

Chapter 5.13

A Case Study of the Adult Learner's Perception of Instructional Quality in Web-Based Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the perceptions of adult learners in online distance learning programs regarding the instructional quality of Web-based courses via WebCT. The results showed an overall positive perception regarding the instructional quality of online courses delivered via WebCT ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.1362$). The mean obtained for students' perceptions regarding the instructional quality items ranged from 3.7 to 3.37. The visual appeal of Web site and appropriateness of the course materials received the highest rating ($M = 3.625$). Clarity and purpose in introduction to content components earned the lowest ratings ($M = 3.37$). These results were closely correlated to students' responses regarding the

important aspects of instructional quality of online courses. The most important aspect indicated by students was the idea of having online course content and materials relevant to the course. The results of the study also indicated other perceived aspects that affect students' views of the instructional quality of an online course, including interaction, design, convenience, feedback, and usability.

INTRODUCTION

The terms *distance learning*, *distance education*, *online learning*, and *Web-based instruction* (WBI) have become buzzwords or catch phrases for the new phenomenon of learning for the adult learning population as well as the nontraditional student. These terms used to describe an ever-changing

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environment of learning represents approaches that focus on opening the access to education and training provision for adult learners, freeing the adult learners from the traditional constraints of time and place, and most of all this environment offers flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of nontraditional methods of learning. Distance education or distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education around the world, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly emphasized through the development of WBI technologies, in particular, advancements in multimedia and communication technologies and more importantly in the World Wide Web (Web) through distance education and learning platforms such as WebCT, Blackboard, and Moodle.

Online and Web-based (WB) courses within the distance education environment have become popular with both students and educational institutions as the new media to deliver educational programs. For universities and other educational programs, they are an excellent way to reach students in diverse and distant locations. Some may also be used to supplement school enrollments since students can conceivably be anywhere and take the courses. Given their popularity and increased use, it is imperative that administrators and professors monitor students' perceptions of courses using these media for delivery. It is hoped that this type of feedback can help in modifying and improving the learning environment and education programs so that course can function as desired by all parties.

With these concepts in mind, the purpose of this case study was to identify the factors that affected the adult learner or nontraditional student's perception in regards to their ideas of the instructional quality of online and WB courses. This information presented in this chapter will lead to the development and implementation of innovative strategies to promote quality teaching and student learning online and with media. In order to effectively develop a conducive environment

for the adult learner in a WB course, instructional designers, educators, trainers, and facilitators must pay particular attention to the design of instruction, the mode of delivery, and the technologies employed to disseminate the information to the adult student; only then can we begin to harness the power of online and distance learning.

BACKGROUND

Distance learning has the potential to generate new patterns of teaching and learning for the adult learning and nontraditional students. This idea is strongly linked with developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs); furthermore, it is close to the development of new learning needs and new patterns of information access and application and learning. There is evidence that distance education and advances in technology can lead to innovation in mainstream education, and may even have effects beyond the realm of education itself. Distance learning, therefore, may play a decisive role in the creation of the global knowledge-based society (Michael & Tait, 2002).

In order to understand the environment online and distance education/learning and the factors that affect the adult learner or the nontraditional student and their perception of the instructional quality of the course, there must be an understanding of terms and concepts associated with these environments. A large component of this environment relates to the principles and theories of learning including the adult learning methodology, andragogy, active learning principles, and information processing theory that includes concepts on perception. Other words associated with distance and online learning environments include instructional design, distance education/learning, instructional quality, learning communities, learning management systems, and WBI.

It is evident that open and distance learning will be an important element of future education

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