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Enhancing Online Learning Experience:

From Learners' Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of adult students' perception of online education, motivational factors to them, and their sense of community in this environment. A qualitative, in-depth exploratory case study with limited quantitative data, was conducted. Data was collected using an online survey, interviews, online interaction observations, and e-mail follow-up questions. Results showed that most participants were satisfied with their online experience. However, the lack of social connection may decrease participants' levels of satisfaction of the learning experience, impact their desire to seek help from fellow students, and lead to a weak sense of being connected in a learning community. Based on the results, using technology to enhance connection in online learning was recommended.

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1. Introduction

As Internet has expanded in the past decades, it makes education opportunities available over the world. Online learning has grown tremendously taking advantage of the use of the Internet. It was reported that in United States, during the fall 2011 term, nearly 32 percent of higher education enrollments, which was about 6.7 million students, were taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013). More and more higher education institutions started to offer online courses at undergraduate and graduate levels, especially graduate programs (Kuong, 2011). Most graduate students have multiple obligations, for example, work full time and have family to support. Online learning

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is flexible and convenient; a learner can study at his or her pace in any place where an Internet connection is available (Kuong, 2011). The mode of online education meets their needs. In higher education, an increasing number of faculty is requested to adapt their courses to be delivered online. Levin and Sun (2002) pointed out that “when distance learning started happening via Internet, universities asked faculty to replicate their courses online” (p. 5). However, an effective online course is more than just converting materials from a traditional course into electronic format. It consists of factors such as learner characteristics course organization, preparation of the teachers, and instructional strategies (Willis, 1992). What can educators do create meaningful online learning environments to enhance learning experience? According to Dick, Carey and Carey (2005), understanding the learners’ needs is the first step to design appropriate instruction for the learners. According to Moore and Kearsley (2005), in United States, the majority of distance education learners are between 25 to 50 years old. Compared to traditional college-age students, they are “more likely to be self-directed, self-motivated, goal- and relevancy-oriented, and less dependent on instructors” (Kuong, 2011, p. 20). On the other hand, there are factors to note that can affect learning, for example, when people age, their physical and cognitive changes take place and older learners reaction are slower than younger learners. However, when adult learners have control over the pace of learning, in most cases, they can overcome the weakness and learn new things successfully (Cross, 1981). Adult learners have rich life experience; when they can control the pace of learning, their experience can enhance the overall learning experience in a group. An in-depth understanding of adult learners’ perception of online learning grants a solid base for course designing. In general, research of online education has focused on comparison of online setting and traditional face-to-face classroom setting. The significance of this study is its focus of adult students’ perception of an online educational environment, in relation to achievement, motivation, and the learning community. This study provides insights into the way online educators can enhance their teaching and improve students’ learning through the lens of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), integrated with strategies of self-regulated learning and situated learning. Three focal points of the study, under guidance of social cognitive theory, learners’ online experience (environmental influences), personal motivational attributes (personal factors), and membership of online learning community (behavior), are interlinked and interact. The study attempted to answer the following research questions: 1) How do students enrolled in an online course perceive their learning experience? 2) How do students enrolled in an online course think about their motivation to learn in that environment? 3) How do students enrolled in an online course think about their membership in an online learning community?

2. Method

The study was conducted at a Midwestern university in United States and employed a qualitative case study approach and involved with limited quantitative data. A graduate level course offered completely online in the Fall semester of 2008 was chosen to carry out the study. This study did not seek to generalize the findings from the particular case, but to provide in-depth understanding of these students’ perceptions in one class. The course content was delivered through a university hosted website, an email listserv, and a Wetpaint discussion site was also utilized. Wetpaint is a free wiki website. This course discussion site was login enabled, only students enrolled in this course had access to the discussion site. On this site, students could post reflections, respond to classmates’ postings and send messages to other members. Prior to the study, a pilot study was conducted with three former students who took the same course in previous semesters. Participants were four doctoral students who enrolled in the said course, three female students and one male student. Age of these participants was ranged from 32 to 51. To investigate students’ perceptions of overall online learning experience, motivation factors, and sense of the online learning community, data were collected from a survey, online class observations of interactions among students and the instructor, and from interviews with participants. A 82-item survey developed for this study was based on a combination of existing validated instruments. It was adapted from the Online Learning Survey (Leonard & Guba, 2001), Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990), Internet Self-efficacy Measurement Scale (Eastin & LaRose, 2000), and Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002). The survey was administrated to participants at the beginning of the semester for baseline perception. In-depth interviews with a series of guiding questions that were in correspondence to the survey questions were conducted at the end of the course. The 45-60 minutes end-of-course interviews aimed to gain in-depth understanding of participants’ reflection and comments after they had sufficient experience in the online course. In addition to the survey and interviews, the researcher audited the course and used a weekly participation tracking form by adapting existing online assessment

rubrics to observe the participants' participation in class discussions, course assignment responses, and online course interaction with fellow students and the instructor throughout the semester.

3. Results

Results of this study included information collected through survey and interview. Data from online course interaction observations were used to triangulate the interpretations from the survey and interview data. All data were analyzed through examining their constructs, themes and patterns. Research question one examined how students enrolled in an online course perceived their learning experience. All participants stated that the course met their expectation and they enjoyed the learning experiences. They all agreed that online education is convenient, flexible and allow more reflection time on learning materials. On the other hand, they pointed out that in their experience, it was lack of face-to-face interaction and personal connection, and immediate feedback was missing as well. Even though all participants were satisfied with the learning experience, not all of them would take another online course. One participant indicated that she would choose a face-to-face course if she had choice because personal interaction and immediate feedback from the instructor and fellow students is essential in her learning while it is difficult to duplicate in an online environment. The second research question investigated how students who enrolled in an online course thought about their motivation to learn in that environment. Overall, all participants were confident that they did well in this course. The confidence level grew gradually throughout the semester. At the beginning their sense of self-efficacy for learning was lower but as their knowledge of the course content increases and received supportive feedback from the instructor and class members, their confident level went higher. Participants were comfortable with the technology used as the instructor was always available to address student concerns promptly. However, emotional bonding among students was limited due to inflexible of design of the interface. The data indicated that the participants were intrinsically goal oriented and understood that they were responsible for their own learning. Most of the participants found no problem on study time management. The one who reported weak in managing study time and study environment felt more comfortable with the course after she adjusted her schedule to use study time effectively and studied at a regular place. In responses for the attribute of help seeking in an online environment, participants preferred working on their own. When they had questions, they tended to ask for help through a face-to-face mode. Research question three explored how students enrolled in an online course perceived their membership in an online learning community. Participants felt comfortable being in a learning community where they could share thoughts and opinions safely. Their overall learning expectations had been met. However, even though participants' feelings of connectedness had some degree of changes over the semester and they knew that they were supported, they did not have strong feelings of connected to each other in the class due to the lack of human interaction.

4. Discussions and Conclusions

The findings of the study suggested that the overlapping concerns across the three research questions included the need for social connection and the use of technology to enhance a connection in online learning. According to Bandura (1986), personal motivational factors, environment influences, and learning behaviors actively interact with each other. It is evident that lack of social connection may decrease participants' satisfaction in online learning and discourage their desire for help from fellow students. As a result, sense of being connected in a learning community is weak and might cause doubt about quality of online learning. Participants also questioned the design of interface limited their opportunities for establishing social connection with others. Lack of synchronous interaction with others was the major constraints for collaboration among students. It is unrealistic to expect that an online course could totally replicate face-to-face interaction; however, appropriately utilize technology to enhance the capacity is achievable. Yet, it is impractical to expect all learners would do well in online environment; it is not a failure but simply not a good fit or they are not ready for online education (Palloff & Pratt, 2007) as learners are different in prior experiences, cultural backgrounds, and learning preferences, etc. Instructors need to strengthen the transition to enhance students' readiness. Oslen (2007) suggested to integrate multiple technology features into online courses to engage students, such as multimedia, listservs, chats, simulators, role-playing activities, images, live virtual classrooms, streaming media, audio and video, etc. However, it is important to note that technology as a means to provide a platform to build connections, communication and opportunity to achieve learning goals, it should be functional and user friendly (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). What type of technology to use in an online course depends on

particular circumstances. It is not the fancier, the better, or, the newer the better. Furthermore, adult learners tend to be less familiar with an online environment, especially when verbal and physical communication hints are missing. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) pointed out that should not “assume that learners know how to interact online and how to become more responsible for their online learning” (p. x). Instructors’ are responsible for facilitating learners’ development of necessary skills to engage with the content and fellow students. It is suggested to engage learning using activities. The ultimate goal is to select appropriate technology to plan and conduct activities to provide successful online learning experience for adult students with different learning preferences.

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