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Tian Luo
Old Dominion University

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An Exploratory Study of Students' Perception of their Online Learning Experiences in a Midwestern University

Tian Luo
Instructional Technology
Ohio University
United States
tl303308@ohio.edu

Abstract Online learning programs and online courses have seen a rapid rise in recent years; however, how to improve those online programs to enhance student learning often remains an issue. This study seeks to gain insights into learners' perceptions of online learning and investigate problems that take place in online learning. 33 students enrolled in online courses offered by a Midwestern university participated in this study. A survey instrument of ten questions targeted three major domains, including course design, instructor facilitation, and social presence. Most students reported positively with course design and instructor facilitation. Interestingly, students demonstrated a relatively ambiguous and divergent perception on social presence, which suggested that social presence might no longer be perceived as a necessity in an online environment. Implications and suggestions for educators to adapt to this potential change are discussed as well.

Introduction

During the last few decades, advances in technology have brought opportunities and challenges to the ways in which individuals are educated and trained. The Internet, emerging as a new media in the last century, has exerted an incontrovertible impact on people's way of learning following the use of computers in education. Hence, Internet-based forms of education have fundamentally changed the way in which instruction is designed, delivered and evaluated as it has become an integral part of people's everyday lives (Prenksey, 2001). A myriad of new terms, such as distance education, online education, e-learning, and online learning, have been called into existence. Especially in higher education, there has been a soaring increase in online courses and online academic programs in recent years (Haugen, LaBarre, & Melrose, 2001; Liaw & Huang, 2002; Setzer & Lewis, 2005). This change has incited researchers' great interest in examining their practice, impact, and evaluation.

As student satisfaction has a large stake on the quality of an online course or online program, there has been an increasing number of research studies focusing on student perception of their online learning experiences associated with online courses (Kim, Liu, & Bonk, 2005; Palmer & Holt, 2010; Seok, DaCosta, Kinsell, & Tung, 2010; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Previous research studies manifested that a variety of factors can influence students' perception of their online learning, including course design, comfort with online technologies, motivation of the learner, instructors' facilitation, affective response, sense of community, social presence, and so on. Consistency in course design, interaction with course instructors, active discussion, flexibility of online learning and opportunities to communicate with teachers and peers in online learning settings, and training to use the necessary technology are found to be conducive to online learning (Klingner, 2003; McCall, 2002; Schramm, Wagner, & Werner, 2000; Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, & Pelz, 2000). In contrast, big class size, a lack of immediacy in responses, lack of instructor-student and student-student interaction, and lack of sense of community can impair their online learning (Essex & Cagiltay, 2001; Hara & Kling, 2000; Petrides, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003).

Although studies have investigated various facets of students' online learning, studies that examined experience from student perspectives are relatively rare (Song, et al., 2004). This study seeks to gain insights into learners' perceptions of online learning and investigate problems that have taken place in online learning using students in a Midwestern university as samples.

Theoretical Foundation

A great number of theories in relation to various practices of distance education have been generated and applied, among which two in particular, social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and transactional

distance (Moore, 1993), have been widely used in the research and performance of online learning. These two mainstream theories were employed to set the framework of this research study.

Social presence theory is primarily concerned with the notion of *being there* or *present* in an online learning environment. It was defined as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p.65) by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976). Several strategies suggested to enhance social presence in online courses include basically three respective elements: course design, instructor facilitation, and class size (Aragon, 2003).

Transactional distance is another theory constituted by two key variables, dialogue and structure (Moore, 1993). Dialogue is measured by student-to-student interaction and student-to-instructor interaction; structure is determined by the actual design of the course, the organization of the instruction, and the use of various media of communications. According to Moore (1993), the more dialogue (interaction) that occurs in the online course and the less structure (inflexibility) the course possesses, the less transactional distance takes place. This research employed transactional distance theory to reify the concept of course design and learner-learner interaction by measuring how structured the course design was and how students in the online courses interacted with other participants as a community. In particular, this research used measurements of *dialogue* and *structure* as two basic components of transactional distance theory to see how structured the course design is and how much dialogue there is in the interaction between members in the learning environments. Elements associated with *dialogue* and *structures* were transmitted into the survey design.

Research Questions

This research study purports to investigate several online courses and programs from students’ perspectives. In particular, this study aims to examine whether or not students were content with the course design, how instructors carry out an online course, and student’s peer-to-peer interaction from a social presence point of view. Therefore, the following questions guided this research study:

1. What is the overall students’ perception of their online learning experiences at Ohio University?
2. What is the students’ perception on course design?
3. What is the students’ perception on instructors’ facilitation?
4. What is the students’ perception on the aspects of social presence?

Methods

The ten-question survey instrument encompassed three major components: two questions targeted course design, three targeted instructor facilitation and five targeted areas of social presence. These were all five-scale Likert questions where 5 = strong disagreement to the statements and 1 = strong agreement to the statements.

Email surveys were randomly distributed to undergraduate students who were enrolled in online courses. After five days’ survey collection, 27 online surveys were collected from the large sampling pool. Six other surveys were gathered from snow sampling in which samples were recruited by word of mouth.

The participants were 33 students who enrolled in online courses offered by a Midwestern university, among whom 25 students were from the U.S. and 6 international students were respectively from China, Mali, Bulgaria, Uzbekistan, and Ghana. 16 of them were female and 17 were male. Three aged below 20, 21 between 20 to 25, seven between 26 to 30, and two above 30.

More information on the participants was gathered by demographic questions. According to the demographic questions, students participating in this research started their Internet use at an early age. Of all the 33 participants, 25 started to use the Internet before they started college. More than half of the students had used the Internet for more than ten years; only three of them had been using it for less than six years. When they were asked “How many hours approximately did you spend on using the Internet per day in the first few years since you began to use the Internet?” students reported that they did not spend much time on the Internet when they first began to use it. 20 people among 33 spent less than one hour on it.

Results of Analysis

Findings from the survey gathered from this research study are presented in the two tables below. Mean and Standard Deviations are presented in Table 1, and survey items and responses distribution are presented in Table 2.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
CourseDesign	33	1.8788	.85723
ClassSize	33	1.9091	.63066
Instructor1	33	1.9091	.84275
Instructor2	33	1.9394	.86384
Instructor3	33	2.0000	1.00000
SP1	33	2.6667	1.24164
SP2	33	3.3030	.98377
SP3	33	3.7576	1.03169
SP4	33	3.0606	1.14399
SP5	33	3.3636	1.14067
Valid N (listwise)	33		

Table 1

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
(CourseDesign) The course design is well-organized in general.	33.3% (11)	54.5% (18)	3.0% (1)	9.1% (3)	0.0% (0)
(ClassSize) The course has a limited size (e.g., student-instructor ratio no higher than 30:1).	24.2% (8)	51.5% (17)	18.2% (6)	6.1% (2)	0.0% (0)
(Instructor1) I am satisfied with the performance of the instructor.	30.3% (10)	54.5% (18)	12.1% (4)	0.0% (0)	3.0% (1)
(Instructor2) The instructor promptly answers email.	36.4% (12)	45.5% (15)	15.2% (5)	0.0% (0)	3.0% (1)
(Instructor3) The instructor always encourages student participation.	33.3% (11)	39.4% (13)	21.2% (7)	3.0% (1)	3.0% (1)
(SP1) I can well interact with my classmates.	21.2% (7)	24.2% (8)	30.3% (10)	15.2% (5)	9.1% (3)
(SP2) I feel a spirit of community in the class.	0.0% (0)	21.2% (7)	42.4% (14)	21.2% (7)	15.2% (5)
(SP3) I feel the class members are closely tied as family and friends.	0.0% (0)	12.5% (4)	28.1% (9)	28.1% (9)	31.3% (10)
(SP4) I feel isolated in the class.	9.1% (3)	21.2% (7)	27.3% (9)	30.3% (10)	12.1% (4)
(SP5) I get help from my classmates.	6.1% (2)	15.2% (5)	42.4% (14)	18.2% (6)	18.2% (6)

Table 2

The first two questions are associated with course design. According to the descriptive statistics results, students were reported to be content with their course design and class size. The limited size of online courses indicates a higher possibility of success of their online learning.

The following three questions involve instructor facilitation. Students have a relatively high satisfaction rating of their instructors, as 29 people out of 33 agreed they were satisfied with the instructors' performance. Instructors were perceived to have timely responses in dealing with students' emails, as only one of the students disagreed with the statement on instructors' email-responding. 31 students also reported that instructors encouraged

student participation during the course. By and large, it is perceived that instructors can well facilitate the online course from students' perspectives.

The next five questions depend on the interaction between students themselves; in other words, the student-student relations, which are the most integral part of social presence. Surprisingly, students seemed to fail to perceive that a high level of social presence occurred in their online learning experiences. Less than half of students believed they easily interacted with their classmates. Very few people (24.1%) felt a sense of community and only 12.5 % of them believed that they were closely connected to their peers in the class. Students seemed to be less facilitating to each other as less people agreed on the statement "I got help from my classmates" than those who disagreed. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of students stood neutral — over 30% on average— when responding to statements associated with social presence. In addition, it is patent that the standard deviations were much higher on these items than on the course design and instructor facilitation, which was an indication of a divergent perception on these items.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that students at a Midwestern university have an overall positive perception of their online learning experiences. In terms of course design, students believed that their online courses were well-organized with a limited size. Regarding instructors' evaluation, students perceived their instructors favorably in general. Particularly, instructors were said to have provided effective responses such as email, and encouraged student participation. However, problems and challenges of online learning still exist as there were some disagreements on students' ratings across all those statements. Therefore, it is suggested that instructors should consider and implement multiple activities that can largely enhance class interaction and student engagement in online learning environments. Immediacy in responding to students is also of great importance to instructors.

Yet, when speaking of social presence, students displayed an ambiguous and divergent perception. A larger number of students had a certain degree of interaction and communication with their classmates and instructors so that they did not feel isolated in the online learning environment; however, a sense of community was rarely perceived strongly by students. Additionally, most of them did not perceive to obtain much assistance from their peer members. Much higher standard deviations indicated a strong dispersion in students' attitudes of social presence.

Findings on social presence suggest that it remains a major barrier in online learning. Maintaining a strong social presence in an online environment is critical to student motivation and their satisfaction with online courses (Frith, 2002; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). However, students often perceived low social presence in their online learning experience, as indicated in this research study. Possible explanations to the lack of perceived social presence could be that they did not pay enough attention to the social presence aspect of their online learning or they did not appreciate the value and the importance of social presence. Considering a soaring usage of social networking tools in an online environment, it is likely that social presence is no longer perceived as a necessity in this day and age. Being less *socially present* may be deemed as more appropriate in a formal learning environment as it may correspondingly increase distraction from the learning content.

This research study suggested that the notion of social presence in an online environment needs to be further speculated on and reconsidered. Questions, such as how much social presence is needed in an online course, why students fail to appreciate social presence, why they demonstrate a neutral and apathetic attitude on the social aspects of their online learning, and how social presence perspectives assist students' learning, are prompted from this research. As this report is only an exploratory pilot research study, more studies need to be done to investigate the prompted questions. Further qualitative studies on students' inquiry into the social presence aspects of their online learning experiences are greatly needed. New themes and patterns may emerge as characteristics of a new generation of learners.

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