradually changed when most of the course was spent on grammatical pattern drills. The student ended up being an unhappy and unaccomplished Chinese learner, and her motive shifted to simply fulfilling the language requirements. Her experience illustrates that motive is constantly shaped and reshaped under specific social and cultural contexts.

Research in educational psychology has shown that a learner's abilities and strategies alone do not fully explain academic achievement; factors such as self-regulation and motivation are important factors in explaining achievement differences among learners (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008). This is especially true in the case of online learning due to its virtual nature and flexibility in time and space. Self-regulated learning (SRL) is defined as "self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions in order to attain educational goals that include such processes as planning and managing time; attending to and concentrating on instruction; organizing, rehearsing, and coding information; establishing a

productive work environment; and using social resources effectively" (McInerney, 2008, p. 374). Students are self-regulated to the degree that they are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning processes (Zimmerman, 2001). A self-regulated learner is aware of her strengths and weaknesses, and ready to adapt to different learning situations by employing appropriate learning strategies. A less self-regulated learner has a more limited repertoire of strategies, which could be very ineffective in the face of academic challenges (Hartley & Bendixen, 2001).

The notion of SRL emerges from the assumption that students exercise agency by consciously controlling and regulating themselves in learning. Within the limits of their capabilities, as well as the constraints and affordances in their environment, students exercise agency by setting goals and making choices about how they strive to reach those goals, how intensely they choose to engage in a task, and how long they can persist if the task cannot be completed effortlessly (Winne & Hadwin, 2008).

Along with behavior, motivation, and cognition, the learning context is another major consideration in the execution of self-regulation (Pintrich, 1999). The learning context and learners are in a dialectical relationship. On the one hand, learners often attempt to control or regulate their learning environments. On the other hand, the nature of the learning context can facilitate or undermine learners' attempts, depending on the nature of the context, the tasks and activities included, and teachers' approaches to them (Wigfield, Hoa, & Klauda, 2008). Research has indicated that online learning requires more learner control and self-discipline than traditional classroom-based instruction (Bell, 2007). Although the Internet allows for more flexible learning, it has been found that students tend to lose focus, confidence, discipline, and willingness to participate in online classes (Wang & Lin, 2007).

METHODS

I conducted a case study of two students in an entirely online ESL writing course in an attempt to tease out their orientations, motivations, perceptions, and use of self-regulation strategies. Specifically, I sought to answer two research questions:

1. What self-regulation strategies do learners employ in an online ESL writing class?

2. How do learner agency and motive impact learner performance and academic achievement in an online ESL writing class?

The study was conducted in an online undergraduate ESL academic writing class at a university in the Northeastern United States. The ESL academic writing course is required for all international undergraduates at the university to help develop their ability to read and write academic discourse. International students can opt to take the course either in a traditional classroom setting or in an online virtual environment supported by the World Campus program of the university. The online course was initially designed for students located all over the world, but in reality the majority of students (and the two students selected for the case study) were on-campus students from that university.

The course adopted a process-based approach designed to enhance academic reading and writing abilities. In addition to introducing writing techniques, the course provided students opportunities to conduct academic research and write analytical and argumentative essays. The class had nine ESL students (five males and four females), eight were from Asia (Korea, China, Taiwan, and Pakistan) and one was from Poland. Most of the students were first-year undergraduates, and a few were in their second year. I was the instructor of the course. All course materials were uploaded to the course website through the course management system of the university. The course materials mainly consisted of digitalized content related to the writing topics, detailed instructions and rubrics for the writing tasks, discussion topics, and supplementary readings. Students were required to complete approximately two writing assignments per week. I communicated with students via email about learning materials and written assignments, and held one-on-one writing conferences via Instant Messenger, a commercial synchronous online chat program. To encourage collaborative learning, the students were required to write on the asynchronous discussion board approximately once a week to discuss their understandings of the reading materials and progress on the writing tasks. Throughout the semester, they also held synchronous group discussions in the chat room supported by the course website. Peer reviews of essays were conducted via email with me, the course instructor, making the grouping decisions.

In order to investigate characteristics of strategic learners in an online environment, I adopted a case study approach that focused on two individual students in the class. David was a first-year undergraduate student from Poland. Before matriculating at the university, David had been an exchange student in an American high school for a year. Huiwen was a first-year undergraduate student

from China. When the study was conducted, it was her first semester in the United States. Neither of them had prior experience in an entirely online class.

Data were collected from different sources to provide a triangulated analysis of the learners. With the participants' consent, I collected their writing assignments, journal entries, observation notes I had made, records of student-teacher interaction via Instant Messenger, email exchanges, and records of synchronous group discussions via the live chat room supported by the university's course system. Three months after the course ended, I conducted one-on-one interviews in English with David and Huiwen. The interview with David was conducted in person and digitally recorded. The interview with Huiwen was conducted through Instant Messenger, because at the time of the interview Huiwen was not on campus.

FINDINGS

A Quantitative Look at the Learners' Participation in the ESL Online Writing Course

Table 1 displays data on course website usage by David and Huiwen throughout the semester. Figures 1 and 2 present a chronological picture of the learners' logon records and activity logs, delineating distinctive patterns of participation of the two learners at different time points in the 15-week duration of the semester. It is clear that David was much more actively engaged in the course than Huiwen, both in terms of time spent and participation. The activity records show that David participated in asynchronous group discussions on the discussion boards more actively, turned in all assignments and participated in all online discussions. In contrast, Huiwen missed three assignments and one scheduled online writing conference with me. Compared to David, Huiwen had more email contact with me, partly because she needed help with course materials and assignments and also because she initiated several lengthy negotiations regarding the submission of assignments. The logon records and the activity logs together present a consistent participation pattern for David and a sporadic one for Huiwen. Huiwen made very few visits to the website during the first few days of the course, which explains why she had problems maintaining the pace. During the second half of the course, there was a dramatic decrease in Huiwen's visits to and activities on the course website.

Table 1: Summary of Course Website Usage by David and Huiwen

	David	Huiwen
Logon records	328	218
Activity records	1,498	869
Assignment submission	20	17
Emails to the instructor	8	23
Participation in synchronous writing conferences	4	3
Participation in asynchronous group discussions	14	10

Figure 1: David's and Huiwen's Logon Records throughout the Semester

Log on records
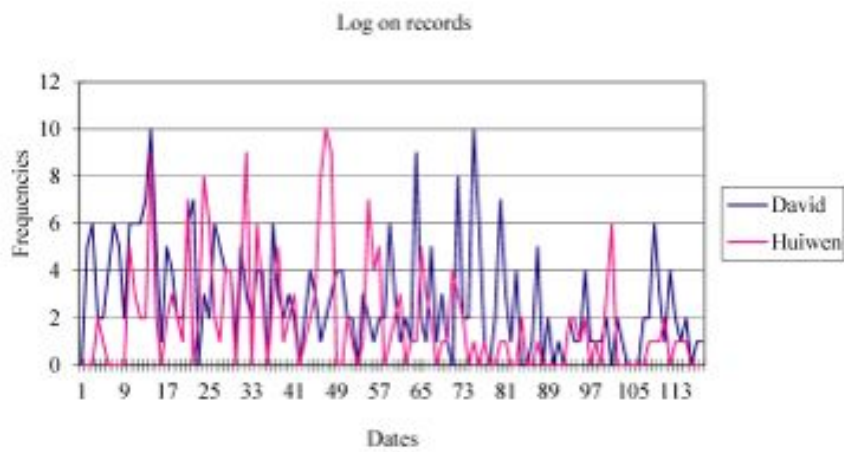
Figure 2: David's and Huiwen's Activity Records throughout the Semester

Activity Log
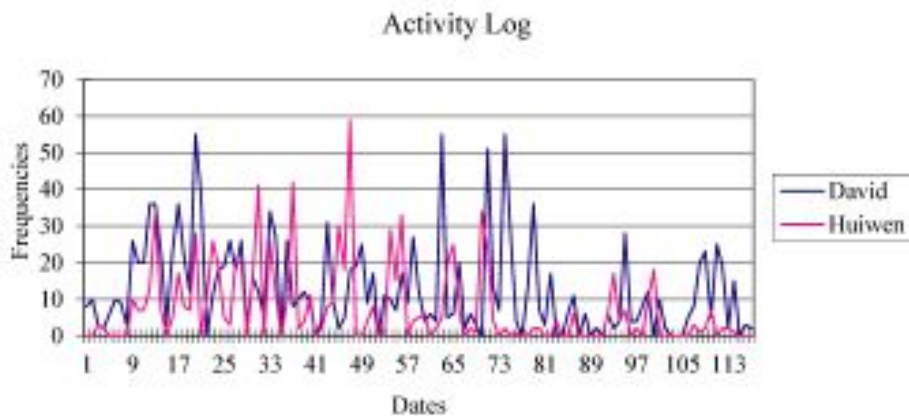
As the course instructor, I observed very different patterns of participation and performance from David and Huiwen. David was a punctual, consistent, organized, and conscientious student. He submitted every assignment on time with high quality. He was clear about the class expectations and his own strengths. His performance was consistent throughout the semester. However, Huiwen seemed to be a struggling learner from the beginning. She had more questions about assignments and found them to be difficult. She frequently missed the assignment deadlines and group discussions, and did not reply to my inquiries in a timely manner. The physical distance between student and instructor created by the computer seemed to have posed a big problem for her. In addition, she seemed to have problems understanding course materials posted on the course website. During the second half of the semester when the course materials and topics became more difficult, Huiwen encountered greater difficulties in maintaining the pace of the course. She missed several draft submission deadlines and her final paper failed to reflect the class content.

How Did the Learners Participate in an Online Course?

This section provides an emic view of how David and Huiwen managed their learning in the online writing class in order to probe into how they adapted to the online learning environment and to identify the difficulties and challenges they encountered in the course. Data mainly came from journal entries in which they recorded their attitudes about the course, and post-hoc interviews in which they reflected upon their experiences in the ESL online writing course. This discussion is divided into how they managed the routine work, how they communicated with me and peer classmates, and their overall impressions of the course.

Routine work in the ESL online writing course

During his interview, David accounted for how he managed routine course work such as reading and writing assignments. David was able to evaluate the tasks he was given and execute effective strategies in completing the tasks. His approach to writing matched the writing process taught in the course. He also had clear understanding of his own strengths and weaknesses, and was able to seek help from the instructor when needed.

> I read what the assignment is about, and I kind know how to do it. If I
> don't know, I send you [the instructor] email. If I kind of know, I'll say,

"Ok. I'll maybe do it on Wednesday when I sit down, I write the main ideas." It's already a paragraph. It's already a piece of work, kind of draft. And then I just add to it some other day. Thinking, draft, and adding to it, fixing it. [As to how long I spent on the assignments,] it depends on what the paper is about. If it's about an article, I would say three days. But for longer paper, I take a week. It's similar, basically the same [as the way I deal with assignments in traditional classes].

Importantly, writing on a computer turned out to be a pleasant experience that David was eager to embrace. The entertainment and communication function of computer was not a distraction to David as it is for many students. David acknowledged the value of computers to education, and that other regular courses also required him to use a computer to complete assignments. As a learner who was eager to embrace the future, David was aware of the necessity to adapt to the new mode of learning through self-regulation. When asked about the possible distractions that computer use might bring, David answered:

It happens all the time. Like you know they are writing a paper and in the meantime they log into the Facebook, check their mail, you know, IM someone. That's distractive. But even in a regular course, they still have to type on the computer.

In contrast, Huiwen approached the routine work in the online course using a completely different strategy as reflected in one of her journal entries:

When the class began online, it was not as easy as I thought. It was really easy to lose track on the assignments. Usually, on Monday, we got the entire schedule for the whole week, and the assignments due on the weekends. The homework you have to do seem not really difficult, so I automatically keep them till the end of the week. Then I feel a lot of pressure of that plenty of work on weekends. If you not write the assignments on your planner or somewhere else that can remind your work, then you will definitely forgot some of the assignments. Especially some work you have to do on the discussion board.

It seemed that Huiwen had a weak understanding of the writing tasks and a lack of readiness for the new mode of online learning. She mistakenly assumed the assignments were easy and postponed them until the last minute. Once she realized the assignments were not easy, she had missed the best opportunities to

seek help from me and/or her classmates. She failed to employ the self-regulation strategies necessary to manage the writing tasks.

The multiple tasks required in the online course, such as writing and reading assignments and asynchronous bulletin board discussions seemed to be another issue for Huiwen. She lacked a clear understanding of what tasks needed to be fulfilled. Since the tasks appeared to be assigned in a piecemeal fashion to her, she easily lost track of them. To her, completing the assignments without a teacher's verbal face-to-face explanation was challenging. This reveals that the isolation and physical distance created by the computer was a big problem for her, and she needed more direct and immediate social support. Moreover, her failure to employ effective strategies to seek help via computer rendered her powerless. Even more interesting is despite all the problems and difficulties she encountered, Huiwen did not worry about lagging behind in the course.

> I won't worry about missing the deadlines. Maybe because this is the online class, I will never see the teacher and classmates. I don't have the feeling that it is a real class. A real class would be students having teachers taught in the classroom.

> The most important reason is, you don't have to go to class during the weekdays and don't have to face the teacher, and then it is really easy for you to depreciate this course and homework.

To Huiwen, the physical distance between the learners and the teacher in the online class resulted in a laissez faire attitude towards all activities carried out via the computer. To her, the physical distance created by the computer caused her to ignore the serious nature of school learning and became an excuse for shirking her academic responsibilities.

Student-to-instructor and student-to-student communications

David was satisfied with his communication with me, the course instructor. He found the email exchanges and the synchronous writing conferences to be very helpful in framing his topics. The distance caused by the virtual learning environment and the mediation of a computer turned out to be an advantage for David. He successfully transformed activities that typically involve face-to-face communication into online communication and achieved the same effects. David once again displayed an accurate understanding of his own strengths and a proactive stance toward his learning.

I like the course. I think everything is clear. I knew the information. I knew what to do. And let's face it. You say you don't meet the instructor. But I can email you [the instructor] every time. You [the instructor] reply pretty fast, and you [the instructor] explain very clear. You have the online chat, which is helpful to discuss the project.

However, the change of learning medium turned out to be dramatic for Huiwen. She felt that there were fewer communicative and cooperative opportunities in the online class and that communication with the instructor was less effective than in a traditional class. Although she expected help from me and her classmates, she did not employ effective strategies to seek support in an online environment. She was suddenly rendered helpless and isolated, which discouraged her from investing time and energy into learning.

The material you post online, I read them carefully, but sometime it's just less clear and understandable than listen to the teacher in the class, maybe because it was lack of teacher's explanation. I was not helped a lot. Maybe I am used to listen to a teacher, and when I feel I do not understand, then raise my hand and ask.

It [the ESL online class] has less opportunity to communicate with the classmates and cooperation opportunities. As I remembered, the teacher let us talked about the advertisements we chose for the first essay on the discussion board. I didn't get any valuable suggestion and didn't feel it has any help.

Overall evaluation of the ESL online writing course

Overall, David expressed satisfaction with his first online course. He did not feel that the online mode of learning posed more challenges to students than a traditional mode. Meanwhile, he highlighted the importance of self-discipline in online learning.

I really like the online course. I think it's a good idea. Yeah. If people would show up on time, do all the work, I don't think it will take you longer than a traditional course.

In contrast, Huiwen deemed her first experience with online learning to be less successful. After taking the ESL course online, Huiwen found that she preferred traditional classes. She missed the face-to-face communication with her

teachers, the immediacy of response that face-to-face communication offers, the social support and competitive atmosphere a classroom creates. She definitely learned better in a traditional classroom. When asked about the biggest challenge in an online course, Huiwen acknowledged it was self-discipline.

> I think the online will never be better than a regular class, well, for me, it is. I found it is more helpful and I learned more if I go to classes. I don't like taking classes without seeing the teacher. … I like talk to people face to face much better. That way made me treat things, knowledge seriously and assignments. … I won't take another online class.

What Motivated Learner Behaviors in the ESL Online Writing Course?

As discussed in the literature, motive plays a significant role in student behavior and learning outcomes. Using data from interviews, journal entries, and bulletin board posts, this section explores David's and Huiwen's motives related to the course and their motivational changes throughout the semester. Their final reflections on the online learning experiences are presented to provide a complete picture of their motivational fluctuations.

David

From the beginning of the course, David showed a strong and integrated motive towards the ESL online writing course. Besides fulfilling the university requirement for international students, David liked writing as an activity and he especially liked to write in a solitary manner. He was prepared for the challenges of the new medium, and acknowledged the importance and indispensability of online learning in educational and professional development.

> I decided to take this version of the course because from my previous experiences I learned that one of the most important things in writing is ability to concentrate. Personally I like to write in my own, quiet environment instead of doing it in class. Besides that by choosing ESL online I also learn how to deal with online classes, which seems to be our future.

In a journal entry he wrote halfway through the semester, David once again clarified that his belief about online learning was reinforced by the positive

experience he gained from the ESL course. His initial experience with online learning enhanced his confidence in learning via computer.

> Taking online course is a great experience. The knowledge is presented in the modern and easy to acquire way, especially for my generation because it is not any different than everyday activities. In my opinion in the next few years there will be more and more online courses offered. I'm really satisfied that I chose this online class. I know that the things that I'll learn here will be critical in order to success in college.

After the course, David acknowledged the satisfaction and fulfillment he gained from the online learning experience, which transformed into a positive attitude toward online learning in general. During his interview, David mentioned that he decided to take an online course on business writing owing to his positive experience with the ESL online writing course. He felt that what he had learned from the ESL course helped him in his business writing course. He also was able to see the relationship between the ESL writing course and other courses.

Huiwen

During her interview, Huiwen said that she had taken the online course because she had heard that I was a good instructor, and my traditional classroom-based section of the class was full. Huiwen registered for the online course mainly because she wanted to take the ESL writing course with me to fulfill the university's language requirements. Hence, Huiwen did not have a strong rationale for taking the ESL online writing course; she did not expect the course to be useful or interesting. From the moment she registered for the online course, she lacked internal motivation. In addition, she was not prepared for the challenges she would face in an online class, which explained her later struggles and frustrations in the course.

> At the very beginning, I have no idea about what this course going to be and what activity we are going to do online. The reason I chose this web class was also really simple, one of my friend who told me the teacher is the best in ESL courses.

Huiwen took the course largely because of opinions she had solicited from her Chinese friends who had already taken the course. To some extent, her friends' opinions reinforced her instrumental motivation, which was merely to fulfill the university requirements and get the course out of the way. Therefore,

she framed the online activities as "busy work" with little meaning and practical value.

> Firstly, for Chinese students, they think use English to write a really long paper is really terrible. They thought ESL was the hardest course for their first semester. And it is really hard to get an A. So neither of them liked this class. Secondly, they thought the topics are really boring, and they not interested. It is also not that popular. They don't find the writing techniques learned from the class to be helpful for other courses.

Huiwen's attitudes towards online learning became unquestionably negative when the course was over. She completely lost interest in online classes. She confessed in the interview that she would never take another online class, because traditional classes provided her with more opportunities to communicate with the instructor and her classmates directly, and she was able to treat learning more seriously if she had to meet the teacher in person. When asked about the writing tasks she completed in the online course, she indicated that she did not understand the goal and the significance of them.

> I think the online will never better than a regular class, well, for me, it is. I found it is more helpful and I learn more if I go to classes. I don't like taking classes without seeing the teacher. … I won't take another online class.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

By conducting a case study of two students enrolled in an online ESL writing course at a university in the Northeastern United States, I investigated what makes a successful and strategic learner in an online environment and how learner agency, motive, and self-regulation impact student performance and academic achievement in online learning. Triangulated analysis revealed that like all human cultural inventions, computer technology contextualizes learning for different people in different ways by empowering some and handicapping others.

As in a traditional classroom, in an online learning environment, learner agency is based on the individual learner's motive and readiness for the online mode of learning. Those who have a strong motive to learn and good self-regulation skills tend to be empowered by computer technology and benefit more

from the online learning experience, while those who are solely externally motivated and have difficulties with self-regulation are more likely to be frustrated. Interpreted through the lens of activity theory, from the moment learners enroll in an online course, they may engage in very different activities. David's motive for taking the online ESL writing course was internally driven, strong and steady. He truly enjoyed writing in English, and he enthusiastically embraced online learning with a readiness to improve his writing through the new mode of online learning. All of his actions proved to be meaningful and integrative steps towards his goal of becoming a successful student writer and a capable online learner at his university. It is evident that his full engagement in online learning activities resulted from thoughtful planning, organization, and self-discipline, which supported successful learning outcomes. In contrast, Huiwen took the course only for the purpose of fulfilling the minimum university language requirements. To her, the course work consisted of meaningless tasks that she described as busy work. The intellectual opportunities and challenges offered by the course were interpreted as barriers to achieving her goal of passing the course with minimum effort. Her performance on the writing tasks and class activities indicated confusion, disorientation, and puzzlement, which when coupled with procrastination, eventually led to academic disappointment.

In addition, different users can interpret the use of technology in very different ways. David saw more similarities between the computer-mediated course and traditional courses. He executed effective self-regulation strategies and successfully adapted himself to the new learning environment. However, Huiwen viewed more contrasts between the two modes of learning and found self-regulation and adaptation to be tremendously difficult. David enjoyed the freedom and autonomy provided by the computer-mediated learning, while Huiwen felt lonely and helpless when confronted with the physical isolation and the lack of face-to-face communication. David assumed more responsibilities for his progress in the online course, whereas Huiwen took the course less seriously because she did not need to face the instructor.

The opposite experiences of David and Huiwen show that not every student is ready for the autonomy and flexibility that computer-mediated learning provides. First-year college students, especially ESL students who are new to the culture and the academic community of practice, need direct guidance and support from the instructor and their peers. They want to take greater responsibility for their learning, but they may not be able to function well as autonomous and self-regulated learners. The physical distance imposed by a computer could be detrimental for those learners who do not possess effective

self-regulation skills, nor employ strategies for seeking support and help. Huiwen mentioned several times that for her, as soon as the classroom became virtual, the peer pressure and competitive atmosphere that motivated her to try hard academically significantly decreased. This is, in fact, one of the major concerns about scaling online learning for a larger population in higher education, particularly for subjects that focus heavily on developing communication skills, such as writing and languages. It is worth noting that the self-directed learning advocated by many educators is not automatically realized by introducing computer technology into the learning process. A key takeaway is that learners need guidance and support on how to self-motivate and self-direct learning in the online environment; thus, when designing and delivering online courses, individual differences in learning styles, cognitive processes, and educational histories must be taken into consideration.

In reflecting on the course design and delivery of the online ESL writing class that served as the context for this study, I make the following suggestions that could help alleviate student anxiety and optimally accommodate first-time online learners:

- In the syllabus, clearly specify expectations about student participation, assignment quality, the importance of meeting deadlines, group discussion formats, the kinds of involvement expected, and effective ways to communicate with the instructor and peer classmates. Also include detailed weekly schedules for reading materials, writing tasks, and group work.
- To prepare students for a successful online learning experience, spend the first week of the course introducing effective online learning strategies and helping individual students develop an online study plan. During the first week, the instructor should assign readings and facilitate class discussion on useful online learning strategies, introduce basic technical skills and online communication tools that help students succeed in online learning, and help students create a study schedule that will be checked weekly.
- To maximize student-content interaction, course materials need to be designed so as to be sufficiently visually stimulating without being overly distracting in order to sustain students' attention and motivation. Instructors should take full advantage of the abundant resources on the Internet and incorporate multi-modal materials such as videos, audios, cartoons, pictures, and so on, to motivate learner interest in the writing topics. I suggest using micro assignments that gradually build into a

bigger project, with clear, detailed instructions and grading rubrics for each assignment.

- To improve student-to-instructor communication, provide timely, frequent, clear, and structured assessments of student performance. Use different types of formative assessments supplemented by student self-assessments. Instructors can maximize their presence by replying to students' emails within 24 hours and providing timely feedback to individual students on discussion boards. If needed, offer individualized online tutoring hours so that struggling students will receive timely and tailored help in maintaining the pace of the class, as well as the individual attention they need to succeed.

- To optimize student interaction, explore various forms of collaborative and social learning and establish an online learning community. Use popular and easily accessible social network programs such as Facebook or Twitter to encourage students to communicate with each other. In addition to the old-fashioned discussion boards supported by most university learning systems, use other interactive and multimodal communication tools such as VoiceThread or Google+ to conduct group discussions. For different types of collaborative activities, create student learning groups of various sizes, and frequently change the groupings so students have an opportunity to interact with different classmates.

- Lastly, online teaching is a learning process, not only for students, but also for instructors. To design and deliver a successful online course, the instructor must have support from the technology support department, the center for teaching excellence, and similar university institutions. It is important for instructors to know how and where to seek support so as to facilitate the transition from traditional classroom teaching to online teaching.

The study has several limitations that future research could address. Due to a rather small focus group and the case study methodology it employs, the findings may not be generalized without reservations to online classes in different social and cultural contexts. Because of the short duration of the research and limited contact with the focal students, many variables were not investigated that could have played important roles in defining the students' online learning experience. Further research is expected to include a larger group of students representing different personalities, cultural backgrounds, educational histories, and acculturation experiences to investigate how these variables shape learner perception of online learning and participation in online classes. Another equally

important facet of online education is the instructor. Future research could examine how the instructors' experiences in online instruction, expectations for online learning, and the kinds of support they receive from the administration in teaching an online course may affect students' online learning experience.

As Hirvela rightfully pointed out, "implementing computer-mediated technology is a complex undertaking that, for all its promises, is often fraught with disappointment" (Hirvela, 2007, p. 53). Online education requires collaboration and cooperation of all parties involved, namely, the students, the instructors, the administrative units, and technology support. As educators in the Internet era, more research needs to be conducted about the complexity of online learning and the optimal way of designing and delivering an online class so as to empower all learners in online learning.

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