Chapter 7
Examining Individual Students’ Perceptions of Curiosity Utilizing a Blend of Online and Face-to-Face Discussions: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT
Research has established that the exploratory behavior of an individual student has a positive effect on learning and academic achievement. However, very little is known about the impact of a blended learning approach on individual student curiosity and whether combinations of online and face-to-face learning activities significantly enhance student exploratory behavior. This chapter assesses the effects of blended learning on perceived individual student curiosity, utilizing a blend of online and face-to-face discussions. This research collates elements from the theories of curiosity. A qualitative research methodology was utilized for the purpose of the research. Data were obtained through in-depth and semi-structured one-on-one interviews with undergraduate students. Results from the qualitative study showed that individuals’ perceptions of curiosity were strongly supported. The results of our study may suggest that future research should explore more deeply, the importance of technology on learning and academic achievement (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). For example, specific studies could address various aspects of online learning and instruction, such as an individual’s patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting. These interconnected thoughts, feelings and behaviors, may reflect the differences in motivational behavior between an individual and groups.

INTRODUCTION
Colleges and universities share a common mission to educate their students in the best possible way, by creating environments where students are intellectually challenged, where current and relevant subject matter is disseminated in a professional manner and where lifelong learning and high standards of professional education are fostered.

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Given the technologies of the 21st century, we ask the question, how can educators successfully accomplish this mission? Universities world-wide are currently facing a restructuring of traditional educational paradigms. What is emerging within this restructuring is a blended learning model that combines the best practices of online and face-to-face formats (2005; Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones, & Pickard, 2003). Blended learning offers the convenience of the online format without the loss of face-to-face contact (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004). By combining face-to-face and computer-mediated elements into a blended learning activity, the learning activities become more authentic for the students. Moreover, when technology is used as a tool to support students in performing authentic tasks, the students are in a better position to define their goals, make decisions and evaluate their progress (Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995).

Both online and face-to-face delivery has the potential to facilitate environments where: (1) meaningful and authentic learning takes place; (2) construction of knowledge is promoted; (3) collaboration and conversation (between and among students and instructors) is supported; and finally, (4) individual student curiosity and exploratory behavior may be significantly increased. However, a major problem we encounter is that we presently lack accurate information on how to effectively make use of blended learning environments in order to effectively promote the active learning, collaboration and problem solving skills of individual students. It is not only difficult to assess how students learn but also how well they are able to adapt to these learning environments.

The following research question seeks to assess the effects of perceived curiosity of individual students utilizing a blended learning approach: Are perceptions of individual student curiosity higher in online discussions compared to traditional face-to-face discussions, utilizing this type of blended learning approach? The intention of this research is to create a blended learning platform that allows students to interact and collaborate in both online and face-to-face settings. Interaction and collaboration is one of the most important components of learning experiences in both on-line and face-to-face environments (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Collaborative inquiry offers a different model of learning from that provided by traditional lecture and classroom-based methods (Ocker & Yaverbaum, 2002). However, recently developed instructional and communication technologies can facilitate the collaborative learning process for students by adding structure to their group experiences and giving them additional tools to support their work (Hiltz, 1990; Warschauer, 1997).

This research has long-term significance for students, instructors, institutions and society at large. The information that can be gained from assessment can be invaluable in facilitating students’ higher-order cognitions, active learning and self-regulated learning. The use of a blended learning approach also has the potential to change the nature of learning environments and the ways in which we design both online and face-to-face activities to support intellectual development, including the explorative strategies involved in learning. Examining individual students’ perceptions of curiosity, utilizing a blended learning approach, should play a pivotal role in enhancing learning and furthering this research. Considerable discussions emanating from academic debate and research surround the emergence of blended learning environments. This paper firstly seeks to integrate and synthesize content regarding (a) blended learning environments and (b) curiosity. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and the implications of these results.

**BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

Currently many universities are exploring what is referred to as a unique combination of blended