Exploring Students’ Perceived Needs and Ideas About Feedback in Online Learning Environments: Implications for Digital Design

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ABSTRACT

Although research has found that students value timely, formative feedback, it’s unknown how students’ prior experiences influence their expectations for feedback in online learning environments. Two workshops were conducted to examine college students’ perceptions and preferences about feedback during traditional and online instruction. Survey, short response, and interview questions were used to collect students’ self-reported experiences in receiving and using feedback with a variety of work products (e.g., essays) in traditional academic experiences, examining their self-reported challenges and needs during online learning tasks. Students collaboratively worked to design storyboards that depicted optimal feedback environments for an online instructional system. Results show that students’ (positive and negative) prior experiences with traditional feedback guide their perceived preferences regarding online feedback. Students were aware of many specific challenges that they faced during online research, and expressed a strong desire for technologies that could support identification of valid and relevant online content. Self-reported, online feedback needs were consistent with successful features of digital learning environments that have been shown to support deeper learning. This research suggests that students’ perceived needs and preferences have a strong impact on the degree to which they are likely to value and utilize feedback in online learning environments.

Keywords: College Students, Digital Environments, Feedback, Online Learning, Self-Regulated Learning

INTRODUCTION

Online learning tasks are an important example of self-regulated learning tasks, where learners must independently regulate decisions, strategies, processes, and evaluation involved in learning from instructional materials (Williams, 1996). Because self-regulated learning involves a complex interaction between students’ personal beliefs, individual behavior, and environmental factors such as instructional
context and learning materials (Pintrich, 2000; Tseng & Kuo, 2010; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001), it has been suggested that research on feedback and self-regulated learning should be tightly coupled. Even incidentally-provided feedback can influence self-regulated learning processes such as calibration and monitoring (Butler & Winne, 1995). Understanding students’ expectations and values regarding feedback has important implications for online learning, since students deploy a variety of individual perceptions (e.g., self-beliefs), processes (e.g., comprehension strategies), and behaviors (e.g., digital interactions) to construct their own learning during self-directed tasks (Winne & Perry, 2000; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Promoting Self-Regulation with Feedback in Online and Digital Environments

Self-regulated learners engage with the learning task and instructional content through specific behaviors such as monitoring task progress, evaluating conceptual understanding, setting learning goals, deciding on learning and revision strategies, and assessing understanding through task progression (Azevedo & Witherspoon, 2009; Winne & Perry, 2000; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Engaging in effective self-regulated learning requires students to engage with metacognition in the form of metacognitive monitoring (i.e., being aware of one’s own thinking and learning) and metacognitive control (i.e., utilizing skills that are favorable to learning, such as selecting appropriate strategies like prioritization and planning). Because self-regulation inherently is driven by individual choices, self-regulation researchers (e.g., Butler & Winne, 1995; Winne & Perry, 2000; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001) also acknowledge that self-regulation interacts with students’ desires and motivations for accomplishing a task. As such, self-regulated learning is an adaptive process that requires learners to be aware of many aspects of their behavior, environment, and metacognition simultaneously. Encouraging students to engage in self-regulated learning strategies and processes is challenging even in traditional classroom settings; when a learning task is moved online, learners face significant additional challenges because there are added decisions, strategies, and monitoring processes that must be deployed in order to work successfully with and move efficiently through nonlinear hypermedia (Azevedo & Witherspoon, 2009). That is, learners who self-regulate during online learning must not only decide how to control their learning strategies and behaviors, but also must engage in decision-making and monitoring related to the selection of the learning materials themselves.

Although some research has found that a majority of students believe that online learning systems allow them to be self-directed learners (Mishra, 2005), other studies have found that students tend to struggle in online environments where they are in charge of determining what resources to use, when (and in what order) to use them, and how to employ them in their learning processes (Azevedo, Guthrie, & Seibert, 2004; Greene & Land, 2000; Metzger, Flanagin, & Zwarun, 2003). Prior research has found that learners find it difficult to engage in the processes necessary for effective self-regulation of their learning, at times experiencing little overall knowledge gain even after online study (Azevedo & Cromley, 2004; Azevedo, Guthrie, & Seibert, 2004).

As Butler and Winne (1995) suggest, providing feedback in a learning environment can facilitate task engagement. In turn, this engagement promotes desirable self-regulated learning strategies, such as monitoring one’s own understanding. A significant goal of providing feedback in online and digital learning environments is to encourage these metacognitive monitoring processes, as metacognitive monitoring has been found to comprise many specific challenges that students face in online learning (Azevedo, Guthrie, & Seibert, 2004; Greene & Land, 2000; Metzger, Flanagin, & Zwarun, 2003; Mishra, 2005). Taken as a whole, the research literature demonstrates a clear need
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