

## Chapter 4

# Exploring the Influence of Affiliation Motivation in the Effectiveness of Web-Based Courses

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Students are considered the central element of any learning process. This article examines one specific characteristic of students in Web-based courses: their affiliation motivation. The objective is to explore the influence of affiliation motivation on students in the effectiveness of Web-based courses. The authors conducted a case study of a Brazilian Web-based course. Six different data collection strategies were used: open and semi-structured interviews, direct observations, record and document analyses, and a structured survey. The results show the significant influence of three main constructs related to affiliation motivation (attention, positive stimulation, and emotional support) in four dimensions related to students: (1) their satisfaction, (2) their perceptions of course results and quality, (3) their perceptions of the effectiveness of Web-based courses compared with that of on-site courses, and (4) their perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of Web-based courses.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2023-0.ch004

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has been appointed as a solution for the creation of virtual environments that enable an interactive, flexible distance learning experience that was never before possible. As a consequence, investments in the implementation of Web-based distance education and training programs have been significant (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Kim, Yang, Nam, & Kim, 2010; Maia & Meirelles, 2005; Salas, Kosarzycki, Burke, Fiore, & Stone, 2002). However, it is important to consider that the hope of a wide use of the Internet in education and training depends on many factors that influence the effectiveness of such a goal (Kim *et al.*, 2010; Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001). Among these factors, students constitute the central element of any learning process. Research has already demonstrated that the individual differences among students affect distance learning outcomes; thus, there have been tentative efforts to determine which individual variables (student characteristics) affect these outcomes (Chen & Paul, 2003; Salas *et al.*, 2002). This work focuses on one of these characteristics: affiliation motivation.

Researchers have focused on the “potential association among students’ interpersonal relationship and their academic motivation, behavior, and achievement” (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008, p. 115). Although teacher-student relationships and the relationships of students with their peers has been the object of research attention in traditional education, research on Web-based courses is scarce. Today, it is possible to create Web-based virtual learning environments that allow a high degree of interaction among participants (Beldarain, 2006). However, this interaction does not necessarily ensure that the social contact needs of students are fulfilled by such courses. First, students establish comparisons between the interaction that occurs in traditional education versus Web-based education. Second, students differ in their individual levels of affiliation motivation.

Researchers have presented diverse opinions regarding the proximity and the contact that is established in virtual learning environments. For example, although some researchers view Web-based courses as impersonal and independent environments, the study of Arbaugh (2001) affirms that these courses can reduce the traditional distance that exists between teachers and students because virtual environments are more dependent on a collective effort from all participants than on a concentrated effort from one instructor to ensure the success of such courses. Thus, Coppola, Hilts, and Rooter (2002) verified that the relationships in these courses became closer in some Web-based courses even though the instructors often consider the language that is used among the students to be more formal.

In contrast, Richardson and Swan (2003) consider the lack of social contact to be one of the main disadvantages of Web-based courses. These authors identified numerous critics in prior studies who have stated that Internet learning is not as effective as traditional classroom learning because of the lack of in person interactions. For example, Bullen (as cited in Richardson & Swan, 2003) conducted a case study to examine the participation of students in an undergraduate course using a conference that is mediated by computers. The case study showed that some students feel “disconnected” from other students in this type of learning environment because of the lack of facial expressions and other common characteristics of traditional classroom environments. Lawhead *et al.* (1997) affirm that numerous authors agree that the lack of personal contact is one of the disadvantages of Internet-based distance learning. In addition, Salomon and Almog (1998) highlight the need for face-to-face (rather than virtual) contact among students as a crucial limiting factor in virtual courses.

Based on this context, Salas *et al.* (2002) highlighted the necessity of research to examine whether the social interaction needs of students affect the learning process and their satisfaction.

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