Online Learning Experiences of University Students

Johanna Lammintakanen
University of Kuopio, Finland

Sari Rissanen
University of Kuopio, Finland

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

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; Kilby, 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. In addition, technology is expected to improve access to education, reduce costs and improve the cost-effectiveness of education (Bates, 1997, cited in Alexander, 2001).

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 no significant improvement over traditional methods. At the same time, there is a lack of systematic and scientific knowledge, especially with regard to the effects and outcomes of online learning. Most of the previous studies have experimental study designs and have no follow-ups. (Karuppan, 2001; Lu, Yu, & Liu, 2003; Reisman, Dear, & Edge, 2001).

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 subject being taught and the needs of the learner. 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. On this basis, the article presents some of the lessons learned about online learning, focusing on online learning at university level.

THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE OF ONLINE LEARNING

In general, the students found the online learning experience a positive one; motivation to participate in online courses has been high, and almost all students and teachers have been willing to use new technology (e.g., Lammintakanen & Rissanen, 2003; Morss, 1999). 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; Motivalla & Tello, 2000; Tricker, Rangecroft, & Long, 2001). However, Dringus (2000) has pointed out that convenience should not be the only reason for participating in an online course. From the point of view of adult learners, online learning has, at least partly, solved problems of combining the academic calendar and family responsibilities (Volery & Lord, 2000).

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; McFadzean & McKenzie, 2001). 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 (Kolb, 1984; McFadzean, 2001; Rathwell et al., 1999). This reflects the future need for experts who are able to share their expertise in active networks and "learning organizations" (Senge, 1990; Sinko & Lehtinen, 1999). Actually, online education is said to be a flexible way in which individuals can shift between working life and education and in which educational organizations can cooperate (e.g., Pulkkinen, 1997).

Some students who do not have previous experience on online learning, however, may display a degree of resistance towards new technology, or their view on the best way of working and learning may be different to that described above (Alexander, 2001). They might 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 to learn effectively online; hence, the preference of some for courses that are lecture-driven (McFadzean, 2001). Therefore, one critical issue concerns how the learning needs of different groups should be taken into consideration when using an online environment.

In addition, King (2002) has recognized another crucial problem in online learning—the number of students not completing the course is increased compared to traditional learning methods. Students are dropping out through feelings of isolation, frustration with technology, anxiety, confusion, and lack of feedback (see also Motivalla & Tello, 2000; Volery & Lord, 2000). Volery and Lord (2000) have identified two especially vulnerable groups – those students who are less motivated and those who are most advanced. To address this, some important factors concerning student satisfaction with online learning are summarized here on the basis of previous studies (e.g., Alexander, 2001; Volery & Lord, 2000).

Students' Experience of Technology

It is expected that the technology will be convenient to access and easy to use, and previously, using technology has been found to increase the user's satisfaction (Lu et al., 2003; Volery & Lord, 2000). It appears that for many students, the new learning environment is a motivating factor; however, Sinko and Lehtinen (1999) found that a lack of student workstations is one obstacle to using the online learning environment, as are the weaker ICT skills of some students. On the other hand, those students who were initially anxious about using computers also expressed positive attitudes once their computer skills had improved (Lammintakanen & Rissanen, 2003). In addition, variables such as age, gender, and being employed or unemployed are usually expected to affect computer use; however, results on the effects of demographics are somehow mixed (Karuppan, 2001; Lu et al., 2003).

Online platforms have also been criticized by students, with the criticism focusing on, for example, technical clumsiness (see Lammintakanen & Rissanen, 2003; Rathwell et al., 1999), or the fact that discussions were difficult to follow. Students have also expressed a level of dissatisfaction with asynchronous and synchronous communication tools (Motivalla & Tello, 2000).

Time Available to Devote to the Course

The students' lack of time, course overlap, and insufficient course hours have been seen as affecting students' use of ICT (Sinko & Lehtinen, 1999). Morss (1999) has noted an increase in workload, despite the students spending only a moderate amount of time online. It was discovered in one Finnish study 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; Rathwell et al., 1999).

Support from the Teacher and Fellow Students

The role of the teacher (tutor) is very important in online learning. The teacher's role can be described as a learning catalyst and knowledge navigator, or as tutor acting as a facilitator for learning and group processes. Moreover, the tutor's duty is to maintain a safe environment for learning and encourage novel