

Characteristics of the Online Learner: Experiences, Participation Level, and Achievement

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Abstract

This study was conducted to analyze the characteristics of online learners enrolled in three different semesters of the same course. A survey was administered to 51 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory Educational Psychology distance education course. In addition to the survey, the students' level of participation and grades within the course were examined. While some of the findings from this research is consistent with previous research, there were also inconsistent results that were uncovered related to the characteristics of online learners. The information gathered in this study had an impact in the instructional design of the course based on the responses that were received. By assessing the learner characteristics, study habits, and experiences, the instructor of the course was able to make significant improvements to the course to help facilitate learning.

Introduction

The enrollments and popularity of online courses have increased over the years. Although a majority of distance education courses are offered as individual courses through different disciplines within a university there has been an increase in complete degree programs that are conducted via distance education. These include Master's, doctorate in education, and certificate programs (Lindsay & Howell, 2004).

With this rise in the interest in online programs, the same concerns remain constant throughout the years. One main concern was the retention rate in these courses or programs. According to King (2002) the dropout rate in online courses is much higher in distance education courses than traditional face to face courses. Reasons for non completion or dropouts include "feelings of isolation, anxiety, and confusion" (King, 2002, p. 157). Are these feelings present because of the course design or is this the initial disposition of the student when entering this learning environment?

Research examining the online learners has focused on specific characteristics, including psychological aspects that effect performance and retention in distance education courses (e.g. Irani, 2001; Irizarry, 2002; Katz, 2002; & Smith et al. 2003). Ali (2003) also examined the instructional design of online courses as it is related to students' perceptions and satisfaction in the course. Among the characteristics of online learners that were examined were attitudes towards preferring distance education courses over face to face ones (Katz, 2002). Katz (2002) found that preference of learning environment was correlated with their preferred levels of control in learning. It was found that preferences for online distance education courses were related to a greater feeling of independence in the control of learning. It was also found that students with this preference were not dependent on high levels of intensive face to face teacher-student interaction.

Statistics gathered in 1999-2000 revealed the number of undergraduates enrolled in distance education courses across the U.S. nation (Sikora, 2002) are quite high. It was found that students who are enrolled in distance education courses have greater family responsibilities. For example, they are married with children or are single parents. Furthermore, and interestingly enough, education majors are among the highest percentage of students

who are enrolled in such courses. Another finding was that the distance education student was indeed not taking the course at a “distance”. In fact, a higher percentage of those enrolled in their institution’s distance education courses are legal residents of that same state.

Irani (2001) conducted a quasi experimental study in which subjects were split between a direct experience with distance education (delivered via videotape and the internet) and an indirect experience with distance education (students remained in the traditional live classroom). Their attitude towards distance education was then measured. Irani’s (2001) study found that those less experienced in distance education courses may have a more challenging experience. The reasoning behind this is that they are being required to participate in a learning environment that they are not accustomed to. This unfamiliarity requires them to engage in behavior for which they have little to no contextual basis for.

Additionally, another study (Osika & Sharp, 2003) assessed students’ technical skills necessary to succeed in an online learning environment and established minimum technical competencies for the students. These skills included navigating through the internet, communicating online, and being able to use a word processing program such as Microsoft Word. It was hypothesized that having these skills would be critical in succeeding in the online learning environment. Osika & Sharp (2003) gathered this list of skills by administering a survey to online instructors and students. The survey administered for their study asked participants to rank the importance of possession of particular computer skills. The results indicated that the skills mentioned previously were perceived as the most important ones.

The purpose of this study was to examine the types of students who were enrolled in the EPY 303: Introduction to Educational Psychology online distance education courses. For the purpose of this study, distance education courses are defined as courses that do not meet on campus in a traditional classroom. Instead, this course is conducted via the internet. Some technology components used in this course included online streaming videos, web pages, online testing, and use of online communication tools (chat room, discussion board, and electronic mail [e-mail]).

Among the characteristics that were examined are basic demographics of the online learner (i.e. age, class standing, and employment status), study habits, experiences with computers and online courses, and reasons for enrolling in and withdrawing from distance education courses. By tracking these types of data, patterns related to enrollment in an online course and what factors may have an impact in success or retention in this type of learning environment were established.

This research will open the doors for instructors, administrators, and learners involved in the creation and participation of an online distance education course. A clearer identification of the online student will help inform instructors of the types of students who prefer distance education courses over face to face ones. By learning about the characteristics of an online learner, educators will be able to obtain a better understanding of how to design an effective online course. Information gathered from this type of survey will also help administrators in the different educational institutions understand why these courses are so popular. By determining who their typical audience is, administrators will be able to promote their courses more successfully and offer high quality distance education courses.

Furthermore, this information will also be helpful for potential online learners who are contemplating enrolling in online courses. A successful online learner will most likely possess certain characteristics and this study will attempt to gather such information. Certainly, an online distance education course or program is not for everyone. Rather than going in blindly, information gathered in this research will help these prospective students make more informed decision on whether or not to enroll in online courses.

Method

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two parts for this study. First, a researcher developed survey (consisting of 25 items) was administered to the participants. Second, the students' levels of participation, as well as their grades for the course, were examined. The survey was used to gather background information on the students involved in the study. This included demographic information, study habits, and experiences in distance education courses and computers in general. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions. The level of participation was determined by the number of discussion posts that the student contributed to the course. The number of posts was compared to the minimum requirement for the course.

Participants of this study were 51 college students who were enrolled in the online course EPY 303: Introduction to Educational Psychology. These students volunteered to participate in the study through the department's research subject pool. The students involved in this study were enrolled in various semesters over the course of a year. The first group was enrolled in the summer version of the course and the second group was a mix of those who enrolled either in the fall or spring semesters. SPSS was used to run descriptive analyses of the variables for each group of questions associated with student background information, study habits during the course, and experiences in online courses.

Course

The course was an upper division course worth four credits which met the curriculum requirement for both education and non-education majors. The summer version of the course took place over the course of five weeks while the fall and spring courses spanned over sixteen weeks. The course materials are delivered online through a course management tool used by the university. Materials are presented as standard web pages and through streaming videos. Activities in the course include small group discussions, whole class discussions, various assignments, and exams.

The standard minimum participation required for the course included an introductory post, small group discussions, and whole class discussions. The discussions were geared towards various concepts that students are exposed to at the time. Based on these requirements, a student was required to make a minimum of 20 discussion posts throughout the 16 week semester and 15 posts for the 5 week course.

For the small group discussions, the class was divided into groups of four and each student was required to make two contributions per discussion. The initial was a response to a question posed by the instructor that was related to the course content. The follow up post was in response to another group member's. An additional requirement for these discussions was that one student within the group must volunteer to summarize the group's discussion at the end. Each student was required to post one summary for the semester. The instructor would highlight discussion points and bring up issues that were not addressed at the close of each small group discussion. Occasionally, the instructor would interject in these discussions with comments if the students appeared to be confused about the topic being discussed or if any questions are posed for clarification.

For the whole class discussions, students were asked to make at least two thoughtful contributions to a whole class discussion of their choice. These contributions could be made either in a single topic or in two different discussion topics. There were approximately six whole class discussions that were scheduled throughout the semester. Students in the course were also encouraged to participate in the discussions which they found interesting – which may have resulted in exceeding the minimum whole class discussion requirement. The instructor's role in the whole class discussion was different from the small group discussions. For the whole class discussions, the instructor posed the initial question. however, unlike the small group discussions, after a number of posts were made, the instructor would summarize the contributions and posed another question to move the discussion further. The whole class discussions often took place over the course of several days. The amount of time spent on these discussions was dependent on the level of participation from the students.

Results

Online Learners

The sample for that was surveyed included a majority of upper division undergraduates who were either in their junior (31%) or senior (51%) year at the university. The rest of the subjects fell into the range of freshman, sophomore, and graduate levels. Based on these results it was no surprise that most of these participants were experienced online learners; having enrolled in more than 4 distance education course (62.7%). These participants were also more skilled computer users; none of whom were first time computer users. Additionally, for this particular course, a majority of the participants were local residents who resided in the city or nearby areas (86.3%). The ages of these students varied greatly as well; the oldest being in the 56-65 range and the youngest falling into the 18-25 range.

As far as marital and employment status were concerned, the responses varied as well. Approximately 49% reported their status as single and 41.2% were married. About 50% have no children and for those who reported having children living at home, 25.5% of the respondents had children under the age of 5. Approximately 41.2% of the respondents surveyed were employed full-time. Following close behind these individuals were those who were employed part-time, outside of the home (35.3%).

Study Habits

Results from this study indicated that participants spent anywhere between 4 to 7 days a week working on the course. About 49% of the respondents devoted at least 6-10 hours a week on course related activities (both off and online). It was determined that the most common time of day spent online is during the evening hours (between 5 – 10pm). The most common days of the week in which a majority of the time is spent on the course was during the earlier part of the week. Since the participants were allowed to select as many days possible for this question, the most common response was pulled from the results.

Experiences

A majority of the questions addressing the experience involved whether or not students had a positive versus negative experience in their online courses. Because these were open-ended questions, the responses were individually analyzed and categorized based on common themes. With the responses coded into specific categories, common patterns were discovered.

As mentioned before, a majority of the respondents were more experienced online learners and report at least a basic or intermediate level of computer skills. In asking to compare online and face to face courses, respondents were asked to determine which of the two they found easier or if there was no difference. Of the responses, there were no significant differences among the answer choices. Among the reasons for online courses being easier was the convenience factor (no commute or being able to work during their free time) and the level of control the learner has in this environment (self-paced). For those who found the online course more difficult, reasons were based on a heavy workload and the lack of immediate feedback from the instructor. An additional reason was that the student was responsible for their learning and progress in the class. Most reported that their lack of discipline to stay on track made online courses more difficult.

A majority of the respondents had a positive experience with their first online course. This resulted in their decision to take more courses online. Although one participant indicated that it made them fearful of taking additional online courses, the individual reported taking four or more online courses. Therefore, the first experience was not a deterrent in this individual case. This is most likely due to their computer skill level which gives them the confidence that they can succeed in other online courses. This is also attributed to the ability to recognize that all online courses are constructed differently.

Participants were asked to provide one piece of advice for students considering enrolling in online courses. This question served as an indicator of what students have learned through their online learning experiences and which skills they perceive as being crucial for success. In 2003, Osika & Sharp found that technical skills are seen as important for online success. Only one student in this study recommended that students be confident in their computer skills. However, it was recommended that new students familiarize themselves with the technology

(WebCT) prior to the start of the class and even start off slowly (with one course only) to see if online learning is something they can succeed in. Additional recommendations involved students familiarizing themselves with the course layout as well.

Instead of technical skills being a top priority, most respondents found it important to have good time management skills that would allow the users to keep on task. It was also recommended by the participants that the students check the course daily for any updates. The advice in this response was to warn first-time students that this type of learning environment may not be as easy as they might think. These results also indicated that because students are in control of their learning in this online environment, they should take the initiative to stay up-to-date with what is going on in the course.

Since many learning tools were used in the course, students were asked to report which component of the course they found most useful. More than 50% of the respondents mentioned the usefulness of the videos (lecture & supplemental) as well as the discussions. Students found the videos useful in disseminating information while the discussions help them interact with other students and see the issues from other students' perspectives.

Reasons for Enrolling or Withdrawing

Participants were asked to report their primary reason for enrolling in an online course rather than a face to face one. The results were consistent with their attitudes towards the nature of online versus face to face courses. About 86.3% of the respondents indicated that convenience was their main reason for enrolling in an online course. Most reported that online courses allow them to work from home, on their own time, and from remote areas. Also, since they were not required to meet on campus, there was no need to drive to campus to attend classes.

When asked what would make these students drop out of the course, the responses varied. However, at the top of the list was the workload associated with the course. If the student felt as if they could not keep up or if the expectations of the teacher were too high, they would consider dropping the course. Also mentioned were problems related to the course organization, too many time restrictions, or inexperienced teachers.

Participation Level & Achievement

Based on the data that was run through SPSS, 85% of the respondents met the minimum participation requirement of 15-20 posts throughout the semester. Of that 85%, 70.6% went above and beyond the minimum requirement. Additional posts were made both in the small group discussions as well as the whole class discussions. The achievement level in this class was skewed mainly because the minimum grade that education majors had to receive in order for this course to count was a B-. Approximately 90.2% of the respondents fell in the top 25% of the course – receiving a grade of B or higher.

For the individuals who withdrew from the course or received a grade of 69 or lower, their participation level was below the requirement for the course. In fact, these individual had completed no more than 50% of the minimum requirement. These were also not inexperienced distance education students. However, 3 out of the 4 students who fell into this group devoted only 0-5 hours to the course. Despite this time being reported, it was found that the advice that these students would give potential students involved time management and daily access.

Discussion

Responses to the survey questions are consistent with the results of Sikora's (2002) study of the distance learner. Results indicate that individuals enrolling in this particular online course are not necessarily "distance" learners. A majority are most likely enrolling based on the convenience of the online courses. Since a majority were working either full-time or part-time, the ability to work on the course at various times during the day seemed to be the most appealing draw of online courses. Furthermore, for the participants who reported having children that may not be in school, the flexible schedule in the online learning environment allows them to stay at home to take care of these children. This is consistent with Sikora's (2002) conclusion that distance learners have greater

family responsibilities. Additionally, the participants in this course are more seasoned online learners and more familiar with the technology.

Consistent with results to previous questions and past research (Katz, 2002), preferences for online courses certainly does involve the level of control the student has in this type of learning environment. Here, students are able to pace themselves in the course. Although they have specific deadlines to meet, the students are responsible for when they choose to complete the work ahead of time or wait until the last minute. In addition, this current study also found that the most common reason for enrolling in online courses are the convenience of not being restricted by a specific face-to-face class meeting, not having to drive to campus, and being able to work from home.

According to King (2002), the dropout rate in online courses can be attributed to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and confusion. The retention rate in the course was dependent on a variety of reasons, but a majority of the responses are related to course design. These reasons include organization, schedule and workload of course requirements, and clarity of expectations from the instructor. Additional reasons for considering dropping a course are based on their performance in the course as well; similar to face-to-face courses. These results certainly emphasize the importance of effective course design in retaining students in the course.

The feelings of isolation related to the high dropout rate (King, 2002) can be alleviated through several components of the course. Results from this survey indicate that the participants found the discussions and videos as useful components in this online course. It is postulated that these components compensate for the lack of personal contact in the online environment. The online videos used in this course included lecture based videos created by the instructor. The discussions in this course were also highly interactive. Small-group discussions allow students to interact with one another and the instructor takes on a more role of guidance when needed. The whole class discussions also provide an opportunity for the students to interact both with one another and the instructor. The instructor took on the role of a facilitator in the whole class discussions. Since students are placed and kept in the same small groups for the entire semester, the feelings of isolation appear to be non-existent as a bond is created among group members.

The results of this study served as an indicator of what the students preferred in the course and which components or factors were ranked as highly positive. Based on the results of this survey, changes were made to the course between semesters. The organizational structure of the course was modified over the course of the year with changes made for the fall and spring semesters. For example, instead of creating a long list of all units, each unit was divided into separate content modules within the course. This allowed students to focus on a single unit. Additionally, unit based schedules were included at the beginning of each learning module. This was received as a positive addition to the course as it served as a time management aid.

In the future this survey could be administered in other courses. This would help determine whether or not certain types of learners are more adept to this different learning environment and examine what characteristics are associated with a more successful online learner. There should also be a comparison of satisfaction levels of these students who are enrolled in these courses. Results from this study will also serve as information for online learners, instructors, and administrators. Online learners will benefit from this data collected by understanding what it takes to be successful in online distance education courses. The data collected in this study was very useful in providing specific feedback and identifying the types of students who are enrolled in these online courses. To take this research further, it would be interesting to examine the satisfaction levels of the students across each semester.

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