Factors Contributing to the Effectiveness of Online Students and Instructors

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INTRODUCTION

As technological advances become mainstream in higher education, web-based learning continues to gain focus and momentum. The number of online courses in K-12, technical, professional and liberal arts education has increased significantly (Allen & Seman, 2013; Picciano, 2001; Setzer & Lewis, 2005). Multimedia technology has changed the landscape of distance education (Zirkle, Norris, Winegardner & Frustaci, 2006). Gray (2013) purports barriers to online learning are being addressed and students have access to more educational opportunities than ever before.

Online learning programs often tout more interactive, individualized and independent learning (Chen, Czerwinski & Macredie, 2000; Inan, Yukselturk & Grant, 2009; Park & Lee, 2003). However, a major challenge with web-based learning is identifying the idiosyncrasies between learning online and the traditional learning format (Inan, et. al., 2009; Martinez, 2003; Rovai, 2003). Another challenge is identifying the very different profile of online students (Dutton, Dutton & Perry, 2002; Sikora & Carroll, 2003).

Identifying the positive attributes of students and instructors in the online environment will contribute to the understanding of how we can enhance the learning experience for the student and the teaching experience for the instructor. This article will assist students and instructors in understanding the differences that may be experienced in the online environment versus the face-to-face environment and provide the opportunity to consider whether online learning and/or teaching is a "good fit" for them. Understanding why students and/or instructors might choose the online environment will also assist administrators in developing successful, quality online programs that enrich the experiences for both students and instructors.

BACKGROUND

In 1981, the first online classes were developed at the School of Management and Strategic Studies at Western Behavior Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California. An evaluation of the program, and the discussions that took place, revealed that the quality of the online course was higher than the information collected in the traditional classroom setting (Feenberg, 1999).

Since that time, a number of studies have compared the effectiveness of online instruction to traditional lecture formats. Findings have admittedly been mixed (Rivera, & McAlister, 2001; Ungerleider & Burns, 2004; Zhang, 2005). Even though a majority of the studies find no difference in student performance and student satisfaction, regardless of the delivery format (Lim, Kim, Chen & Ryder, 2008; McFarland & Hamilton,

Figure 1. Motivations to take online courses
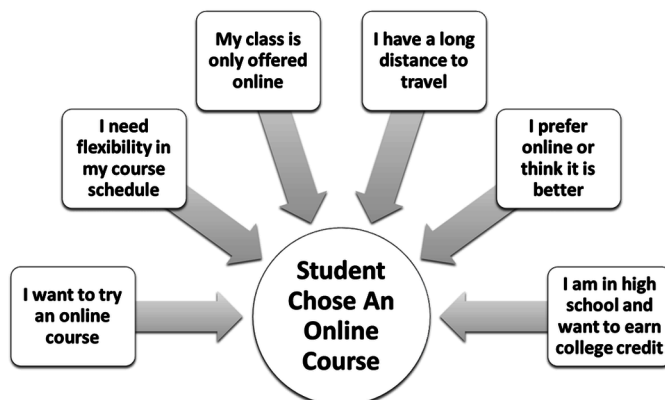
2006), there is concern regarding online student retention. Knowledge of student characteristics and how they can possibly affect online course success can provide the opportunity for faculty to intervene before grades are affected or dropout rates increase (Cochran, et al., 2014).

Kilburn (2005) developed the following conceptual map regarding student motivations to take an online course at a particular University in the Midwest. (see Figure 1)

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

In the upcoming section, an examination of student and instructor characteristics and how each of those different roles contributes to the quality of an online course will help provide insight into the foundational underpinnings of web-based learning.

Student Characteristics

It is estimated that five out of six students taking an online course are employed and would not be able to attend traditional classes (Thomas, 2001). Literature suggests that the growth in on-line courses is based on attracting new students rather than "stealing" from students enrolled in

current on-campus programs (Mangan, 2001, Thomas, 2001). Kauffman (2014) points out the convenience and flexibility that online education affords students with work and family demands. Undergraduate online students are commonly older, married, or have dependents (Dotterweich & Rochelle, 2012). Regardless of gender or age, students who need the flexibility of online or distance education classes in order to obtain a degree may find online to be a good option for them (Dotterweich & Rochelle, 2012).

Kilburn (2005) found that positive characteristics identified in studies stress the importance of an active versus passive student role in an online course. Some researchers have attempted to identify student abilities that suggest whether a student will complete an online course, or be less satisfied with an online course, in comparison to the traditional classroom setting. In Kirmizi's study (2015), student satisfaction was used as the dependent variable and sub-dimensions of a learner's readiness: computer self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner control, motivation, and online self-efficacy, as the independent variables. Kirmizi identified self-directed learning as the most valuable predictor of success, with learner control and motivation as next in importance. Shea and Bidjerano (2010) also suggested that motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation are the central components of learner presence in an online course. Studies have consistently reported

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