Online Student and Instructor Characteristics

Michelle Kilburn
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

Martha Henckell
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

David Starrett
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

As technological advances become mainstream in higher education, many universities have begun delving into online learning as an effective means of course delivery. Transitioning from the Industrial Age to the Digital Age of learning has forced some evaluators to rethink standards of success and the idea of productivity and learning (Leonard, 1999).

Understanding the positive attributes of students and instructors in the online environment will contribute to the understanding of how we can enhance the learning experience for the student and the teaching experience for the instructor. This article will also assist students and instructors in understanding the differences that may be experienced in the online environment vs. the face-to-face environment and provide the opportunity to consider whether online learning or teaching is a "good fit" for them. Understanding why students or instructors might choose the online environment will also assist administrators in developing successful, quality online programs that enrich the experiences for both students and instructors.

BACKGROUND

In 1981, the first online classes were developed at the School of Management and Strategic Studies at Western Behavior Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California. An evaluation of the program, and the discussions that took place, revealed that the quality of the online course was higher than the information collected in the traditional classroom setting (Feenberg, 1999). Jung, Choi, Lim, and Leem (2002) also found that online instruction showed significantly better results on examinations, complicated problems, or student's perception of learning outcomes.

With the popularity of the Internet, and the continuing demand for online courses, many college and university administrators might find it challenging to incorporate online technology. Many may feel pressured to jump on the "online bandwagon" in order to keep up with the student demand for these types of courses.

Kilburn (2005) developed the following conceptual map (see Figure 1) regarding student motivations to take an online course at a particular university in the Midwest:

In the upcoming section, an examination of student and instructor characteristics and how each of those different roles contributes to the quality of an online course will help provide insight into the foundational underpinnings of Web-based learning.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

It is estimated that five out of six students taking an online course are employed and would not be able to attend tradi-

Figure 1. Student motivations to take an online course at a Midwest university
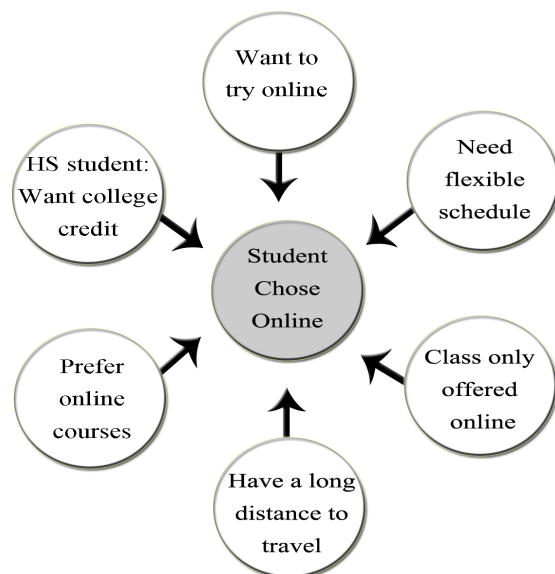
tional classes (Thomas, 2001). Moore and Kearsley (1996) and Hardy and Boaz (1997) found that most distance learners are working adults, primarily female. Literature suggests that the growth in online courses is based on attracting new students rather than "stealing" from students enrolled in current on-campus programs (Mangan, 2001; Thomas, 2001).

Some researchers have attempted to identify student abilities that will suggest whether a student will complete an online course, or be less satisfied with an online course, in comparison to the traditional classroom setting. Kilburn (2005) found that positive characteristics identified in studies stress the importance of an active vs. passive student role in an online course and include: self-motivation and the ability to organize thought (Hardy & Boaz, 1997), prior experience with technology (Richards & Ridley, 1997), positive attitude regarding the subject matter (Coussment, 1995), learning and personality styles (Saunders, Malm, Malone, Nay, Oliver, & Thompson, 1998), self-selection of online courses vs. forced-choice (Thomerson & Smith, 1996), intrinsic motivation, and self-reported explorative behavior (Martens, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2007).

One attraction to online learning is the presumed capacity to increase access and equity to learners by removing some of the barriers to participation (Harasim, 1990). Sullivan (2001) found that the online classroom is often more welcoming for quiet or shy students than the traditional classroom. Online learning has also been advanced as a powerful, yet neutral, tool for enhancing the potential of distance education (Weisband, 1992).

Sullivan (2001) asserts that nontraditional students, particularly female with children or other familial responsibilities, value online courses. Research has suggested that the asynchronous nature of the online environment might encourage a more reflective type of interaction that changes the dynamics of classroom discussion in a way that female students find rewarding (Selfe, 1999). Another aspect of online learning that female students appear to find appealing is the relative anonymity online affords and changes to the social dynamics inherent in a traditional course (Sullivan, 1999).

Most students may initially select distance education as a result of perceived convenience (Klesius, Homan, & Thompson, 1997). These conveniences may include travel, compatibility with personal schedules, and opportunity for self-paced work. Online courses can accommodate all of these conveniences.

Busy work schedules and the expense of completing a higher education degree have often been the typical roadblocks encountered by students in traditional educational arenas (Holt, 1993). Online education has helped to remove some of these hurdles by saving commuting costs, equalizing classroom participation, and offering convenient scheduling for working students.

The age of a student generally is related to the course completion rate and the type of study in a distance education course. On average, students over 30 and under 50 years old are more likely to finish a distance course than traditional students age 18 to 29 (Willis, 1993). Technical skills also appear to play a role in the success of students taking online courses (Kerka, 1996). Students should possess the ability to navigate the Internet and deal effectively with computer software and hardware difficulties.

In the online environment, successful students shift from a more passive role in the exchange of knowledge to a more active role. Several studies purport that the following are the most influential factors affecting a student's active participation in online learning: (1) prior knowledge of online learning, (2) knowledge of a given subject area, (2) information overload, (3) personality traits, (4) instructor facilitation, and (5) appropriate feedback (Lim, 1999; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005).

INSTRUCTOR CHARACTERISTICS

The relationship between student-teacher interactions and learning outcomes has been well documented in the traditional classroom (Powers & Rossman, 1985). Of particular importance in traditional classrooms is teacher "immediacy tendencies." Immediacy alludes to the psychological distance between student and instructor (Weiner & Mehrabian, 1968). Research suggests that a teacher's verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors can help diminish the apparent distance between themselves and their students. By lessening the perception of disconnect between the instructor and student in a course, instructors can help facilitate (directly or indirectly) effective learning.

With the importance of interactions established as a crucial component of learning, one might assume it would be equally important online. Certain researchers have suggested that asynchronous media are less capable of representing the social presence of participants (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Researchers with experience teaching online contest this view, arguing that rather than being impersonal, computer-mediated communication often seems to be hyperpersonal (Walther, 1994). According to Kilburn (2005), research indicates that participants in online courses communicate, argue, and create social presence by projecting immediacy behaviors (LaRose & Whitten, 2000; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

Previous studies (Thompson & Chute, 1998) suggest that in order to enhance learning motivation, small group activities are important in online courses. One might argue that learning motivation is more important in distance education courses because distance learners with low motivation have more of a tendency to drop out or fail when

Related Content

Examining Online Purchase Intentions in B2C E-Commerce: Testing an Integrated Model

C. Ranganathan (2009). *Best Practices and Conceptual Innovations in Information Resources Management: Utilizing Technologies to Enable Global Progressions (pp. 213-230).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/examining-online-purchase-intentions-b2c/5519

Bridging the Academic Research and Business Practice with the New Media

James K. Ho (2000). *Information Resources Management Journal (pp. 6-14).*

www.irma-international.org/article/bridging-academic-research-business-practice/1208

Offshore Software Testing in the Automotive Industry: A Case Study

Tabata Pérez Rentería y Hernándezand Nicola Marsden (2017). *International Journal of Information Technology Project Management (pp. 1-16).*

www.irma-international.org/article/offshore-software-testing-in-the-automotive-industry/187158

Software Project Managers under the Team Software Process: A Study of Competences Based on Literature

Marcos Ruano-Mayoral, Ricardo Colomo-Palacios, Ángel García-Crespoand Juan Miguel Gómez-Berbís (2012). *Project Management Techniques and Innovations in Information Technology (pp. 115-126).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/software-project-managers-under-team/64957

Technology and Transformation in Government

Vincent Homburg (2009). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Second Edition (pp. 3695-3699).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/technology-transformation-government/14127