
Chapter IV

Web-Based Learning: Experience-Based Research

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, a synthesis of work from several evaluative studies that the authors have undertaken on the different experiences professionals and students have had with Web-based education is provided. Provided are perspectives from undergraduate and postgraduate students and from academic staff members who have experienced learning and teaching in a Web-based environment. Reflection on these sources of experience provides a number of indicators for improvements to approaches to staff development for online teachers, for the preparation of students for an online learning environment, and for student-centered Web-based design.

INTRODUCTION

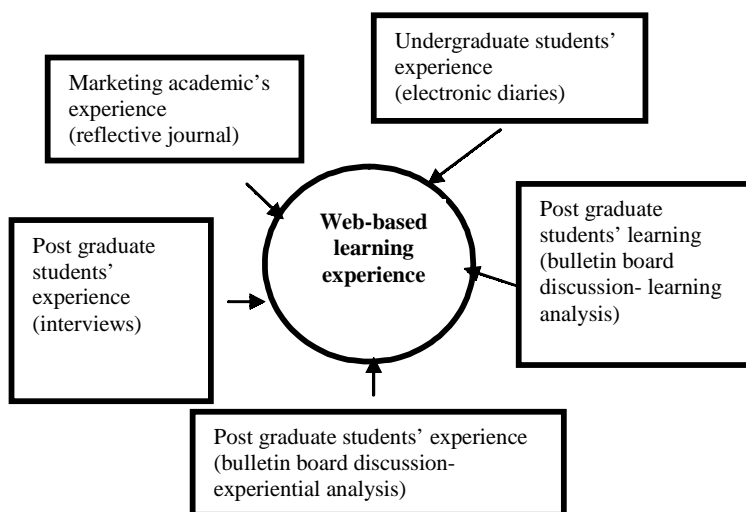
Increasingly, formal education and procedural training and management skill development is being accommodated through Web-based learning. Our recent experience and research on the provision of Web-based learning in the higher education sector has shown that although Web-based¹ technologies are well received, there continue to be issues for teachers, learners, and instructional design. This article draws from several projects, each of which was designed to evaluate and reflect on various aspects of the development of different Web-based learning sites. In one project, a professional journal was kept to assess the similarities and differences between traditional distance learning and Web-based learning. In another project, undergraduate students were asked to keep a reflective diary of their

experiences of a unit that was delivered entirely online with no support materials, so that we could better understand how they engaged with, and felt about, the process of learning in this environment. The next project was based around interviews with postgraduate students taken at the end of a semester of Web-based learning. In this unit, the students' Web-based learning was supplemented by printed materials and a CD of resources. The evaluation interviews, conducted by a nonteaching staff member, asked how the students compared the Web-based learning experience with face-to-face classrooms. For the student diary study and the interview study, the original data were reanalyzed and are presented here in an original form for the specific and integrated focus this chapter takes. Another evaluation procedure available to staff is the analysis of bulletin board postings from a class conference. Here, two projects are reported, one analysis of postings utilized a cognitive framework, while another utilized the business-based concept of the "experience economy." Therefore, there are five sources of experiential data,² each providing a component part to the picture of Web-based education in a large Australian university, as follows:

- Marketing academic's experience with planning and design of Web-based learning materials
- Undergraduate students' experience with learning via Web-based materials, as reported through electronic diaries
- Postgraduate students' views of their experience with learning online, reported through telephone interviews
- Postgraduate students' learning experience reported through an analysis of their bulletin board discussion, using Henri's (1992) analytical framework
- Application of a business model based on the concept of the "experience economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) to an education-focused bulletin board discussion

The five experiential studies that have contributed to our understanding of current issues and directions for the future are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Web-Based Education: Learning from Experience



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