

Learner Perceptions of Online Courses

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INTRODUCTION

The debate about learner perceptions of online courses can be divided roughly into two spheres: those that argue that learner perceptions are influenced mainly by instructor quality, and those that argue that learner perceptions are more affected by course design quality (Ortiz-Rodríguez, Telg, Irani, Roberts & Rhoades, 2005). These divergent views may mirror a shift in research literature away from an instructor focus and toward a student focus – labeled as either a learner, learning, or engagement focus (Ennis-Cole & Lawhorn, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2007, and Rice, 2006). This also reflects emerging research (e.g., Jackson, 2007, Palloff & Pratt, 2007, and Wilson, 2007) which indicates that the instructor’s role is changing from being the sole expert responsible for designing, developing, and teaching the class – the “sage on the stage” model – toward a team-based approach where the instructor assists in designing a course with a team and acts as a facilitator for the learners – the “guide on the side” model.

This is an important crossroad in the study of online education because both sides may be partially right. As we evolve out of the “sage on the stage model” and into the “guide on the side” model, the learner perceptions of the efficacy of online courses will increasingly be affected by course quality – especially the new communications tools in course management systems. The role of the instructor communication patterns will continue to be important. As the role of the instructor shifts, the impact of his/her communications in the overall assessment by learners will diminish.

BACKGROUND

There have been many studies positively correlating learner attitudes and perceptions of the online course to instructor quality. Online instructor quality has been equated to teaching presence or immediacy, or more recently, e-mmediacy. Mehrabian (1969) first identified several nonverbal communications (e.g., eye contact,

gestures, smiles, and humor), which he called immediacy strategies. These are associated with subjective evaluations about the “presence” of the teacher. These are linked, in turn, to learners’ positive feelings about the course and instructor. Similar online strategies, termed “e-mmediacy” strategies by Tryon & Bishop (2005) may be equally important for increasing learners’ positive feelings. These strategies are directly tied to building online learning communities.

Researchers have successfully measured immediacy strategies by examining specific behaviors using a 14-point scale described by Gorham (1988). Some of these behaviors can be adapted to the online environment and have formed the basis of instructor communication studies in the online environment. One study of business courses identified two critical immediacy factors: (1) classroom demeanor -- the instructor’s use of personal examples, humor, and openness toward and encouragement of learner ideas and discussion; and (2) name recognition -- the extent to which the instructor addressed learners by name, and vice versa (Arbaugh, 2001). These strategies were positively correlated to the learner perception of the online course efficacy, although Arbaugh recommended additional studies in areas other than business courses to confirm this finding.

Most studies evaluating instructor quality have attempted to correlate instructor quality with the attitude and perception of the learner, but not directly to learner success. These studies (e.g., Arbaugh, 2001, Frietas, Myers & Avtgis, 1998, Gorham, 1988, and Menzel & Carrell, 1999) often conclude that learner success may be positively correlated to increased instructor quality. A representative finding of one such study (Arbaugh, 2001) concluded that learners will generally have more positive feelings about college and university Web-based courses and programs when they are led by skilled and experienced instructors who communicate effectively with learners (Arbaugh, 2001).

Many early researchers of online education (Morgan & O’Reilly, 1999, and Palloff & Pratt, 2003) began their research with the assumption that the main focus of educators and education should be on the role of the

instructor. Palloff & Pratt (2003), for example, discussed the role of the instructor in depth while neglecting the roles of the learner, the institution, and course design. Their main focus remained instructor-centered, and highlighted key instructor tasks such as understanding the virtual learner in terms of roles the learner plays, fostering team roles for the learner, designing an effective course orientation, and identifying potential legal issues the instructor might face (Palloff & Pratt, 2002, p. 16). Their secondary focus was on effective course design, centering on building an effective online learning community without highlighting the roles effective communication tools would play.

The term “effective communications tools” encompasses many different aspects of online courses. For example, the usefulness and effectiveness of online tools is increasing as a function of advancing technology and the successful integration of that technology. One characteristic of advancing technology is increased bandwidth. At one Michigan community college campus, for example, approximately 40% of learners had consistent broadband access in 2004. In 2007, more than 99% of learners have consistent broadband access. In addition to characteristics such as bandwidth, there are emerging tools for online educators that did not exist only a few years ago. These can be divided into asynchronous and synchronous communication tools.

Asynchronous communication tools allow learners and instructors to effectively communicate regardless of whether they are connected to the course management system simultaneously. These tools allow users to leave messages for each other, which can be accessed and viewed, saved, considered, and responded to at a later time. These tools are designed to foster increased learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-instructor interaction. There are many new tools, such as wikis, blogs, and speech upload that enable interaction on a more complex level. Some of these tools, such as wikis, have no parallel in a traditional classroom and may eventually create completely new ways of thinking about course content and learning.

Synchronous communications tools, on the other hand, allow instructors and learners to interact and effectively communicate when they are connected to the course management system at the same time. These tools allow users to text chat, conference call, video teleconference, use an online whiteboard, and view presentation materials while performing these other tasks. These tools are also designed to foster increased

communication, though only with other users and not with the technology.

A critical point to remember is that all of these tools require advanced skills for both the learner and instructor. These skills are largely cumulative for both, and must be learned in addition to other skills that are normally identified as necessary for success in education. The need to learn these skills, and the need for the instructor to guide learning via these tools, is correlated to the shift in education becoming more learner focused.

The idea that learner perceptions are influenced more by effective communications tools, an indicator of course quality, may be indicative of broader trends in higher education. According to many recent researchers (e.g., Jackson, 2007, Palloff & Pratt, 2007, and Wilson, 2007) the role of the instructor is shifting toward coaching, support, and facilitation. In addition, research by Howe & Strauss (2000), Prensky (2001) and Prensky (2005) indicates that learners increasingly want a customized education experience, rich in engaging activities that are meaningful to them as individuals. Many, if not all, of these interactions are likely to be the result of, or greatly influenced by, effective online communications tools. In spite of this shift toward facilitation, and learner desire for customization, few studies of learner perceptions have examined course design quality or effective online communications tools.

Part of the challenge with assessing online course quality, and the effectiveness of communications tools, is that they are difficult to operationalize and assess. Yet effective communications tools are likely where most schools can exert the most positive influence. There may be an additional cultural reason that few studies have included effective communications tools as a major determinant of learner perceptions: a good instructor leading motivated and skilled learners is widely thought to produce better perceptions of online courses (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Another reason is that very few universities and colleges attempt to measure course quality, and the effectiveness of communications tools, and those that do are largely ineffective.

Achtemeier, Morris, & Finnegan (2003), for example, found that many of the tools used by colleges and universities for assessing the quality of online courses and programs do not measure important principles of online teaching and learning. Based on course evaluation instruments from thirteen institutions, the



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