

## Chapter 20

# Experiences and Opinions of Online Learners: What Fosters Successful Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*The International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (IBSTPI) engaged in a research study in 2007-2009 to survey learners enrolled in online education and training. The project attempts to better understand how students engage in learning in online environments, and to identify the critical factors that affect their satisfaction and success. This data is intended to arrive at a set of competencies critical to online learners' success to be disseminated for use by online learners, as well as providers. This chapter reports findings and analyses of a 58 question survey administered online that yielded 318 responses from American, Israeli, Mexican and Japanese cohorts. The study revealed that the majority of respondents rated their satisfaction and success with online learning as positive, and that these outcomes were largely due to self-motivation and time-management, rather than provider resources. The discussion addresses the impact of instructional resources, to ascertain if characteristics of the online environment are a dominant factor in influencing students' attitudes, behaviors, and learning outcomes. Practical application of findings is considered by articulating a preliminary set of online learner competencies.*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (IBSTPI) initiated an ambitious new research project (1) to survey learners enrolled in diverse education and

training offerings delivered in an online format. This data is intended to assist the research team in developing a set of universally applicable competencies considered to be critical to success in online and blended learning environments, and that could be widely disseminated for use, not only by online learners, but also by providers designing and delivering online education and training. Knowing

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what learners find to be the most effective and least useful features and practices for success in online settings can be instructive to those wishing to enhance the teaching-learning process. Our purpose here is not to arrive at new theories of online teaching and learning, but rather to identify and articulate a set of competencies that are both learner-centered and data-driven.

1. Research team members: Gila Kurtz, Jan Visser, Robin Yap, Katsuaki Suzuki, Peter Cookson

The burgeoning phenomenon of online education has generated several volumes in the past decade presenting instructors' techniques for effective online teaching based on their experiences. These "how to" books (e.g., Palloff and Pratt 2001, Talbot, 2007) are making a useful contribution to the literature and to improving practice, as more faculty and students choose this format for teaching and learning. For the most part, these presentations are largely informed by those authors' experiences, presumably after having taught a number of courses, and hopefully having benefited from at least some student feedback. But it is also quite likely that many faculty novitiates to distance education enter into this new learner landscape with little familiarity with the literature on distance education theory and practice.

Other online educators, however, are quite well grounded in distant teaching theory and practice, and often generate observant and thoughtful advice to their peers via papers and presentations that identify challenges and solutions for online learners, with comments to the effect that: *"The biggest challenge is understanding what it takes to be a successful student."* While these seem like reasonable notions, it is not at all clear what these well-intended statements are based on, if such advice is inspired by valid and reliable data, or if these represent little more than opinions derived from instructors' anecdotal material and personal reflections. And, of course, there is the ultimate

question of whether or not such data translates into meaningful and useful information for educational providers and consumers to enhance their teaching and learning.

It cannot safely be asserted, at this point, that our best practices to date have benefited from the input of online learners, obtained through systematic data collection and analysis. De la Teja and Spannaus (2008), among others, have noted that lists of hints for effective online study rarely refer the learner to authoritative sources that might give validity to those recommendations. They also comment that most learner behaviors or characteristics that are advocated are generic and can be applied to learning situations that are not necessarily online. With some institutions worldwide now boasting online enrolments well in excess of 100,000 annually, and if, as likely, it will not be too long before the number of online courses enrollments exceeds face-to-face course enrollments, then distance education managers, course designers and instructors can ill afford to expand their practice without acquiring data directly from the learners and interpreting findings based on such data into reliable and valid conclusions regarding what constitutes successful online learning.

This chapter reports key findings, based on a content analysis of the data obtained through the online learner survey intended to address the need described above. It provides information about what works and does not work, what contributes to and what detracts from successful online learning, and what these learners want and need from their online learning experiences. From these data, the study attempts to identify specific online learner competencies; an initial draft statement of competencies is included in this chapter. A final version of these will be disseminated once the project team has validated its work.

Learning environments (LEs) can be altered to enhance student outcomes, but practitioners and researchers must have means to measure the principal features of those LEs before they make

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