PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE LEARNING IN AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY: AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' (ASIAN REGION) PERSPECTIVE – SUPPORT FOR LEARNING

Renee Chew Shiun Yee
INTI International University
Persiaran Perdana BBN Putra Nilai, 71800, Nilai. Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia
reneesy.chew@newinti.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Several researchers have reported that cultural and language differences can affect online interactions and communications between students from different cultural backgrounds. Other researchers have asserted that online learning is a tool that can improve teaching and learning skills, but its effectiveness depends on how the tool is used. To delve into these aspects further, this study set out to investigate the kinds of learning difficulties encountered by international students and how they actually coped with online learning. The modified Online Learning Environment Survey (OLES) instrument was used to collect data from the sample of 109 international students at a university in Brisbane, Australia. A smaller group of 35 domestic students was also included for comparison purposes. Contrary to assumptions from previous research, the findings revealed that there were only a few differences between the international Asian and Australian students with regards to their perceptions of online learning.

Keywords: Online Learning, Online Learning Environments, Online Learning Environment Survey (OLES), Net Gen, Support for Learning

INTRODUCTION

Online learning, for the purposes of this study, is defined as learning which takes place via a web browser on the Internet, intranet, and extranet (Chiu, Chiu, & Chang, 2007). The usability of the learning management system is important, as are its applications, such as interactive video, bulletin boards, chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, and document sharing systems (Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006).

A review of existing research literature on students' perceptions of online learning reveals several gaps in the body of knowledge necessary for the informed utilization of blended online courses with Asian students studying in Australian universities. An example of this is the lack of research on the influence of different culturally-based learning styles on the Asian students' engagement with and perceptions of online learning. According to Wang (2007), cultural attributes affect online presence and learner perceptions. Another gap is the limited corpus of knowledge about how differences in online learning environments influence Asian students' perceptions of online learning. These student differences in online learning environments have been reported in the literature (e.g., McLoughlin, 2001a, 2001b). In terms of student experiences, the research study focused on the problems that these students faced when studying in an online learning environment, the strategies they employed to address these problems, and how they used the online learning tools (e.g., chat rooms, conference/video conferencing and emails) to overcome these challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted with the international students from the Asian Region countries who were enrolled at an Australian university. The student sample comprised 109 international students (n=109) and 35 Australian students (n=35). All of the students in the study were first or second year undergraduate degree students. The original nine-scale survey origin from Trinidad and Pearson (2004 & 2005) was modified. The modified survey consisted of twelve OLES scales (three of which were added by the researcher) used to investigate the students' perceptions of online learning. The modified version of OLES contained a total of 71 items broken into 12 scales – CU (Computer Usage), LS (Lecturer Support), SIC (Student Interaction & Collaboration), PR (Personal Relevance), AL (Authentic Learning), SA (Student Autonomy), EQ (Equity), EN (Enjoyment), AS (Asynchronicity), EA (Evaluation & Assessments), OLT (Online Learning Tools), and ID (Interface Design). A Likert scale questionnaire (1-Never; 2-Sometimes; 3-Quite Often;

4-Frequently; and 5-Always) was used to gather responses from the students. An open-ended item was attached at the end of each section to generate qualitative data that could be utilized to supplement the quantitative data. To facilitate the collection and analysis of data derived from the survey, the twelve modified OLES scales were clustered into four categories: Enjoyment, Usability of the Online Learning Tools, Support for Learning, and Quality of Learning. In this paper, the Support for Learning category will be reported. This category relates to how the students were assisted by their lecturers/tutors, the students were asked to complete the following four scales in the modified OLES survey: Personal Relevance (PR) scale, Authentic Learning (AL) scale, Student Autonomy (SA) scale, and Evaluation & Assessments (EA) scale. The collected data was analyzed via ANOVA to investigate the differences between the Asian international and Australian students. The feedback on the open-ended questions were then analyzed via thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

There were no statistically significant differences at the ($p < 0.05$) in the means between the international and domestic students in the four scales associated with the Support for Learning category: Computer Usage, Lecturer Support, Student Interaction and Collaboration, and Equity. The effect sizes were also small (less than 0.2) (Cohen, 1988). All the scales fell under the “Frequently” category, except for the Equity scale, that fell under the “Quite Often” category. In these four scales, international students generally scored higher means compared with domestic students except for the Student Interaction & Collaboration scale. The individual items in each of these scales are further discussed in the subsequent section.

On the Computer Usage Scale, students generally had no issues with computer usage except for some technical issues mentioned in the responses to the open-ended question. The Computer Usage scale indicates that the students seldom used computers to email assignments to their lecturers/tutors.

Several researchers (e.g. Volman, Van Eck, Heemskerk, & Kuiper, 2005; Hannon & D’Netto, 2007) have asserted that different cultures influence computer usage in education. These researchers have looked into the cultural aspects, for example, student engagement with the organizational, technological and pedagogical components of online learning. The findings from this study are at variance with these researchers; in this study, there were no significant differences indicated on the Computer Usage scale between the international

and domestic students.

Hiltz and Shea (2005) claimed that positive technology attitudes and computer skills play an important role in the success of online learning. The findings from this study are consistent with these claims. Most students stated that their use of Computer Usage fell under the “Frequently” category. This indicates that the students embraced a positive attitude towards computers, a crucial factor in online learning. The finding also explains the reason the students enjoyed online learning; it could be due to the students embracing a positive attitude towards computers.

On the Lecturer Support Scale, most of the means fell under the “Frequently” category. This indicates that the students generally perceived that they had received much support from their lecturers/tutors. According to Chou (2003), if students are able to interact with their peers and lecturers effectively, this will increase the learning satisfaction and positive attitudes of students towards online learning. Chou’s viewpoint was borne out in the responses to the items in this scale and also in the students’ written responses to the open-ended question.

The domestic students scored almost the same mean values in all the items in the Student Interaction & Collaboration scale. Generally, the domestic students scored higher compared to the international students in all items in this scale. However, the differences between domestic and international students’ means were not statistically significant at the ($p < 0.05$) level. Most of the students’ responses to the items in the scale fell under the “Frequently” category. This indicates that most of the students had positive perceptions about the support for learning provided by their interactions and collaboration with other students in the online learning environments.

On the Equity scale, most individual items fell above the “Quite Often” category. In particular, there were almost equal means in most items and this reflected, to a certain extent, that the students perceived that they were being treated fairly by the lecturers. The students were also given encouragement and equal opportunities to contribute in class discussions. However, item six (My work receives as much praise as other students' work) had the lowest mean (3.20 for international, 3.43 for domestic) among all the items on the scale. This indicated the possibility that some students perceived that their work did not receive as much praise as other students’ work.

Overall, the findings from the quantitative analysis of the data from the Likert items within the Support for Learning Scales indicate that both the international and domestic students generally had positive perceptions about the support for learning they received.

These findings were further confirmed by the qualitative analysis of the data from the open-ended questions focusing on students' perceptions of support for learning appended at the end of the Computer Usage, Lecturer Support, Student Interaction & Collaboration, and Equity Scales.

Six themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of this data. Three of these themes were positive with respect to the students' perceptions about the support for learning that they received in the online learning environments: Positive Lecturer Attitude towards Students' Learning, Easier Communication, and Information Sharing. However, three themes that emerged from the analysis (Technical Issues, Online Collaboration Issues, and Different Cultural Background) indicated perceived limitations about the support for learning provided to the students.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study appeared to contradict the findings from most previous studies in the field, namely that there were significant differences in the perceptions of online learning between international Asian and domestic Australian students based on cultural-background factors. This study found only a few differences in perceptions between the international Asian and the domestic Australian students. With the sample of participants in this study, it seemed that commonalities based on joint-membership of the Net Generation overcame most of the cultural difference factors. In addition to advancing the corpus of knowledge in the field of students' perceptions about online learning, the findings from this study have generated important implications for research and practice in this field.

REFERENCES

- Chiu, C.M., Chiu, C.S., & Chang, H.C. (2007). Examining the integrated influence of fairness and quality on learners' satisfaction and web-based learning continuance intention. *Info Systems Journal*, 17(1), 271-287. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2575.2007.00238.x>.
- Chou, C. (2003). Interactivity and interactive function in web-based learning systems: A teaching framework for designers. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 34(3), 265-279. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8535.00326>.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Hannon, J., & D'Netto, B. (2007). Cultural diversity online: Student engagement with learning technologies. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 21(5), 418-432. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09513540710760192>.
- Hiltz, R., & Shea, P. (2005). The student in the online classroom. In S. Hiltz and R. Goldman (Eds.), *Learning together online: Research on asynchronous learning networks* (pp.145-168). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Klein, H.J., Noe, R.A., & Wang, C.W. (2006). Motivation to learn and course outcomes: The impact of delivery mode, learning goal orientation, and perceived barriers and enablers. *Personnel Psychology*, 59(1), 665-702. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2006.00050.x>.
- McLoughlin, C. (2001a, December). Crossing boundaries: Curriculum and teaching implications of culturally inclusive online learning. *Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education 2001 Conference*, Fremantle, Australia. Retrieved November 23, 2010, from <http://www.aare.edu.au/01pap/mcl01720.htm>.
- McLoughlin, C. (2001b). Inclusivity and alignment: Principles of pedagogy, task and assessment design for effective cross-cultural online learning. *Distance Education*, 22(1), 7-29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0158791010220102>.
- Trinidad, S., & Pearson, J. (2004, December). Implementing and evaluating e-learning environments. *Paper presented at the Australian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education 2004 Conference*, Perth, Australia.
- Trinidad, S. & Pearson, J. (2005). OLES: An instrument for refining the design of e-learning environments. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 21(6), 396-404.
- Volman, M., Van Eck, E., Heemskerk, I., & Kuiper, E. (2005). New technologies, new differences: Gender and ethnic differences in pupils' use of ICT in primary and secondary education. *Computers and Education*, 45(1), 35-55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2004.03.001>.
- Wang, M. (2007). Designing online courses that effectively engage learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 28(2), 294-311. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2006.00626.x>.