Chapter XXX

A Program Satisfaction Survey Instrument for Online Students

Badrul H. Khan, The George Washington University, USA
Henry L. Smith, San Jose State University, USA

Introduction

With the advent of the Internet and online learning methodologies and technologies, online learning is becoming more and more accepted. Institutions are investing heavily in the development and deployment of online programs. To fulfill the demand of online education and training, academic institutions, corporations, and government agencies worldwide are increasingly using the Internet and digital technologies to deliver instruction and training. However, institutions must pay attention to the needs of learners. With the increasing use of a variety of approaches in learning in the information age, learners require rich learning environments supported by well designed resources. They expect on-demand, anytime/anywhere high-quality learning environments with good support services.

To cater to the needs of online learners, institutions should develop learning-focused educational and training systems where “the learner is the key entity and occupies the nucleus of the systems complex of education” (Banathy, 1991, p. 96). For Banathy, “when learning is in focus, arrangements are made in the environment of the learner that communicate the learning task, and learning resources are made available to learners so that they can explore and master learning tasks” (p. 101). Therefore, online learning environments that can effectively support learning-on-demand must be designed by placing the learners at the center. Learners’ satisfaction becomes a major issue. In support of a learner-centered approach, Moore (1998) states:

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Our aim as faculty should be to focus our attention on making courses and other learning experiences that will best empower our students to learn, to learn fully, effectively, efficiently, and with rewarding satisfaction. It is the responsibility of our profession to study ways of maximizing the potential of our environments to support their learning and to minimize those elements in their environments that may impede it. (p. 4)

An online program has the potential to satisfy learners’ needs if it is meaningful to learners. A meaningful program involves a systematic process of planning, design, development, evaluation, and implementation to create a learning environment where learning is actively fostered and supported. When an online program is easily accessible, well designed, learner centered, affordable, efficient, flexible, and has a facilitated learning environment where learners display a high level of participation and success in meeting course goals and objectives, and enjoy all available support services provided in the program without debilitating interruptions—it is meaningful to learners. A meaningful program should then provide a moderate to high level of learner satisfaction with both the quality of instruction and all support services (Morrison & Khan, 2003).

Academic institutions ordinarily solicit student evaluations of courseware. Generally this is done on a course-by-course basis that focuses on traditional items such as course content and instruction. What seemed to be missing from the evaluation of online education was the determination of student satisfaction with online instruction as a delivery method or system. For us, concern was focused on satisfaction associated particularly with the emerging asynchronous online instruction method, in part because of its growing popularity among post-graduate educational agencies. Asynchronous instruction does not require the simultaneous participation of students and instructors, and students do not need to be gathered together in the same location at the same time (Ehrmann, 1995). It is critical for institutions to learn about learners’ satisfaction with their online programs. It has been our interest to understand learner issues with electronically based education, and we began the process of understanding such issues with the idea of tapping student satisfaction with the implementations of online instruction programs.

A literature review was undertaken to look for an instrument that would measure student satisfaction with educational programs as a whole, and none was found. Additionally, the search focused on an instrument that would measure satisfaction specifically with the asynchronous online delivery method, and again, none was found. The search then turned to a listserv canvass of colleagues in the field of instructional technology and distance education for suggestions. The postings drew responses that generally pointed back to individual course evaluations.

After reflecting on various aspects of online learning, we have adopted the E-learning Framework (Khan, 2001) as a basis for a student satisfaction survey of online instruction. E-learning, nominally, is a modern type of distance education that is delivered via the use of computers, the Internet, and multimedia presentation. The seeds for the E-learning Framework began germinating with the question, “What does it take to provide the best and most meaningful flexible learning environments for learners worldwide” (Khan, 2001, p. 77). Khan (2001) found that numerous factors help to create a meaningful online

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