Chapter 15
Student Learning in an Online Environment:
Differences in Study Approaches

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ABSTRACT

The increasing class sizes, changing expectations, diversity and mobility of students and the use of computer technology in teaching have challenged universities, world over, to review educational courses and delivery to provide a more satisfying learning experience to students. Understanding how students learn is essential in this process and continuous enquiry into teaching practices for their effectiveness towards enhancement of student learning outcomes is therefore considered a vital strategy. This chapter discusses an exploratory study on the differences in the learning approaches of a group of students in a second year marketing course in an Australian university. E-learning system remains the primary communication and the learning resource of these students. Results indicate that there are no significant differences in the study approaches of students but on average they seem to demonstrate deep learning than surface learning although they may differ in terms of the learning contexts. The study also reveals that in comparison female students and older aged students seem to demonstrate deep learning orientations than surface learning orientations.

INTRODUCTION

The higher education sector, the world over, is faced with the challenging task of servicing an increasingly diverse and mobile student community in the globally competitive education market. The significant growth in the number of international students from different backgrounds entering universities has made the task more demanding. The different study approaches and learning styles of students influenced by their prior learning backgrounds (Ramburuth and McCormick 2001; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) and their exposure to a variety of teaching methods while studying in universities (Biggs, 1999 & 1987) are among the major pedagogical challenges faced by universities

in its efforts to ensure effective learning outcomes for students. Additionally, the increased use of computer based technologies for the delivery of teaching material has posed further challenges to the academia.

The issue therefore is how universities should address the learner differences in designing curricula and modes of delivery to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In this context, understanding how students learn is essential and continuous inquiry into teaching methods and strategies to assess their effectiveness becomes vital. Biggs (2003) argues that teaching quality is a joint responsibility of the teachers and the institutions; while the individual teacher takes responsibility for improvement in teaching, institutions will need to take responsibility for the quality enhancements in the whole delivery system.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss a research study on learning orientations of a group of students in an Australian university and their variances based on age and gender. The chapter is structured as follows. Following a brief background and a literature review, it will discuss the research design and the research findings before outlining the implications and directions for further research.

BACKGROUND

The students participated in the study belong to a second year marketing course in an undergraduate commerce degree. The subject is offered each year in multiple campuses both as on campus and off campus modes with face to face teaching supported by an E-learning system (WebCT equivalent) as the primary communication and learning resource for both modes. The course attracts around 300 students each semester. Two hour lectures and one hour tutorial classes are conducted each week and the tutorials are focussed on discussions on topics and concepts covered in the lecture of the previous week, chapter end questions and selected case studies. Students are able to access the suggested answers to tutorial questions discussed in each tutorial the following week and to engage in a discussion with teachers and their peers via the E-learning system discussion folder. The assessment regime comprise of well paced three progressive assessment tasks – multiple choice test, learning reflections and the final exam. The first two assessment tasks are conducted online.

The increased dependency of some students on the E- learning system as their only learning resource and less exposure to face to face teaching has been of concern to many academics (Saunders and Klemming, 2003;Jackson, 2003). This is due to the fact that many students work either full time or part time although they are enrolled as full time day students or they consider internet based learning resources are more than adequate to achieve a pass. This would inevitably have implications on student learning environment, teaching strategies, and the uniformity of assessment. Less face to face contact for some students has reduced opportunities for the application of different teaching and learning contexts which cannot be delivered successfully to students who depend entirely on the online environment for all their learning resources. For the purpose of this study, lectures and tutorial classes are considered as the learning environment and tutorial discussions, group work and assessment processes are regarded as the learning context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a large body of literature in relation to how students learn and are taught and the impact of social, cultural and past educational background on their own learning. According to learning theories individual learning differs in view of the different ways of processing information. This has prompted the educators and researchers to identify different learning styles or approaches which are useful in understanding the learning needs of students.

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