

Students' Attitudes to Online Learning Experiences

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Introduction

Various theorists from Vygotsky (1978) to proponents of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) have stressed the importance of social interaction in the learning process. Traditionally, computers have been seen largely as tools for specific tasks but there is now a growing practice and literature (e.g. Koschmann 1996; Palloff & Pratt 1999) on their use to support collaborative learning. Much of this literature has been very positive about the impact of new learning technologies on teaching and learning. However, we were interested in looking at these technologies from students' points of view as learners. Hara and Kling (1999) suggested several reasons for the plethora of positive accounts of students' experience in online learning environments - the main one being that course developers and teachers tend to be "biased towards technology" and view their courses through rose-tinted glasses. Their paper concluded that students do suffer frustration and that this originated from three main sources: technological problems; infrequent and minimal feedback from tutors and unclear instructions put out on the web or by email. This paper explores the factors that affected our students' attitudes to their experience of working in an online learning environment.

Case study

The module under discussion, 'The Virtual Classroom in the Information Age', was offered at the then University of North London (now part of London Metropolitan University) to students taking the B.A. in Education Studies or the B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education) courses. It was first taught in semester A 2000-2001, and there were 35 students initially registered for the module.

The aim of the module was to use ICT (Information and Communications Technology) to develop students' higher learning and thinking skills, encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas, and to use a diversity of electronic and more traditional pedagogical styles. WebCT was chosen as the online learning environment within which students from different backgrounds and courses would be encouraged 'to think globally and act locally' (Tiffin & Rajasingham 1995).

The module consisted of two strands: firstly, seminars, using both online and face-to-face communication based around key texts, and secondly, students working collaboratively in enquiry-based learning using the Internet as a tool for research and

communication. The assessment comprised a presentation of the enquiry-based project; a portfolio containing evidence of participation in online discussion (including a journal of weekly learning experiences), and a reflective report on the impact of new learning technologies on the students' learning.

Our research used five different sources of information: end of module questionnaires and evaluation forms, review of students' reflective journals, analysis of quantitative data generated by WebCT, and scrutiny of both online dialogue and transcripts of chat room activity. We were interested to see what students thought about working online, the difficulties and successes they were having, and their methods of coping with the experience.

Discussion of findings

Initial feelings about working online

When we analysed the range of emotions, there was a variety of initial feelings about working online, ranging from 'excellent' and 'excited' to 'scary', 'terrified' and 'petrified'. Most of the responses were less extreme with about the same number of students either looking forward or feeling daunted, anxious and worried.

Ways in which these feelings have changed and why

By far the majority of students registered a change from that of negativity, at the start of the module, to positive feelings by the end. Improvement in IT/technical capability and increased confidence were the leading reasons for change in attitudes to online learning. Interestingly, the negative feelings expressed by the students, such as frustration at limited access to facilities, time constraints, and technical problems, concerned issues all out of the students' control. Positive changes were in areas they could be proactive in addressing, such as attitude, confidence and ICT skills. However, the mixed prior experience in IT capability resulted in some students feeling intimidated by their more IT-literate colleagues.

Attitudes to working collaboratively online

The students raised several issues, namely: sense of isolation; face-to-face *versus* online communication; communication in terms of social skills; access and time constraints; software (WebCT) and technical problems. Responses indicated positive and negative attitudes, although negative comments were more numerous.

In the reflective evaluations students were able to identify, in some detail, their gains as learners. They could see the benefits of good teamwork, the group approach to problem-solving and they welcomed the opportunity to interact with a wider range of students. Working online had a positive influence on students' confidence, which encouraged them to participate in online discussions, and helped some to overcome shyness. It also motivated them to think and work independently, with opportunities to work in their own time at home, which indicates a match between the mode of learning and students' preferred style of learning.

Our study outcomes have some parallels with Teague's (1999) findings that synchronous and asynchronous technology provided different benefits to online learners. The use of synchronous technologies, such as chat rooms, were generally perceived by the participants as helping to establish group identity and dispel feelings

of isolation – even though certain issues, including access, group dynamics, technical problems and time constraints, did impede student participation. On the other hand, the use of bulletin boards and email facilitated flexible communication about collaborative work between students working from different locations. Many of our students were not as positive about these methods although some saw their potential. A reason for this could be that the students could make face-to-face contact any time since they were all on the same course, on the same campus. By contrast, Teague's students were located around the world, therefore face-to-face interaction was not an option.

Feelings of isolation mitigated against engagement with online learning. Students observed that it was hard to get responses after leaving messages either by email or postings. Hence, some students found working face-to-face a preferable medium and were pleased that they had the opportunity to engage in this way. They felt that they did not make as much progress when working online as a group, as in a face-to-face situation. The reasons were clear: as one respondent noted, "Online learning is beneficial to some people, though some may miss out on emotional support and feedback that another human can provide". Language was another factor. One student for whom English was an additional language found it more difficult to express herself in the written word and felt at a disadvantage when doing research or communicating with others online.

With respect to social skills, there was evidence of certain students dominating online discussions and others not taking a very active role. Problems emerged in some groups with members who "did not want to listen or take on board others' ideas, and instead of being a support network the work became more stressful". In retrospect, this kind of situation could have been addressed by establishing codes of conduct to facilitate smooth group functioning.

Group dynamics also had some impact on the group project that was an assessed piece of work. A student commented that they hoped "the next assignment is to produce the work independently and not as a group. This is because not everyone bothered to keep in contact, people did not take responsibility." In a similar vein, another student thought that "the collaborative group work was fine although some people took a more active role in the work itself". However, a positive view was that online learning provided opportunities for time management, and some students found it an enjoyable way of communicating with their peers.

Matters of access arose for several students because of their not having regular access to computers at home, due to economic factors. As they saw it, this had a detrimental effect on their participation in online discussions. One student commented: "It was difficult because I had no Internet access from home thus I only depended on the university computer." There was also an issue of availability of students to work together online, particularly in the chat rooms.

The question of time concerned many students. They noted that having to keep up with postings and email meant that they had to log on quite frequently, so they ended up spending more time on this module than they would normally have expected. Yet students also acknowledged the flexibility of online learning in terms of the advantages of being able to work from different places in one's own time and at one's own pace, and to investigate topics they liked in greater depth as well as covering the essentials.

Regarding technical problems, some students found a great deal of difficulty logging onto the university network at the beginning of the module, leading to feelings of being left behind. The problems were not with WebCT, as such, but rather with the computer network. Indeed, most of the students found WebCT a valuable tool for communication and to assist learning. It also encouraged motivation and helped the students to take responsibility for their own learning. Some found it difficult to get used to as they were lacking computer skills. Others felt pressurised, in that they had to participate in online discussion, even when they felt they had nothing to say. Nevertheless, students valued the interactive features, the flexibility offered and opportunities to exchange information at any time.

Conclusion

In her paper "Online Learning Communities", Bauman (1997) stresses the need for designers of online courses to take heed of the more affective and social aspects that are part of a learning community. These needs are largely met in a real classroom and if they are ignored in an online environment then the students' experiences will be so much the poorer. She argues that the reasons why students, on the whole, seem to find online courses more difficult or time-consuming, is that they are required to take a more active role in their own learning. While this was true for some of our students, many appreciated the flexibility of online learning and responded to the incentive it can create to become a more independent learner.

Evidence from Wegerif (1998) suggests that for many students, using bulletin boards or conferencing can be a much better support for collaborative learning than face-to-face sessions. Yet the converse was true with some of our students who favoured face-to-face over online interaction. A related issue is whether students engage with the course material at a 'deep' or 'surface' level. A number of reports and studies have indicated that both synchronous and asynchronous methods of communication, facilitated by a computer, can have a transformative effect on the students as learners. On the other hand, many of the paralinguistic methods of collaborative learning as understood by Vygotsky are dependent on face-to-face communication, and so are denied to students in online learning. Accordingly, some of our students experienced face-to-face contact more as conducive to expressing and clarifying ideas.

The success of online learning can also be dependent on the assumptions made by module designers. It is easy for teachers to assume that the students want to work online, have certain levels of IT capability, regular access to computers, time to keep up-to-date with developments on the module, and that students are adept in the language of online communication. But, as this paper has shown, these issues can have a significant impact on how students engage with online learning opportunities. It is evident that to facilitate their constructive involvement, it is essential to address learners' attitudes and emotions about computer-based learning and interactions within groups, as well as their ICT and communicative skills and technical and access problems.

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