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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 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 communi-

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