Online Learning Readiness: Its Relations to College Students’ Changes over Time, and Willingness to Enroll in Future Courses

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether online students’ course-related readiness would undergo changes between midterm exams and final exams, and which student-readiness factors might predict students’ willingness to take an online course again. The analysis used survey data from 217 students enrolled in an online course that was presented three times over three consecutive semesters. The results of this study were as follows: (1) an increase in communication self-efficacy and a decrease in learner control and in motivation for learning from middle of the semester to the end of the semester; (2) communication self-efficacy and learning motivation were statistically significant predictors of the students’ willingness to take future online courses.

KEYWORDS

Communication Self-Efficacy, Learner Control Motivation, OLRS, Online Learning Readiness, Self-directed Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The activities of learning and teaching are undergoing great changes as higher-education institutions rapidly adopt the concepts and practices of e-learning. Many universities nowadays are starting to provide Web-based courses or at least to integrate online asynchronous components into classroom-based courses. Indeed, web-based courses constitute a new method of teaching and learning that complements traditional methods (Vaughan & MacVicar, 2004), and its chief function is to support creativity and innovation for higher education (Kim, 2005). This new paradigm also shifts education from teacher-centered contexts to learner-centered contexts (Lee, Yoon, & Lee, 2009). Because it can facilitate traditional methods of instruction while transcending the traditional spatial and temporal limitations of conventional classrooms, online learning is growing both in importance and in popularity today.

Since online learning has become highly popular in educational institutions, researchers have been concerned about the issue of learners’ perceptions and attitudes toward online learning. Studies (e.g., Morris, Finnegan, & Wu, 2005; Thiele, 2003) have stated that such student characteristics as academic engagement, independent learning style, and effective time management perhaps can greatly improve student grades and learning retention. Researchers have also noted that technical skills (Peng, Tsai, & Wu, 2006) and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Saadé, He, & Kira, 2007) are related to learners’ performance in Web-based learning environments. Additionally, the degree to which students can use computers or the Internet for their learning has become a topical research issue because computers are attractive pedagogical tools capable of presenting multiple perspectives and strengthening user
interactions with learning material (Jonassen, 1996). Studies suggest that students would not benefit from using computers in learning unless students use certain metacognitive processes (Azevedo, 2005). In sum, successful online students should have an active approach toward learning, sufficient meta-cognitive competence, adequate self-regulation, and a high level of motivation and capacity for learning from past experiences. Thus, students’ individual characteristics and learning styles should relate to their online learning performance, and are worth further investigation.

The above discussions have led to two basic questions: before any online-learning event starts, how much readiness (in the form of personality variables and learning strategies) should a college learner have in order to participate in the event successfully? And what dimensions of readiness should students possess for online learning? In order to answer these questions, researchers over the last ten years have focused on developing a readiness scale for online learning. For example, Smith, Murphy, and Mahoney (2003) conducted a study with college-age students and found two primary factors that predicted student success: self-management of learning and comfort with e-learning. A review of this study, however, reveals that these measures of learners’ readiness do not comprehensively cover other dimensions that are critical to online learning and that include technical skills and learner control. Therefore, Hung, Chou, Chen, and Own (2010) re-examined the concept of readiness and developed an instrument—the Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS). However, the study focused only on instrument development. Because readiness may be an evolving, rather than a fixed, concept, the current study first focuses on the differences among students’ self-reported degrees of readiness at different times during the semester. Second, we argue that learner readiness likely affects whether students will take an online course again.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To be successful, a learner may possess certain dispositions toward learning. In this study, we used Hung, et al., (2010)’s Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS) for further investigation. The OLRS was validated in five dimensions: self-directed learning, motivation for learning, computer/Internet self-efficacy, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy, as discussed in the following.

2.1. Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

According to Gibbons (2002), a learner who practices self-directed learning engages in challenging activities and develops personal knowledge and skills to pursue these activities successfully. More specifically, Knowles (1975) defined SDL as a process in which individuals take the initiative in understanding their learning needs, establishing learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. Song and Hill (2007) introduced a conceptual model for understanding SDL in an online context. The model incorporates SDL as a personal attribute and a learning process. For example, the anytime, anywhere characteristics of asynchronous online learning puts learners in control of when, where, and how they learn. On the basis of the above discussion, we have concluded that online courses tend to grant students considerable freedom, which therefore requires that students take control of the learning process to a greater degree than is conventionally the case (Cahoon, 1998). Therefore, it can be concluded that learners’ SDL toward online learning is an important dimension to predict whether students will take another online course in the future.

2.2. Motivation for Learning

Motivation has always been an important influence on learners’ attitudes and learning behaviors in educational research and practices (Fairchild, Jeanne Horst, Finney, & Barron, 2005). Recently, researchers have investigated the role of motivation in computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). For example, Artino and Stephans (2009) explored differences between undergraduate and graduate students regarding their levels of academic motivation and self-regulation in online-