

Chapter 2

Course Management Systems in Transition: A Mixed-Method Investigation of Students Perceptions and Attitudes of Distance Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This two-part study examined student perceptions of a change in course management systems (from WebCT to Blackboard) at a university in the southern United States. Participants were students and recent graduates (N=145) of an online rehabilitation counseling master's degree program. The sample formed three groups of interest: those students who had experience with WebCT, those who had experience with Blackboard, and those students who had worked with both systems. Participants completed an online demographic and education questionnaire and a survey pertaining to their online learning experiences. Participants also responded to qualitative prompts regarding their online learning experiences.

In the findings from the quantitative portion of the study, there were no significant differences between the three groups of interest. Most of the students in the sample preferred distance education to on-campus courses, asynchronous over synchronous learning, discussion boards over live chats, and video streamed content delivery over text-based delivery. For this sample, a change in course delivery systems did not have a negative effect upon students. In the findings from the qualitative portion of the study, five major themes emerged, those of Communication, Pedagogy/Androgogy, Time Management, Course Delivery Systems and Technology, and Access. Aspects of self-directedness appeared to be a theme throughout much

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of the qualitative analysis. Negative factors included inability to reach instructors in a timely fashion, lack of interpersonal contact with other learners or with instructors, and frustration over technological glitches and hardware, software or Internet complexities, or a mixture of the three. The role of emotion in online learning was significant in several areas, particularly to the theme of Communication, where a personalized learning environment with two-way communication between peers and the instructor can lessen the isolation of online learning. Further study in this area is recommended.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In an investigation of students' perceptions of the effects of changing course management platforms, Szirony, Garner, Dickerson, & Pack (2010) found that a change in course management platforms had little or no practical impact on student learners. Another finding indicated that the transition from one platform to another may not be as significant for students as it appears to be for faculty and administrators, especially if the navigation of the new course seems similar to the old one for the students. In suggestions for future research, this study noted that although the practical implications of changing platforms were minimal, the affective and emotional components of such a change warrant further study.

The emotional aspects of distance learners are salient to the learning process. This concept can be seen in recent literature. For example, Zembylas (2008) reviewed emotional constructs related to the learning process. Specifically, the emotions of adult learners in the context of a year-long participation process in an online course were examined. Zembylas studied how adult learners responded emotionally and talked about their emotions while involved in an online learning environment and tracked emotion changes from the beginning to the end of a course. Zembylas also explored how social and gender roles may play a role in the distance learning environment. In the literature, online learning has been criticized for being less emotional and more impersonal than conventional classroom learning environments. However, emotions are hardly absent from online learning and may include frustration, anger,

confusion, and boredom. Adding a confounding factor such as changing learning platforms may complicate or exacerbate such emotions. From a more positive perspective, higher levels of engagement and interest in a more convenient learning environment may also be included in the emotional constructs of online learners (Zembylas, 2008). Understanding these factors, the qualitative analysis of distance learning participants, especially during the transitional period of a change of platforms was warranted.

Carrying forward from the need to examine emotional and qualitative factors of distance learning, learner satisfaction must also be considered. "Learner-centered evaluation allows for insights into the teaching and learning process, and learner satisfaction is particularly critical in determining quality in distance education" (Lee, 2009, p. 77). Little research exists on how changing platforms may affect learner satisfaction either positively or negatively. With nearly four million college students enrolled in at least one online course in the United States during the Fall semester of 2007 (Allen & Seaman, 2008), and with projections predicting further growth of online learning environments, the need to examine quality of delivery, satisfaction, and other qualitative factors is becoming increasingly important (Lorenzetti, 2003). The trend in educational instruction is moving toward becoming more learner-centered, less linear, and more self-directed, with technological fluency approaching a state of expectancy as a graduation requirement. In addition to that, lifelong learning appears to be increasing as a competitive necessity. According to Moore, Sener, and Fetzner (2006), the burgeoning growth and

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