

Chapter 9

Online Literacy among Students and Faculty: A Comparative Study between the United States and Eastern European Countries

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ABSTRACT

Based on the recent proliferation of online education and the ongoing technological revolution, this research focused on interaction of students and faculty as a main contributor to the success of online education. During 2003, a survey was distributed to convenience samples of faculty members and students from the Midwest of the U.S. and three Eastern European countries. The data reflects students' and faculty members' opinions about the state of technology, online communication, and instruction. The results confirm findings from the literature about the existence of a digital divide between developed and emerging nations. Although Eastern European respondents don't benefit from the technology base of their American correspondents, their satisfaction and comfort with technology remains relatively strong. The digital divide may result from administrative rigidity; Eastern European students enjoy less access to computer labs, due to fewer and less flexible hours. Faculty members and administrators remain entrenched in "old" technologies such as e-mail, whereas Millennials expect newer communication tools and prefer synchronous ones. Considering the available technology, online assessment is employed relatively inconsistently. Libraries as technology providers are perhaps underutilized particularly in Bulgaria, Moldova, and Macedonia.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapidly increasing number of online classes and programs prompt researchers and educators to focus on learner engagement (Andrews & Haythornthwaite, 2007; Condrad & Donaldson, 2004; Finkelstein, 2006). Students rate instructiveness as a critical course satisfaction factor (e.g., Burnett, et al., 2007; Gould & Padavano, 2006; Green, et al., 2006; Young & Norgard, 2006); engagement is positively associated with levels of academic achievement (e.g., Bell, 2007; Lee et al., 2006) and motivation measures (e.g., Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Kawachi, 2003; Schrum et al., 2007).

The existence of online environments is made possible by the technological revolution and the advent of the Internet's connectivity. The online environment both thrives on and generates technological advancements; offering space and time alternatives over traditional classrooms. As a result of the changes in delivery modalities, it is essential to explore the effects of online and hybrid offerings on teaching and learning processes. In the course of the last decade, online learning technologies underwent significant change. Mullinix and McCurry (2003) propose a detailed taxonomy for instructional modalities (Fully in-class, Web-supplemented, Web-enhanced, Web hybrid, Fully-online). Face-to-face, hybrid, and fully online are currently the most commonly employed types. The ever-increasing application of information technology appears to have produced a nexus between face-to-face and online modalities referred to as distributed learning (Vrasidas & Glass, 2002). The shift toward distance education utilizing online tools for instruction and communication turned many face-to-face classrooms into hybrid operations (Young, 2002). Definitions of hybrid classrooms vary significantly, mostly due to disagreements over technological applications (Schrum & Hong, 2002). Three elements, however, appear in nearly all descriptions: hybrid instructional systems require (a) the existence of electronic infrastructure and (b) a professoriate

skilled in the use of new technologies and (c) college students sophisticated enough to make use of hybrid offerings. The subject purpose of this chapter is to study the degree to which adult educators in the Midwestern U.S.A. and Eastern Europe effectively employ the instructional technologies typically part of hybrid environments.

The leaders in distance education include Pacific countries such as, but not only, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (Stephenson, 2002). This is not a coincidence as countries of vast territories, sparse population and ability to invest in distance education most likely forge ahead in the use of online systems. Given the preeminence of Pacific Rim countries in instructional technology application, we employed the U.S. as a benchmark for comparison with Eastern European nations.

BACKGROUND

The primary American University (hereafter Midwestern University) selected for investigation is described as a master's college or university (subdivision = larger program) in the Carnegie classification system (<http://www.carnegie-foundation.org/classifications/>). The university, located in the Northern Midwest, provided over 130 undergraduate majors and 52 master's programs at the time of the investigation. The student population was just under 16,000. In many ways, Midwestern University is typical of U.S. comprehensive universities in terms of technology use—if slightly above the infrastructure curve. In terms of technology application, prestigious private colleges and universities, along with larger land grant and flagship institutions, tend to be slightly further along the adaptation curve than does Midwestern University; two-year colleges and technical schools tend to lag behind.

At the time that the study was conducted, Midwestern University was experiencing, as did many other institutions, a rapid increase in the avail-

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