Chapter 7
Personality and Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a comparative evaluation of two pilot online courses with their traditionally taught counterparts in one of the universities of Hong Kong. As part of a natural experiment, students enrolled on two online courses were compared with their peers who were enrolled on the equivalent classroom based courses. Student satisfaction measures were taken from participants in both modes of delivery and compared with student learning style. This case highlights the impact of adopting a blended learning approach to an undergraduate programme, and suggests that Asian students who behave like Introverts in the classroom environment are likely to behave as online Extraverts when given the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and contribute to an online discussion forum.

ORGANISATION BACKGROUND

City University of Hong Kong is one of eight Government funded universities in the Special Administrative Region (SAR). It has three Colleges (Science and Engineering, Humanities and Social Science, and Business) and two Schools (Law and Creative Media) with a total undergraduate and postgraduate student population of approximately 20, 000 students. Despite, being a relatively young institution, only receiving university status in 1994, it is ranked 18th in Asia and 147th in the world by The Times Higher/QS World University Rankings (2008).

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduction

Online learning is now generally accepted as an effective method of instruction. Much recent educational research has focused on examining the purposes and situations for which online education

is best suited. Typically, this research has concentrated on five main areas:

- What are the particular characteristics of effective online students and teachers?
- Is online learning and teaching as effective as traditional face-to-face teaching?
- What factors determine the most appropriate use of technology in an online teaching situation?
- How important is teacher-student and student-student interaction in the online learning process?
- What cost factors should be considered when planning or implementing distance education programs and how are those costs offset by benefits to the learner?

This chapter concentrates on the first two of these five areas and provides a comparative evaluation of two pilot online courses with their traditionally taught counterparts. As part of a natural experiment (an experiment where the conditions observed occur naturally and require no manipulation of variables), students enrolled on two online courses were compared with their peers who were enrolled on the equivalent classroom based courses. Student satisfaction measures were taken from participants in both modes of delivery and compared with student learning style measured using the Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire (2000).

Learning Style and Online Learning

Terrell & Dringus (2000) investigated the effect of learning style on student success in an online learning environment and concluded that institutions offering online education programmes should give consideration to the different learning styles of their students because these could impact significantly on academic achievement. The effect of learning style on student success in online learning has been extensively researched and so

does not form the focus of this study (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Souder, 1993; Ridley & Sammour, 1996; Diaz, 2000a). However, the relationship between learning style and student satisfaction in two online applied psychology courses is investigated because research into the link between learning styles and student satisfaction, in Asia in particular, remains rare. In concluding that online students were more independent and on-campus students were more dependent, Diaz & Cartnal (1999) demonstrated that health education students enrolled in an online class were likely to have different learning styles than equivalent on-campus students. The study reported in this chapter further investigates the learning styles of online and traditional students and correlates these factors with students' reported satisfaction with the learning experience.

Acknowledging their debt to Kolb's (1984) work on learning and the identification of learning styles, Honey & Mumford (1986) identify a different four stage process from Kolb's Converger, Diverger, Assimilator and Accommodator which involves four styles which they call Activists, Reflectors, Theorists and Pragmatists. For a full description of each learning style, see Honey and Mumford (1982). These learning style preferences appear particularly appropriate for a comparative study of this type because they are based on the idea that students pick up habits in relation to learning which they regularly utilise. According to the theory, the authors would expect the characteristics of Reflectors and Theorists to be most suited to online learning, and therefore to produce the highest satisfaction levels. Activists and Pragmatists might be expected to produce the highest satisfaction levels in the traditional mode of learning. These are the correlations primarily tested in this research.

Other Key Factors

A summary of key research studies in this area yields some conflicting findings relevant to the

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