Abstract

This qualitative case study explored learner experiences in online courses. The study identified three categories of challenges that online learners face: learning perspective, technology, and course design; four coping strategies that learners used to address the challenges: Transform, Resist, Revise and Apply; and three categories of learning outcomes: skill acquisition, transformed learning perspectives, and revised learning perspectives.

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 [3], Eastmond [2] and Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff [4] 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 [6] uses in his theory of perspective transformation. Mezirow [6] 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). Mezirow's remedy for the distorted or undeveloped meaning perspective is the eleven-phase process of perspective transformation.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was: 1) to describe the learning experiences of students enrolled in an online graduate-level library media course, and 2) to identify their individual learning outcomes. Three questions guided this study:
1. What challenges do learners face in online courses?
2. What coping strategies do learners adopt in online courses?
3. What are the learning outcomes for the students in online courses?

Background

The Instructional Technology Department at a southeastern Research I institution went online in 1999-2000 for four pre-service graduate-level school library media courses. This study includes the first two of these 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.

Methodology

A collective qualitative case study design was used [7]. The unit of analysis was the individual participant who had completed both the Reference Materials and Administration courses [5].

Four participants (Barbara, Diane, April, and Carolyn) were chosen using criterion-based sampling [5]. 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. Carolyn had one and one-half years of Internet experience, Barbara and Diane had less than one year, and April had none. Each participant was enrolled in a master's program in Instructional Technology with the goal of beginning or continuing careers as school library media specialists.

A variety of data collection methods were used to enhance the comprehensiveness of the students [1]. On the first night of the Reference course, the students submitted written statements of their course expectations. Focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the each course. After both courses were completed, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with the four participants. In addition, a document analysis was conducted of the archived bulletin board messages from
both courses and the archived e-mail messages between the instructor and the students in the Reference course.

The data analysis proceeded in two phases. Phase 1 was a within-case analysis of data from each participant. The data were open-coded, grouped into natural groupings, and categorized. Phase 2 was a cross-case analysis of the data from all four participants. During this phase, the categories were aggregated and their inter-relationships identified. During both phases, the emerging findings were reviewed with the course instructor, a senior researcher and two research peers.

Findings

What challenges do learners face in online courses?

This study identified three categories of challenges that online learners face: learning perspective challenges, technology challenges, and course design challenges. Each participant's personal history and pre-course learning perspectives were major factors in determining which challenges she faced.

What coping strategies do learners adopt in online courses?

This study identified four coping strategies that learners used to address the challenges they face in the online course: Transform, Resist, Revise and Apply. Each participant applied each of the strategies at some point during the course. The Transform strategy was used least often, while the Revise strategy was used most often. In addition, each participant's course experience can be characterized by a single strategy. Barbara's predominate strategy was Transform as she was able to identify an instance in which her pre-course learning perspectives were transformed. Diane's predominate coping strategy was Resist as exemplified by her decision to cease participating in the discussion list. April's predominate coping strategy was Revise as indicated by her ability to revise (but not transform) her learning perspectives as she encountered and solved problems in the online course. Carolyn's predominate coping strategy was Apply as her pre-course learning perspectives were most compatible with the online learning environment.

What are the learning outcomes for the students in online courses?

This study identified three categories of learning outcomes for online learners: skill acquisition, transformed learning perspectives, and revised learning perspectives. Each of the participants experienced skill acquisition, one experienced transformed learning perspectives, and two experienced revised learning perspectives. The Transform strategy resulted in transformed learning perspectives, while the Resist, Revise and Apply strategies led to skill acquisition or revised learning perspectives.

At the end of the course, all four participants had mastered the course content requirements as demonstrated by their all receiving a grade of "A." Diane, Barbara and April—the three participants with the least amount of Internet experience—gained competence and confidence in their use of Internet technologies. Diane and April demonstrated their competence by assisting others with lesser skills. In addition to gaining technical competence, Barbara also experienced a transformation of her learning perspectives and learned independence. Her application of this independence in interactions with her fellow teachers and with her students is evidence of the transformation. While Carolyn, the participant with the most Internet experience, gained content knowledge, she did not express any gain in technical competence or any transformation in learning perspectives.

Implications

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 should seek to verify the challenges, coping strategies, and learning outcomes categories identified in this study.

References