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Online Participation in Digital Classroom

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Abstract: Online participation in digital classrooms is a common feature in many educational institutes. This research explores working adult learners' perceptions with regard to the use of asynchronous online discussion (AOD). Findings suggest that participants on the whole were receptive to the use of AOD. Moreover, findings also suggest that many working adults preferred instructor to peer facilitation, and participants desired to receive a response from other participants within 24 hours. However, a clearer guidance on how AOD participation is assessed is needed. Participants suggested two possible areas by which online participation may be assessed: (a) the number of thread (e.g., participation rate, frequency of log-in and number of posts viewed), and (b) the content of discussion such as the demonstration of knowledge on topic taught, depth of discussion, content of discussion, relevancy of post, quality of comments, usefulness and constructive of the post.

Keywords: asynchronous online discussion, adult learners, facilitation

Introduction

Digital classrooms – in particular, Asynchronous Online Discussion (AOD) often form a part of online instructional activities. Having AOD implemented, however, does not necessary mean successful implementation. The benefits of AOD would not be reaped if participants do not participate or participate well (Hew & Cheung, 2012). This research attempts to examine full-time working adults' perception of using AOD with respect to its benefit for learning, the participants' preference for instructor or peer facilitation, participants' response time, and the possible ways to assess AOD participation. The result of this research study will be useful for curriculum designers of adult learning programs and facilitators of AOD.

1. Methodology

1.1 Participants

16 Singapore full time working adults (81% male, 19% female) took part in this study. 31% of the participants were of age between 25 - 30, 56% between 31 - 40 and 13% above 40 years. They participated in AOD when they took up part-time study. These participants were selected on convenient basis.

1.2 Data Collection Design and Procedure

This study collected and analysis both the quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire consisted of 9 closed and open-ended questions with quantitative data collected from closed items, with a Likert-scale of 4 points and qualitative data collected from open ended questions where participants explained their responds to the questions. Due to page constraints, we highlight only 4 items (see Table 1)

2. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Survey results – working adults' perception on the use of AOD

Item	Remarks
a) AOD helps me better understand the lesson (81% - strongly agree & agree) (19% - strongly disagree & disagree)	b) The online postings served as a self-reflection and reinforcement of the lesson. c) Time flexibility made participants less anxious because they could take their time to think about an issue longer and deeper.
b) I prefer the instructor to facilitate the discussion (69% - strongly agree & agree) (31% - strongly disagree & disagree)	a) Instructor had more knowledge and he would be able to provide better explanation and guidance so that participants could better understand the topic b) Instructor was able to provide direction to discussion, keep discussion focus and provide feedback when it went out of scope. c) Instructor had the authority to get students to participate in an asynchronous online discussion environment.
c) I prefer my peers to facilitate the discussion (33% - strongly agree & agree) (67% - strongly disagree & disagree)	a) It would be a more relax learning environment which might be easier for non-communicative participants to participate. b) Peers shared similar experience during lesson and would be in better position to appreciate the uncertainties with regard to the topic. Therefore he would be in better position to generate discussion.
d) I know how students are assessed in AOD (36% - strongly agree & agree) (64% - strongly disagree & disagree)	The following areas of assessment were suggested by participants: a) Number of thread submitted. b) Content of discussion.
e) I prefer to get a response when I post my comments	19% preferred to receive respond within half-a-day and 63% preferred to receive reply within 1 day after they have upload their post.

2.1 AOD in relation to understanding of lesson

A majority of participants believed that the use of AOD helped them better understand the lesson taught in class. Detail explanations given by the participants could be broadly grouped into three main reasons: (a) AOD served as a form of self-reflection, and reinforcement of lesson, (b) AOD gave participants a chance to ask questions that were not surfaced in class, and (c) AOD served as a platform to share perspectives about the lesson without the pressure for an immediate reply.

2.2 Facilitation

A majority preferred instructor facilitation because they were used to "teacher centric" teaching methodology and associate AOD as an extension of classroom teaching where instructor still remain as the subject matter expert to provide correct answers. This could also due to Asia cultural where teachers are viewed as main source of knowledge and an authority figure in the learning environment. However, some participants preferred their peers to facilitate because it could help to create a more relaxed discussion environment.

2.3 Assessment

Many participants were not aware of AOD assessment. The lack of awareness might lead to them submitting comments that peers might not find constructive or engaging. Participants suggested two possible areas by which AOD may be assessed: (a) number of thread (e.g., participation rate, frequency of log-in and number of posts viewed), and (b) content of discussion such as the demonstration of knowledge on topic taught, depth of discussion, content of discussion, relevancy of post, and usefulness of the post. Several participants suggested that no repetitions of posts or comments be allowed. Other possible ways to assess AOD involve examining participants' social construction of knowledge and problem solving process (Hew, Liu, Martinez, Bonk and Lee, 2004).

2.4 Desired response time

With the fast pace of working life in Singapore, many learners expected quick response and answers to their posts. A majority of participants were willing to wait up to 24 hours for someone to respond to their questions or comments. This would allow discussion to be more engaging as enthusiasm about the topic would be higher when ideas were fresh and responses to enquiries were faster.

3. Conclusion

In this study, the participants were asked about their perceptions on the use of AOD. It is found that the participants in this study were receptive to AOD. They recognized that it helped them to better understand their lesson. However, many still felt that they were not active participants mainly due to a delay in response from peers. In term of facilitation, many still preferred instructor facilitation as the instructor was deemed more knowledgeable and would be able to keep discussion on track. It was also found that a majority of the participants were not aware of the assessment criteria in AOD and many also feedback the need for rapidity of response upon posting their online messages.

References

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