

# Online Learning Experiences of University Students

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of university students' experiences of online learning, based both on some previous empirical studies and literature during the last decade. Online education has become widespread in many countries during recent years, and the paradigmatic shift from traditional to online education (e.g., Harasim, 2000; Karuppan, 2001) has occurred as part of planned educational policy, with both international and national experiences supporting its growth. Similarly, students now have increasingly higher expectations regarding the quality of learning, and they expect a more individual, flexible, and humanistic approach in education. Students are increasingly demanding online access and universities are working to meet these demands (e.g., Song, Singleton, Hill, & Hwa Koh, 2004). In addition, technology is expected to improve access to education, reduce costs, improve the cost-effectiveness of education, and maintain the competitive advantage in student recruitment in higher education (Katz & Yablon, 2003; Newton, 2003). It is also important to note that no consistent paradigm for online education exists; rather there are multiple ways of making use of the Web in education, and these will vary for many reasons, for example, the needs of the learner and the subject being taught.

## BACKGROUND

Online learning is usually compared to traditional lecturer-driven teaching, and such comparisons are implicitly value-laden; old is not appreciated, while new is achievable and valuable (see e.g., Farrington, 1999, p.78). While a substantial body of research has focused on online learning, the results have been mixed, and show only minor differences between these

two teaching methods (Mullen & Tallent-Runnels, 2006; Romanov & Nevgi, 2006). One Israeli study, for example, indicated that students who participated in an online course reached a level of academic performance similar to those students who participated in "traditional" teaching (Katz & Yablon, 2003). Furthermore, systematic and scientific knowledge is still relatively scarce, especially with regard to the effects and outcomes of online learning (Karuppan, 2001; Kerr, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2006; Lu, Yu, & Liu, 2003). The content analysis of previous learning research, published in four prominent distance-education journals (1997-2002), revealed that most of the previous studies were case studies for which no follow-ups had been done, and that did not have strong connections with theory (Lee, Driscoll, & Nelson, 2004). Moreover, Kerr and colleagues (2006) state that there has been a lag in the empirical investigation of online teaching methods, and the majority of literature consists of personal summaries of teaching experiences from teachers' point of view; online and anecdotal observations.

## MAIN FOCUS: THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE OF ONLINE LEARNING

In general, the students in question found the online learning experience a largely positive one; motivation to participate in online courses was high, and almost all students and teachers were willing to use new technology (e.g., Lammintakanen & Rissanen, 2003; Morss, 1999; Newton, 2003). Online learning is considered a flexible way of learning in terms of availability (anywhere and anytime), and this has been appreciated by students (see e.g., Lammintakanen & Rissanen, 2003; Lu et al., 2003; Stewart, Waight, Norwood, & Ezell, 2004; Townsend & Wheeler, 2004; Tricker, Rangelcroft, & Long, 2001). From the point of view of adult learn-

ers, online learning has, at least partly, solved problems related to combining the academic calendar, full-time employment, and family responsibilities (Dixon, Pelliccione, & Dixon, 2005; Young & Norgard, 2006). However, Dringus (2000) points out that convenience should not be the only reason for participating in an online course.

Some important factors affecting student satisfaction with online learning can be summarized as follows: 1) course design and time management; 2) the student's learning style and skills; 3) support and feedback from the teacher and fellow students; and 4) technology.

### **Course Design and Time Management**

The online learning environment affects the learning outcome differently according to the pedagogy adopted, the design of course Web site, and the interaction possibilities provided by the platform (Romanov & Nevgi, 2006). The course design has an important impact on students' satisfaction with online learning; a coherent course design supports learning, while poorly designed courses cause students frustration (Song et al., 2004).

Students expect courses to be well-structured and instructed, and they appreciate clearly stated goals and objectives that clarify what is expected from learners. Quality content motivates students to learn. In addition, students wish to have a consistent course design across online courses. (Song et al., 2004; Young & Norgard, 2006). A good design focuses not only on technological aspects, but also on pedagogical ones. Littig (2006) even states that the need for innovation in e-learning is not in the area of technology, but in the area of pedagogy and increased value for the learners.

Flexibility with time has been seen as a positive element in asynchronous modes of learning, since it allows students to plan their own schedules. Concurrently, it requires effective time management strategies from the students (Song et al., 2004). The students' lack of time, course overlap, and insufficient course hours have been identified as having an effect on students' use of information communication technology (ICT). Morss (1999) noted an increase in workload, despite the students spending only a moderate amount of time online. In one Finnish study, it was discovered that students found the course workload very heavy and considered the assignments too extensive, with the result that they held the view that the course should be worth

a greater number of academic credits. The requirement of having to familiarize themselves with the online course delivery system may well have placed additional learning requirements upon them (Lammintakanen & Rissanen, 2003; see also Morss, 1999).

### **The Student's Learning Style and Skills**

Online learning requires students to reconsider their ideas about learning: from what they hope to acquire from the course to what they themselves contribute to the creation of knowledge (Dringus, 2000). At best, each student is encouraged to take control over his or her own learning in online education. The online learning environment allows all-round interaction, enables experimental learning in that it allows students to exchange experiences and learn from each other; and enhances the construction of knowledge by interaction (Kerr et al., 2006; Kolb, 1984; McFadzean, 2001). This reflects the future need for experts who are able to share their expertise and tacit knowledge in active networks and "learning organizations" (Dixon et al., 2005; Senge, 1990). Online education is, in fact, said to be a flexible way in which individuals can shift between working life and education, and in which educational organizations can collaborate (e.g., Pulkkinen, 1997).

Online learning requires student skills different to those associated with "traditional" learning. Kerr and colleagues (2006) discovered that the most important characteristics for understanding and predicting online student success were reading and writing skills, independent learning skills (including time management, self-discipline), motivation, and computer literacy.

Some students who have no previous experience in online learning may display a degree of resistance towards new technology, or their view on the best way of working and learning may differ to that described (Alexander, 2001; Young & Norgard, 2006). They may even be unaware of the expectations concerning their own active role, as well as the required learning patterns and styles in online learning (Dringus, 2000). Not all students find it easy to learn from each other, and not everyone is able to be self-directed enough in order to learn effectively online, hence, the preference of some for courses that are lecture-driven (McFadzean, 2001). Some gender differences exist, too. Rovai and Baker's study (2005) provided evidence that the female students felt that their online learning experiences were more aligned to their educational values and goals, and

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