Learner Experiences in Online Courses: Towards a Model for Learning to Learn Online

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored learner experiences in online courses. This short paper presents the model developed from the data analysis that shows the online learning experiences of the participants in the study.

Introduction

Online learning advocates position online education as superior to and distinctly different from traditional face-to-face education and distance education. These advocates also suggest that learners and instructors moving from either face-to-face education or distance education must undergo a transformation in their epistemic meaning perspectives (how they learn, what they think about the learning process) in order to experience the full benefits of online education [3][4]. Harasim [4], Eastmond [3] and Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff [5] all agree that the traditional frameworks, or perspectives, that learners hold about learning may be inadequate for the online learning environment. Their discussion of changing frameworks and perspectives is similar to the concepts and terminology Mezirow [7] uses in his theory of perspective transformation. Mezirow [7] contends that learners can have distorted or undeveloped meaning perspectives which lead them "to view reality in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included, impedes differentiation, lacks permeability or openness to other ways of seeing, [and] does not facilitate an integration of experience" (p. 188).

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the learning experiences of students enrolled in two online graduate-level library media courses: Reference Materials (offered Fall 1999), and Administration (offered Winter 2000). The Reference Materials course was conducted fully online using the TopClass courseware system. The Administration course met face-to-face each week and was supplemented by a TopClass bulletin board discussion list.

A collective qualitative case study design was used [8]. Four participants were chosen using criterion-based sampling [6]. The selection criteria were: 1) the Reference Materials course was their first online course; 2) they completed both the Reference and the Administration courses; and 3) they had less than two years' Internet experience prior to enrollment in the Reference course. Data collection methods included focus group interviews, individual interviews and document analysis of online communications [2]. The data analysis proceeded in two phases. Phase 1 was a within-case analysis of data from each participant. Phase 2 was a cross-case analysis of the data from all four participants.

A Model for Learning to Learn Online

The cross-case analysis of the data from the four participants resulted in the Learning to Learn Online (LTL) model shown in Figure 1. The model is divided into three major phases: Course Preparation, Course Experience, and Course Outcome. The model shows the process by which participants learned to learn in an online environment.

![Figure 1. Learning to Learn Online (LTLO) Model.](image-url)
Course preparation

The Course Preparation phase of the LTLO captures the state of the participants immediately prior to their entering the online course. This phase has two components: Personal History and Pre-Course Learning Perspectives [1]. The Personal History component includes the professional and personal experiences, interests and goals of the participants. The Pre-Course Learning Perspectives component includes participant online course expectations, learning style preferences and learning environment preferences. The arrow from the Personal History component to the Pre-Course Learning Perspectives component indicates that the Pre-Course Learning Perspectives arise out of the Personal History of the participants.

Course experience

The Course Experience phase of the LTLO captures the learning experiences of the participants during the online course. This phase has three components: Problems Encountered, Coping Strategies, and Support Sources.

Course outcomes

The Course Outcomes phase of the learning model captures the status of the participants after completion of the online course. This phase has four components: Skills Acquired, Revised Learning Perspectives, Transformed Learning Perspectives and Integration Activities. The arrow from the Transform Coping Strategy of the Course Experience phase to the Transformed Learning Perspective component of the Course Outcomes phase indicates that participants adopting the Transform strategy have a resulting transformed learning perspective. The arrows from the Resist and Revise Coping Strategies indicate that participants adopting the Resist and Revise strategy of the Course Experience phase to the Revised Learning Perspectives and Skills Acquired components of the Course Outcomes phase indicate that participants adopting the Resist and Revise strategies acquire Content and Technology skills and have their Learning Perspectives revised. The arrow from Skills Acquired and the Transformed Learning Perspectives components to the Integration Activities components indicate that participants engage in professional and personal activities that serve as proof of their acquired skills and transformed learning perspectives.

Implications

This research shows that online learners adopt a variety of strategies to successfully overcome the challenges they face in online courses. The research suggests that online instructors and course designers can use this knowledge of challenges and strategies to provide online learning environments that address the challenges and facilitate the coping strategies.

Further, this research suggests that online educators can use learners’ pre-course learning perspectives to design online learning experiences which support transformative learning, and thus improve the student experience in the online course.

Future research will seek to verify the LTLO model. The first phase of validation will be analyzing case study data from six additional students. The second phase will be the development of a survey instrument that assesses the experiences of new online learners to the experiences outlined in the model.

References