

Chapter 7

Preparing for Online and Distance Learning Courses: Factors Affecting Student Learning and Retention

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive study is to investigate students' perceptions of online learning courses at a 4 year mid-level mid-western university and whether or not these perceptions influenced their decision to continue taking online courses or not. The findings of this study concur with Lim (2004) in that thorough preparation prior to online course work can help to curb dropout rates and can better prepare learners for successful completion of the course.

INTRODUCTION

Widening access to online education and increasing enrollment in online courses has created a sense of urgency in addressing enrollment and retention rates (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Hughes, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009). With over 65% of educational institutions participating in the annual Sloan Consortium survey of online education indicating “online learning is a critical part of their long term strategy” (Allen & Seaman, 2011, pg. 4), it has become crucial for every educational institution to provide the best possible online learning experience for their students.

Hill (2008) stated that responsiveness to students' needs is a critical variable in terms of retention. Retention, however, has an evolving meaning for those institutions that provide education online. In the
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Preparing for Online and Distance Learning Courses

past, retention rates were primarily based on traditional students enrolled in a degree program at a brick and mortar university. Anderson (2011) suggested that we need to consider the students rather than the programs since so many students now *swirl* through online courses. *Swirling* is defined as “the inconsistent flow in and out of college coursework from term to term, institution to institution” (Campbell & Mislevy, 2009, pg 2-3). Tinto (1975, 1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identified numerous factors that contribute to swirling and retention, however these factors were identified for traditional students attending traditional brick and mortar schools (Boston, Ice, & Burgess, 2012).

Social presence may assist online learners with persistence in courses and engagement in course materials (Bandura, 1986; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Rovai, 2007) however many online courses do not provide learners with a sense that someone is on the other end of that computer connection.

If the more than 6.1 million online learners the Sloan survey (Allen & Seaman, 2011) identified are indeed different than the traditional students studying in face-to-face courses, and many courses do not provide a sense of presence, then educators must establish a better understanding of all aspects of online learning that impact not only retention, but learning in online courses. Therefore, the purpose of this descriptive study was to investigate students’ perceptions of online learning courses at a 4 year mid-level mid-western university and whether or not these perceptions influenced their decision to continue taking online courses or not. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What online learning technologies do students know how to use?
2. What online learning technologies do students prefer to use or not use when enrolled in an online class?
3. What aspects of online course delivery do students struggle with and find difficult to comprehend?
4. What aspects of online course delivery do students enjoy most?
5. What aspects of online courses lead to retention and what aspects lead to dropping out?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The popularity of online learning is clear in the annual Sloan Consortium survey results: although online enrollments have declined, online enrollment rates still exceed those for the entire population in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2011). With over 6.1 million online students in the U.S, it has become critical that we continuously examine these students so that we have a clear understanding of what they need and want in online education.

McGivney (2004) argued that there is probably a strong link between the complicated professional and personal lives of those who choose online forms of learning and the likelihood of completion. Rovai (2007) concluded that online learners frequently feel alone in online learning and further that many students do not enroll for social interaction but rather to complete a course and obtain some knowledge and/or skill. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; and Rovai, 2007) has been proposed to address issues of isolation and alienation that these solitary students often experience while learning online.

Social cognitive theory has been utilized to develop one component of the Critical Inquiry Model first proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer in 2000 and has been examined extensively by numerous researchers. However the Critical Inquiry Model examines online courses where there is a community learning together. As Rovai (2007) and others have found, for many students, learning online is solitary

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