The Top 10 Most Valuable Online Learning Activities for Graduate MIS Students

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ABSTRACT

Human activities are at the core of the numerous advancements in technology and learning. The objective of this study was to gather and report the most frequently observed activities learners express to be valuable when attending online courses. Knowing such top valuable activities can provide a guide for online learning systems vendors on the key platform attributes that are most valuable, and subsequently, enable them to design more effective platforms. A review of activity theory and its implication for e-learning environments is provided as the theoretical background for this study. A list of the top 10 most frequently observed valuable activities is presented based on a qualitative exploratory study conducted with five focus groups totaling 47 graduate MIS students who attended online learning courses. Results suggest that nearly all of the most frequently observed valuable activities revolved around the flexibility of the online learning environments. Additionally, activities related to performing research online as well as communication either with the professor or with other students (be it via e-mail, discussion forums or chat) appear to be very valuable for graduate MIS students. The paper concludes with a summary, remarks, and implications of the study findings for research, as well as suggestions for future studies.

Keywords: activity theory; e-learning; learners’ perceptions; learning; online learning; valuable learning activities; value of online learning systems

INTRODUCTION

The aim (of education) must be the training of independently acting and thinking individuals.

Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)

Human activities are at the core of the numerous advancements in technology and learning. Research suggests that learning and interactive activities are necessary components to the success of e-learning environments (Crawford, 2001). Furthermore, Nulden and Scheepers (2002) argue that additional research studies on learning activities are needed in order to progress the current knowledge on information systems in education. Additionally, Mariola and Manley (2002) noted from
their experience teaching online courses that “distance learning appears to be valuable in facilitating and enhancing student learning” (p. 181). Thus, the objective of this study is to explore and define the most frequently observed valuable activities that students engage in when attending online courses. Understanding which activities are most valuable can help vendors of online learning systems to design more effective platforms by addressing system attributes that will facilitate these core activities. Although some of the activities noted in this study have been addressed in existing literature, the information has been scattered over numerous studies. Additionally, previous work ignored the value construct, concentrating instead on other constructs such as satisfaction, attitudes, and behavior. This study is aimed at finding valuable online learning activities by gathering such activities from focus groups of MIS students, and at providing a new perspective grounded in value theory. Additionally, results of this study provide a first glance at specific online learning activities that add value for learners. Future work will attempt to validate the results found here more rigorously.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a review of the literature related to the activity theory and learning activities. The review continues with a discussion on the implication of the activity theory in the context of learning activities, online learning systems, and value theory. These review sections serve as the theoretical background for this study. Additionally, they provide a set of gradual definitions of the terms activity, learning activity, online-learning activity, and valuable online learning activity. The second section of this paper provides a review of the qualitative research methodology and the sample used to derive the results. This leads to the subsequent section in which a list of the top 10 activities is presented based on a qualitative exploratory study conducted with five focus groups of graduate Management Information Systems (MIS) students who attended online courses. Additionally, each of the top 10 activities is elaborated on and discussed in the context of online learning. The final section provides conclusions based on the results, and a discussion which includes a review of the study limitations as well as recommendations for future studies.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Several scholars use the term learning activity or learning activities without clearly defining it. Some provide a definition of activity in general (Walker, 2004), while others provide suggestions of activities without a clear definition of the term itself (Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 2000); however, many use the term frequently. Therefore, the following subsections seek to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by first exploring the literature on activity theory for definitions of the term activity. Definitions of the term activity or human activity from prior literature are presented. Subsequently, a review of literature in the context of learning activities is provided. The next subsection proposes a new definition of online learning activities grounded in the literature reviewed previously. The final subsection provides a review of literature on value theory. This final section also provides literature on definitions of the term value in order to propose a clear and concise definition of the term valuable online learning activities.
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