

Chapter 80

Factors That Contribute to Students' Course Satisfaction While Attending Online or Distance Learning Courses

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ABSTRACT

This case analyzed what factors contribute to students' satisfaction levels in online classes, and how the instructors' nonverbal immediacy impacts those factors. Surveys were administered to participants that have taken a minimum of one online course. Data was analyzed to identify the specific factors that positively and negatively impact student satisfaction levels.

BACKGROUND

The interest of online courses is rapidly growing, and the number of students that enroll in online classes is continuing to grow. In 1999 to 2000 more than seven percent of undergraduate students took a minimum of one online class. In 2000-2001, 90 percent of public universities provided online courses. During fall 2002, over 80 percent all higher education institutions offered distance learning courses, and over one and a half million students took a minimum of one online course (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Malbry, 2002). As previous research suggested, "online teaching and learning interaction is in a state of evolution and that it will continue to evolve as new technologies are introduced" (Blanchett, 2009, p. 405).

Communication between students and instructor in an online or distance learning classroom faces many problems that should be addressed (Blanchette, 2009; Rozina & Tuzlokova, 2004). It is important that in an online class the instructor needs to make students feel part of the class, maintain participation, and feel interested in the class while not being able to have face-to-face communication, where two-thirds of the class is spent talking (Blanchette, 2009). Immediacy behaviors between instructor and students appeared to be factors to successful learning. Conoway, Easton, and Schmidt (2005) found that

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5472-1.ch080

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basic face-to-face communication behaviors, such as smiling and making eye contact, are not available in an online setting. Their research found that it is essential to use other forms of nonverbal immediacy tactics in an online course--such as using first names in discussion postings, discussing personal stories, promptly responding, writing in a sociable manner, and establishing a safe emotional environment for students--in order to have increased course satisfaction levels. In online classes, good communication with instructor and students encourages positive academic performance (Althaus, 1997).

Purpose of This Case

The case examined how instructor immediacy communication influences students' course satisfaction, and what other factors contribute to an increase or decrease of students' satisfaction levels of online classes. The purpose of this research was to seek ways to improve online teaching styles to promote student course satisfaction, student retention, and student performance. Thus, this research examined how instructor nonverbal immediacy works as part of a student's course satisfaction in online or distance learning courses. The research question guiding the research is as follows:

RQ1: *What instructor immediacy behaviors contribute to increased student satisfaction levels in an online classroom?*

SETTING THE STAGE

Instructional Formats

Meyer (2004) suggested that an online learning environment is more student based versus a traditional face-to-face classroom. In a face-to-face classroom a teacher generally spends two-thirds of the time talking. "Asynchronous online communication has increased the potential for interaction between and among participants, and at the same time created the need to learn new ways to use language, since the communicative strategies that instructors and students have been socialized to in the face-to-face settings are not always adequate in the online context" (Blanchett, 2009, p. 391). Blanchette (2003) researched the environment of "teacher talk" and "learner talk" in a text based environment, such as in an online setting. Blanchette found that teachers and students use linguistics to "organize, direct, and facilitate communication" (p. 391).

Past research showed that students perceive online or distance learning courses require larger workloads than a traditional setting (Rozina & Tuzlokova, 2004). Online instructors have reported that their online courses were more difficult to teach than traditional face-to-face courses (Hartman, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2000). "Faculty complained that the online delivery was more labor-intensive in the amount of time to grade papers and respond to questions" (Sellani & Harrington, 2002, p. 133).

A student's current educational stance may have an effect on his or her ability to learn through a new setting, such as online learning, and have an effect on satisfaction about the course and instructor (Joo, 2007). Joo found that "users with high prior knowledge will obtain more structural knowledge when learning through the nonlinear web organization" (2007, p. 20).

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