

ADULT LEARNING ON THE INTERNET: ENGAGING THE eBAY AUCTION PROCESS

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Abstract

The current revolution of the Information Age is rapidly changing the complexion of many personal and corporate societies. This revolution is changing the methods people use to communicate with each other, research new information, solve problems, and transact business. The purpose of this study was to describe the learning strategies that adults use in learning to engage in the eBay auction process. The study used the following research questions: (a) what are the identified learning strategy preferences of adult learners using eBay, (b) how do the learning strategy preferences of eBay users compare to the norms for ATLAS, and (c) how do eBay users describe their learning processes related to getting started on eBay, participating in eBay activities, communicating on eBay, learning through eBay, and experiencing eBay?

This study used a descriptive design along with the information and data gathering advantages of the Internet to collect data about how adults learn using the Internet. An online questionnaire which featured 19 qualitative questions and 11 quantitative Likert scale items was used to determine the perceptions of eBay participants. Assessing The Learning Strategies of AdultsS (ATLAS) instrument was imbedded within the online questionnaire to determine the preferred strategies of eBay users. The study involved a representative sample of 380 eBay users which was identified by electronically downloading the e-mail addresses of participants in completed auctions. The sample was stratified by the 13 categories of items listed on eBay. Within each of these categories, high-volume completed auctions were selected in which the final sale price was under \$10, between \$11 and \$100, and over \$100.

Introduction

Computer and Internet usage has become available in many types of communities with many types of people around the world. For those with computer and Internet access, the revolution has dramatically changed their personal and professional lives on a daily basis. In addition to its societal transformation, the Information Age has created a new form of literacy. Called computer literacy, this form of literacy has become necessary for people to be able to utilize and access new technological advances. However, in spite of all the interest in computer literacy, a component of the Information Age has been virtually ignored. A large amount of people have engaged in self-directed learning in an informal learning environment with practically no recognition of the intricate learning processes taking place.

Although much has been written and discussed about the Internet auction website called eBay, little is known of the learning processes that adult learners have used in order to participate in the online auction activities. These people have demonstrated their self-initiated and self-directed learning abilities in a real-life learning situation through engaging in the eBay auction process. Although crucial to those who plan to learn or teach others using this pervasive new technology, the field of Adult Education has not yet investigated the chosen learning strategies that adult learners are using in record numbers in computer-related activities such as eBay.

Study Findings

The findings of this study were arranged into five areas: Getting Started on eBay, Participating in eBay Activities, Communicating on eBay, Learning Through eBay, and Experiencing eBay. In each area, a discussion of the responses were given to each question which detailed the frequencies of specific categories of answers along with the learning strategy differences.

Table 1 Summary of the Findings

Getting Started on eBay	Learned from other people
Participating in eBay Activities	Used eBay features Monitored current auctions Developed bidding strategies
Communicating on eBay	Relied heavily on e-mail; trust
Learning Through eBay	Strong influence on computer, Internet, and personal skills
Experiencing eBay	Many positive experiences involving other people
Navigators	The Strivers Plan the work and work the plan
Problem Solvers	The Storytellers Ask them what time it is and they will build you a clock
Engagers	The Stimulants It's fun!

Getting Started on eBay involved the participants described how they learned about the eBay website, how they learned about setting up their eBay account, and how they learned to traverse the site. The pervasive aspect of eBay was evident as other people were the most common method that the participants cited about how they learned of eBay. Navigators relied on external sources such as advertisements to learn about eBay while Problem Solvers counted the Internet as one of their major sources. Engagers tended to learn about eBay from their friends. Although most participants learned about becoming eBay users by following the website's directions, the Navigators were likely to utilize eBay's search engine while Problem Solvers chose to describe intricate combinations of methods and Engagers went straight to the bidding process to learn about getting their eBay accounts started. Navigators tended to use their own logic, Problem Solvers used trial-and-error and a combination of sources, and Engagers went directly to eBay's search feature to learn more about the site.

Participating in eBay Activities involved an examination of the participants' typical eBay sessions and how they went about learning more about the auction items, the people involved in the auctions, and any other things related to the auctions. The study participants also shared their eBay bidding strategies and the processes they used to develop their bidding strategy.

Participating in eBay Activities also involved how the participants learned more about the other people in the auction and more about any additional things related to eBay. While describing the methods they used to learn more about the other auction people, some participants used eBay's Feedback Forum and other eBay features while others used a combination of techniques, detailed remarks, and e-mailed communications in their description. When asked to characterize how they went about learning more about things other than the auction items or the auction people, the participants told of using the different eBay website features, trial-and-error, a combination of methods, and other people.

Throughout the section on Participating in eBay Activities, differences were identified between the Navigators, Problem Solvers, and Engagers. The Navigators tended to use predetermined plans

and external resources such as reference books and trade journals and to give more credence to eBay's Feedback Forum and their own logical thinking than the Problem Solvers and Engagers did. The Problem Solvers repeatedly provided detailed examples to tell the stories about their experiences while participating in eBay activities. In addition, Problem Solvers were more likely to use a variety of techniques according to their particular situations. Woven throughout the Engagers' comments was their tendency to waste little effort on activities that they deemed unworthy and their penchant for involving other people and using emotionally-laden words and phrases in their descriptions.

Communicating on eBay encompassed the participants' perceptions of communicating with other eBay users via e-mail, the advantages and disadvantages to e-mailed communications, and their overall feelings of e-mail with others. Communicating by e-mail is an important aspect of operating on eBay since over one-half of the participants used e-mail Very Much or Much. Many participants provided detailed lists of the advantages to e-mailed communications along with others who applauded the speed of e-mail while others said they learned additional item information or got to know other eBay users better by using e-mail. Differences between the participants in the ATLAS groups were discovered as they related their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages to e-mail on eBay. Navigators listed speed and the perk of getting additional information about auction items as advantages to e-mail while Problem Solvers offered detailed lists and descriptions of advantages from their perceptions. Engagers tended to report their strong feelings about the importance of good communication. When describing the disadvantages to e-mail, Navigators pointed to the external problems that could arise such as legal problems and the inefficiencies of others. Problem Solvers were again more explicit with their answers and appeared to be concerned with possible unpleasant e-mail interactions with other eBay users. Engagers were concerned with competition with other bidders and with being bored with the details of e-mail. Engagers were also more apt to express their personal feelings on the disadvantages of e-mail than either the Navigators or Problem Solvers.

To determine Learning Through eBay, the participants were asked to respond to a series of questions concerning their feelings about eBay's influence on computers and the Internet along with their perceptions of what they have learned as a result of eBay participation. They were also asked about eBay's influence on their attitudes about the Internet, their own skills, and themselves as people. Discernable differences between the participants in the ATLAS groups exist when Learning Through eBay. The Navigators placed value on using external tools and completing more research and they also valued rules, regulations, and any control they may have had. They also reported that evaluation and feedback was important to them, and they tended to be more cautious about their next steps and about other eBay users than the Problem Solvers and Engagers were. In addition, the Navigators were more self-critical and self-conscious while learning through the eBay process. The self-confidence of the Problem Solver group came clearly and repeatedly through their responses as did their affinity for providing detailed, descriptive stories about their learning processes. The Problem Solver answers also revealed how eBay participation reinforced their already positive attitudes about computer and Internet use along with their intrigue and curiosity with the many possibilities of the Internet. The Engagers were more likely than Problem Solvers or Navigators to express their answers using internal feelings or emotionally-laden words or phrases, and they tended to utilize methods that made their lives easier, more worthwhile, and more enjoyable. Engagers were also inclined to value personal interaction and relationships with other people and were generally optimistic in their opinions of others.

Experiencing eBay involved the participants' perceptions of their positive and negative eBay experiences along with their descriptions of what they had learned from each type of experience. As they described their positive and negative experiences while engaging in eBay activities, the participants repeatedly acknowledged the importance of other people in their positive experiences while their negative experiences were also frequently attributed to others or to technological difficulties. Positive eBay experiences were described by Navigators in terms of obtaining good bargains, receiving good customer service, and receiving positive feedback while their negative

experiences centered around others' disregard for rules and receiving negative feedback. Problem Solvers' positive and negative experiences were both communicated through detailed descriptions that included specific examples and stories of specific events or people. The positive experiences on eBay according to the Engagers were reported in sweeping, global terms while their negative experiences were laden with emotional terms and phrases.

Conclusion

The problem for this study was conceptualized around three areas of adult learning, addressing individual differences, and the Internet. Thus, conclusions and recommendations were drawn related to each of those three concept areas.

Adult Learning

Conclusion and Recommendation regarding Adult Learning_–Informal learning on eBay exemplifies the adult learning concepts of andragogy, self-directed learning, learning how to learn, and real-life learning. A tremendous amount of informal learning has taken place in order for the eBay users to engage in the various parts of the eBay auction process. As the findings from this study clearly disclose, participation in eBay activities personifies adult learning at its best and illustrates the assumptions written even decades ago. Prophetic words from adult education literature reveal that “(i)n an era of breathtaking change, it is truly impossible to acquire early in life the knowledge that adulthood will require” (Smith, 1982, p. 15). Therefore, practitioners and researchers in the field of Adult Education must recognize and be constantly aware that the core principles of andragogy are applicable in many current settings such as the Internet. Informal learning is learning that meets the learners wherever they are and this type of learning is taking place in every aspect of the eBay auction process.

Addressing Individual Differences

Conclusion and Recommendation about ATLAS_–ATLAS is a useful tool for addressing the individual differences of adult learners. The current study confirms the findings of previous studies (James, 2000; Spencer, 2000; Willyard, 2000) that utilized the ATLAS instrument to determine learning strategies among groups of learners. In all of these studies, the findings associated with the characteristics of the ATLAS learning strategy groups were consistent. The distinctive traits of Navigators, Problem Solvers, and Engagers remained true across the findings of all four studies that incorporated the ATLAS instrument in their design. The original ATLAS categories are stable. Thus, adult learning researchers should consider the use of the ATLAS instrument when conducting any investigation into adult learning whether electronically or in person.

Conclusion and Recommendations regarding Learning Environment_–The nature of the organization attracts a certain type of learner. The different groups of learners identified by the ATLAS instrument are inclined to gravitate toward the types of organizations or learning environments that best support their strengths. To date, no research has revealed an organization that has specifically attracted the ATLAS learners group known as Navigators although the expected distribution of Navigators in the general population was 36.5% (Conti & Kolody, 1999, p. 18). Therefore, it is recommended that learning strategy research in higher education and similar settings be conducted in order to discover if organizations that display characteristics which are complementary to the learning strategy preferences of Navigators attract a disproportionately large number of Navigators. It is also recommended that ATLAS be employed in investigations of many different types of organizations and learning environments in order to learn more about what organizations draw which group of ATLAS learners.

Conclusion and Recommendations about ATLAS Descriptors_–Additional descriptors for each ATLAS group of learners are possible for better understanding of the people in each group. The current study not only confirms the stable characteristics of Navigators, Problem Solvers, and Engagers it also illuminates added detail. Thus, along with the recommendation for adult learning

researchers to use ATLAS in any future studies, it is further recommended that the analysis of each additional study focus on developing even additional descriptors of each ATLAS group. Since ATLAS is a relatively new instrument, any additional descriptors for adult learners in each ATLAS group can provide new meaning and understanding into the Navigators, Problem Solvers, and Engagers.

Conclusion and Recommendation concerning Similar Learning Tasks_—Learners can be successful in accomplishing similar learning tasks even though they use different strategies in the process. Navigators, Problem Solvers, and Engagers frequently reported that they accomplished similar tasks, but the strategies they used to arrive at their accomplishments were different. Therefore, a recommendation for researchers of adult learning is to further explore the different processes that adult learners use when accomplishing similar learning tasks.

The Internet

Conclusion and Recommendation about Data Collection_—The Internet is a useful data collection tool for adult learning researchers. The widespread growth of computer and Internet use within certain populations provides a unique opportunity to researchers of adult learning. Therefore, when in search of the most current information from a large group of people, researchers should consider the Internet as a data collection tool.

Conclusion and Recommendation regarding Literacy Skills_—Participation in Internet activities enhances the literacy skills of the participants. Countless traditional courses in adult literacy occur all over the world in abundant settings, yet many adult learners are benefitting from the literacy-building component of the Internet with no formal instruction. Therefore, adult literacy programs should follow adult learning principles and encourage computer and Internet practice in their course formats. Programs such as English as a Second Language and those offered as Adult Basic Education classes would do well to take advantage of computers and the Internet to facilitate and enhance their programs. Not only would the adult learners benefit from improved literacy skills, but they would also benefit from the technological skills that enhanced computer and Internet competencies would bring.

Conclusion and Recommendation about Language and Culture_—eBay participation is creating new forms of language and culture. As more people gain access to computers and the Internet their language and culture are undergoing transformations. The findings of this study revealed that the Internet site called eBay was a definitive example of this change. Therefore, the eBay Foundation should offer several grants to researchers willing to study the eBay language and resulting subcultures and publish their results. Such research initiatives could be focused around the language alone or could focus on the friendships, business relationships, and even marriages that have occurred as a result of eBay use. In addition, since eBay has such an international flavor, eBay people of different countries than the United States should be interviewed and studied in order to learn how eBay can better serve these populations.

Conclusion about The Digital Divide_—eBay is contributing to the Digital Divide. Although computer use and Internet access is growing at a phenomenal rate, the rate of access and availability is clearly not matching that pace. Therefore, it is suggested that additional research on the Digital Divide be conducted on a consistent basis in order to assess gaps in electricity, telephone, computer, and Internet access and gauge how these factors that influence the Digital Divide may be related to adult learning.

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