

VOICES ON THE WEB: ONLINE LEARNERS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

This paper contains a part of the first years study of teaching and learning in web-based classes. Representative quotes are given to highlight the experience. They include apprehension of those who are new; interaction and peer support; and motivations for web based courses instead of face-to-face classroom.

Many universities, colleges, and other organizations do not wish to be out of the technology loop, and so much in the way of resources is going to online initiatives. As a consequence, educators are faced with new options and new challenges.

Much research has been done lately on this technology explosion. The numbers of programs has been studied, teaching strategies have been examined, and satisfaction has been evaluated statistically (University of Missouri, 2002, 2003). What has come out of much of the research is that there is still a perception that face-to-face classroom experiences are considered more scholarly and preferred by learners, the online experience is not interactive enough, and faculty and learners are overwhelmed with the amount of work that it takes to provide a good online experience (Cooper & Bielema, 2002). If this is the case, why then do the numbers continue to grow regarding participation in online learning? What does that mean for faculty, and administrators in Higher education?

Research Question and Methodology

As an educator that was given the charge to provide an online degree program, I have looked at the distance education literature of those who have gone before, and current studies being reported (Vrasidas and Mclsaac 1999; Hilgenberg and Tolone 2000; Navarro and Shoemaker 2000; Scapin and Marega 2000; Weigel 2002; Garrison 2003; Granger and Bowman 2003). Additionally, at our university we have measured, counted, and evaluated, but still did not have the complete picture. Because the situation appears to be much more complex than any measurement tool can address, I am conducting longitudinal qualitative (Interpretive) research (vanManen, 1990; Gademer, 1991). The primary research question was: What is the experience of taking courses for a Master's degree via the Web? Secondary questions include, but are not limited to: How does the online class compare to your face-to-face classes? Is there a difference in the time required to learn online? These questions call for a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological inquiry does not assume any particular result, rather gains knowledge a posteriori. Text from interviews and online discussion were used to determine the themes. In this paper the preliminary results of the study are presented. Representative quotes are given to highlight the experience. They include apprehension of those who are new; interaction and peer support; and motivations for web based courses instead of face-to-face classroom.

Findings

The themes that emerged were those of apprehension, interaction, and online preference for both learners and instructors. This environment promoted a great deal of learner-learner interaction that has been considered an important indicator of satisfaction among students. Probably the issue of greatest concern in any type of distance education course is that of interaction, both between the student and instructor and student to student (Scapin and Marega 2000). Indeed, using sound adult learning principles such as setting up a learning environment where all are encouraged to question, contribute and comment is probably the most important aspect of the web-based learning experience. Both learner and instructor became more involved than in a face-to-face classroom.

Apprehension of those who are new

Even though learners prefer to learn in the face-to-face classroom, the web based classes draw the greatest numbers in our program. Since providing a totally web-based option, we have had increased admissions into our master's program. A recent admission posted this in the first online discussion:

I am a new student, and am very apprehensive about this format. I have never taken an online course before. I really don't know if I can do this. But there isn't any other way I could get my degree.

Since the average age of our students is in the mid forties, the idea of any form of distance education can be daunting. Another new student had this to say:

I really do prefer face-to-face classes, but with my job and the new baby and the other children, there just wasn't any way that I could keep going toward the degree. You will all have to help me figure this out.

Our web courses consist of new learners like those quoted above and others who are in various stages of their Master's degree. In all of our courses the first week is spent getting to know one another and to navigate the system. Those who are veterans of the online experience, come forward, often before the instructor, to assist those that are new through online interaction.

Interaction and peer support

Our classes are set up using a Blackboard platform, with the discussion forums being the 'classroom.' There is an expectation that each learner will log into the discussion at least three times a week. The veterans of previous classes are ready to post threads almost before the discussion is started, realizing that the sooner they post, the sooner others can interact. When the new students quoted above posted, the interaction went as follows:

Welcome to the class! You will really like this format. Dr C is really patient, and we will be here to help you out. Sounds like you have a very busy life, don't know if I could do it with three little ones. Kudo's.

Yet another:

Hey, Rob, I used to live in O'Fallon, too. Did you every go to the concerts at the city park? Our family really liked those. There are a lot of use who teach at the community colleges, so we will have a lot to take about. Say hi to XXX for me...

True lifelong learners, the students try to find experiences in common and at the very least acknowledge each person's journey. Even those with some trepidation relate their reasons for learning on the web.

Motivations for web based courses instead of face-to-face classroom.

As mentioned previously, the amount of learners taking web-base course continues to increase. With the adult learner, the motivations include geography, convenience, and personal preference. The following are representative of what the students say:

I just love this way of taking classes. Where else can you take care of the kids get them dinner , put them to bed and then log on to the class? Being able to post at my convenience is so great.

Further:

I really wanted to get my Master's degree, but didn't know how I could do it with my health the way it is and working all day. Being able to schedule my learning around my work and personal life has made it possible for me to do this.

Geography plays a big part of course. We have student now in out state Missouri and in 6 other states. They have searched the myriad of online programs but have chosen ours, I believe because it is highly interactive. In fact the following by one of our out of state learners:

It is so great being able to take these courses. I have made so many online friends. The ONLY problem is that I never get to see you guys face to face. I sure couldn't be in a graduate program if it wasn't online. The university here doesn't have anything for working adults.

And,

I live and work in rural area, with the closest college 500 miles away. They don't have graduate degrees either. With these classes I feel so connected even though you are all far away.

Conclusions & Implications

As educators of adults, we have a responsibility to provide options to our learners. The use of multiple delivery methods is one way to that can be accomplished. The development of new skills using technology is both helpful to the students as learners and provides expertise that they will use as educators of adults. While this delivery method is offered to widen participation geographically, the distant learner does not make up the majority of the online student group.

Course design that encourages an interactive adult learning environment is key (Hilgenberg & Tolone, 2000, Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Vrasidas & Mclsaac, 1999). This learner-centered environment which acknowledges the experiences of the learner, encourages interaction, and provides an arena where self-direction is encouraged, would seem at this time to be more important than the factors that motivated the individuals to enroll for an on-line experience. According to Navarro and Shoemaker (2000) any cyber approach should have the following features, multimedia lectures that simulate classroom, a very active threaded discussion and discussion groups as well as instant feedback. This environment promoted a great deal of

learner-learner interaction that has been considered an important indicator of satisfaction among students. The option of obtaining a masters' online will continue, parallel to the in-class offerings, but not as a replacement. Fine-tuning the web-base option continues to be an area of study.

As educators therefore, how we design the course and the provisions for interaction that are built into a web-based environment are the first item to consider. In design consideration of learner differences of motivation, style and experience are key. Continued research is needed in course design, teacher and learner experiences.

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