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Theory-to-Practice

Decision-Making by Online Instructors: Recognizing Student Potential for Success

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the traits that online instructors believe make students successful and compared these expectations to the work instructors actually assigned to students. The researchers completed three interviews each with two instructors who were teaching a college course online. An analysis of the transcripts revealed that these instructors ask students to demonstrate different skills online than those that the instructors connect to online success. While both instructors expected independent learners to succeed online, students were asked to perform interdependent tasks in teams with their online classmates. Both instructors indicated that future versions of their courses would be increasingly interdependent.

Since Knowles (1950) constructed the first andragogical model of adult education, student self-direction has been widely considered a trait that contributes to student success. Knowles' adult learning model (1987, 1990) contains several expectations in addition to self-direction, including learners' requirements for a rationale for learning, a purpose for learning, and motivation springing from extrinsic and intrinsic sources.

The expectation for student self-direction has received new prominence today with the global explosion of online learning. As an increasing number of courses and degrees can be taken online, instructors and students both have assumed new roles. The proposition that guided this research proposed that a pair of online instructors would find

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characteristics of autonomous learners (learners who are responsible, motivated, and self-directed) to be the traits that would make students successful in online classes. While this research acknowledges that different styles of learning exist, ultimately it inquires whether learners are equipped to be successful online.

Theoretical Framework

A three-stage developmental model conceptualized by Kasworm and Yao (1992) provides the theoretical framework for this study. According to Kasworm and Yao, the purpose of their Stages of Teaching/Learning in Distance Learning model is to provide the foundation for a dialogue regarding the development and enhancement of adult learner autonomy and self-directedness as part of the greater distance learning discourse.

The Stages of Teaching/Learning in Distance Learning model suggests a continuum of three stages, moving from low student autonomy and high instructor dominance in Stage One to high student autonomy and low instructor dominance in Stage Three. Stage Two is characterized by moderate student autonomy and moderate instructor dominance.

It is assumed that most adults enter into new and stressful learning situations with a preference for Stage One: High Instructor Dominance, Low Student Autonomy. Stage One provides clarity, security, and high expert guidance. "Thus for those who are not really prepared as self-directed learners, quality distance education programs should begin the introductory courses and presentation of new fundamental knowledge with this stage of instructional design" (Kasworm & Yao, 1992, p. 7). Stage One learners focus on acknowledging, retrieving, and memorizing facts.

Stage Two learners are moving beyond the memorization of facts to the application and evaluation of their own experiences. Distance learning courses characterized by Moderate Instructor Dominance and Moderate Student Autonomy provide learners with alternative learning strategies such as interactive group discussions. Stage Two learners are open to critical thinking, reflective problem solving, qualitative assessments, and learner-initiated evaluation under the tutelage of their instructor.

In Low Instructor Dominance, High Student Autonomy courses (Stage Three), "the learner must come to the relationship with his or her own set of needs, concerns for making of meaning, and action in

relation to the course" (Kasworm & Yao, 1992, p. 9). The instructor's role is that of facilitator and co-instructor with the learner(s). Instructor-learner interaction maximizes learner dominance by the provision of learning projects and learning contracts. In essence, learners actively design and evaluate their own learning experiences with minimal instructor guidance.

Kasworm and Yao's (1992) Stages of Teaching/Learning in Distance Learning model is designed to provide guidance for instructional designers, distance education program personnel, and distance education instructors. The model suggests that distance education can be designed to enhance the development of autonomy and self-directedness among adult learners.

It is worth noting, however, that this framework itself may require revision today since contemporary instructors and students themselves have spent so much time learning online. Kasworm and Yao (1992) could not have anticipated the advent of current online technologies that enable faculty and students to acquire online interactive skills. Chat rooms, blogs, and other online applications are a routine part of 21st century socializing, and permit learners to proceed intrepidly across an online landscape.

Review of the Literature

The literature outlines the potential that online technology brings to learning. An expanded financial investment in web-based courses by higher education institutions offers multiple benefits for students. These benefits include increased access to a wider array of courses and a renewed focus on course design (Svetcov, 2000). However, the success of individuals and institutions hinges on the premise that an information-based society will replace the industrial-based society in the global marketplace of the near future (Mac Keogh, 2001). In fact, Hara and Kling (2000) denote a "promotional bias" apparent in both practitioner and popular literature that tends to "emphasize the virtues and minimize the difficulties of routinely providing high quality and effective Internet-enabled distance education courses" (p. 558). Similarly, Mac Keogh points out that "a largely uncritical consensus" has emerged touting the benefits of technology in education (p. 224).

Business interests are competing with pedagogy to lead innovation in higher education web-based instruction. Twigg (2000) writes, "Institutions are wise to concentrate on those courses that will generate a high return on their investment" (p. 42). However, Goodison (2001) points out that universities run the risk of abandoning academic excellence

by attending only to the economic bottom line. Byron and Gagliardi (1998) find business and industry ill-equipped to educate, and dub much of the educational software produced commercially as "edutainment" that does not reflect accepted instructional standards.

Higher education is in the tenuous position of having to justify the instructional benefits of investing in online courses. Institutions may be unable to demonstrate that their priorities for technology use are determined by pedagogical needs (Billings, Connors, & Skiba, 2001; Busch, 2003; Sims, 2001) or, more importantly, by student needs (Curran, 2001) ahead of practical or administrative considerations. Devine (1997) writes that improving access to technology is emphasized over improving pedagogy, and efficiency is measured according to the number of dollars saved, not according to student performance. As a result, Trench (1999) observes, "[A] great deal of money could be spent without any measurable or significant gains in the quality of education" (p. 112). Higher education faces the temptation of treating online instruction as a panacea that, if ingested, will automatically yield greater academic success. Instructors, however, are challenged to find implementing online pedagogy so automatic.

While some sources (Malveaux, 2000; Vogel & Klassen, 2001) treat faculty members' willingness and ability to integrate technology as a foregone conclusion, by some accounts the faculty member is "the weak link" in technological innovation. One crucial ingredient that often goes missing from promoting technology use in higher education courses is appropriate advising and training for faculty (Hara & Kling, 2000; Lynch, Altschuler, & McClure 2002). Testimony from the recent past indicates that early in the evolution of online teaching (late 1990s), instructors had to complete much of their preparation independently (Sudzina, n.d.). The reality of the paradigm shift toward technology, in fact, is that many faculty members are not technology savvy and may not be able to provide the technological leadership some new learners will need and that future innovations in online pedagogy will require.

An additional challenge faced by faculty is a dearth of literature about exemplary online pedagogy. Busch (2003) points out that oftentimes activities for online courses are traditional "pattern and drill" assignments merely copied into a digital format (p. 284). Goodison (2001) writes that some institutions do not understand the complexity of adjusting a course from face-to-face instruction to a web-based format. As a result, instructors are often unprepared for the increased time online

instruction requires and little recognition in the form of remuneration or a reduced course load that is forthcoming from their administrations (Hereford, 2000). The literature that does exist about teaching online is typically very contextualized and lacks examples of ways to apply generalized advice.

The fledgling body of best practice literature consistently points out that online student success is associated with student communication with the instructor and among classmates (Dede, 2000; Floyd, 2003; Goodison, 2001; Hara & Kling, 2000). Online courses reach their full potential when assignments are "open-ended, rich, student-centered tasks" (Hedberg, 2003, p. 175) and instruction is "cooperative and collaborative, project-driven, and constructivist in nature" (Sudzina, n.d., para. 32). With an increasing use of online technology in her classes since the mid-1990's, Sudzina has seen her instructional role evolve into that of a facilitator and mentor.

At the heart of online pedagogy is the belief that students can learn as effectively in front of their computers as they can sitting in the classroom (Lynch, Altschuler, & McClure, 2002). This confidence in learners' independence fuels a multitude of instructional design decisions for online learning. Ultimately, students do not unanimously find that online interactivity enhances their learning. Hara and Kling (2000) discerned that the potentials for online interactivity did not find their way unimpeded into actual student practice. Some students were overwhelmed by the volume of e-mail posted by class participants and therefore did not read other people's postings before mailing their own messages. Students also reported being frustrated with a lack of feedback from the instructor. In addition, online students tended to resist seeking assistance from classmates and sought help from the instructor instead. Blocher, de Montes, Willis, and Tucker (2002) suggest that some students remain trapped in a traditional, teacher-centered paradigm in which the teacher "was considered the holder of knowledge" (p. 9-10).

Data Analysis

Both researchers in this study have taught online and/or hybrid courses at the graduate level as well as face-to-face courses in college classrooms. For this study, the researchers conducted a series of three interviews each—prior to, during, and following one online semester—with two participants during the 2002-03 academic year. These instructors/

participants were in the process of teaching an online undergraduate course, one section each with approximately 20 students per section. The interviews were transcribed, and emergent themes were analyzed according to Yin's (1994) framework for case study analysis.

The purpose for this study was to explore the beliefs of two online instructors regarding which student traits make students successful in web-based courses. "Liz" and "Patty," the participants in this study, have trained university faculty members to teach online. Liz has a background in library science and instructional design. She possesses some online teaching experience. The other participant Patty earned degrees in human communication and business data processing, with a master's degree in library science. Liz and Patty's undergraduate course, Computer Information Systems (CIS) 101, was delivered entirely online during the semester that this data was collected. This was the first course Patty had taught online.

While an online instructor may be responsible for multiple information-management duties (e.g., posting assignments, emailing to students), the instructors in this study have revealed that teaching online emphasizes the role of the instructional planner. Course design may even be more significant to online courses than the preparations face-to-face instructors make for teaching. The online instructor must design meaningful assignments that encourage student interactivity. Ultimately, through thoughtful design, these instructors seek student input that will establish and fortify the class' online community and motivate further student participation.

Liz likens her role to that of a coach because she believes the online teacher needs to motivate students to be active but independent. The coaching metaphor works well for Liz because the students must remain active and learn extensively on their own. At the heart of Patty's online instruction is flexibility. Students come to her CIS 101 course from a variety of disciplines, and, based on the intensity of assignments from their required courses, Patty tends to make allowances by adjusting deadlines or the number of assignments students will complete during a particular semester. She believes that each group of students is unique, and she must accommodate the needs of a particular class. Because students must already be familiar with some computing basics in order to take her course, Patty may curtail her coursework in order to allow students to devote greater attention to classes in their majors.

The following themes emerged from an analysis of the data: expectations for students in the learning community, expectations for communication, suitability of distance learning for meeting individual student needs, and expectations for student responsibility.

Expectations for Students in the Learning Community

Both instructors said that the successful students in their online classes will be highly motivated and, as andragogical theory spells out, self-disciplined. In addition, the instructors expect that effective online students will maintain good communication with their course instructor and will adapt to new learning environments.

At the beginning of their courses, these instructors give a diagnostic test that points toward a student's suitability for learning online. Students answer a variety of questions on these tests about motivation and independence. Liz says,

> If the student got a good score, they are very competent and can learn online. If their score is very low, some students should go back to face-to face . . . From this survey, I can see who is highly motivated, who is self-disciplined, and who can conquer it themselves. It is really more their responsibility. Responsibility, motivation, and self-discipline are really important for all of our students.

Both instructors believe that students have the responsibility to keep themselves involved in the online course for the entire semester. Liz expects students to email her weekly, and Patty tells of the student who failed the class because her only involvement for the semester was logging on a dozen times in a single day.

Each student has a unique reason for taking a course online instead of face-to-face. For many students, the motivation may be a desire to take the class in isolation, i.e., proceeding at an individual speed in a location of the student's choice. Nevertheless, Patty believes online students want to feel connected to a community of learners. She says that the online interaction is part of what students expect when they choose an online course, not the seclusion of a correspondence course. Therefore, both instructors design assignments built around productive

teacher-student online communication as well as peer-to-peer contact among students.

In a traditional classroom, community-building is an organic occurrence rooted in a combination of elements. Where students choose to sit in the classroom, the types of looks and banter that are exchanged during class discussions, and conversations that transpire naturally before, after, and during class are among the variables that contribute to the development of a classroom community.

Unlike face-to-face instructors, then, online instructors must allot significant time to establishing a virtual community. Liz and Patty emphasize the necessity of structuring communication with students that will motivate their participation. Both instructors believe the course design should create multiple opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction in addition to instructor-student communication.

The online community can enhance class instruction. Opportunities to email classmates and the instructor provide support for the isolated learner. Requirements to complete projects with a team of classmates can also slow the speed at which a student might complete the course. Patty describes that students frequently ask her how quickly they can complete course requirements, as if the course were a correspondence course with only a single student in it. Requiring participation on teams is a way that instructors can slow down the pace of the individual learner to keep him from blazing through a course. Otherwise, proceeding at one's own pace might have the student completing the course too quickly for the pace the instructor desires. Patty says,

> If it is so easy that they don't need to participate, then I will think I've failed them in a way. I really value the time it takes to take this class, and the fact that they would be [in the class].

Expectations for Communication

For Liz's part, there is not a great deal of difference in the work she does as an online instructor and what instructors in traditional settings do. Liz believes the amount of time she devotes to communicating with students is what sets the online instructor apart. Patty and Liz believe the priority online is keeping in touch with class members. For both the individual student and the entire class, the payoff for good communication is a positive learning experience. However, Patty

acknowledges that staying in constant touch with students is a challenge. She doesn't have a predefined interaction strategy in place, but waits to see the personality of the class to determine what sort of contact class members will require. She also conditions students so they will know what sort of contact to expect from her.

Patty also recognizes the importance of providing individuals with opportunities to express all sorts of responses. Frequently, students are reluctant to log on merely to say in an online discussion, "I agree with what the previous student said." Patty says students need to understand that it is acceptable not to have the first original idea. Students must be aware that the priority is participation which may mean simply expanding upon a unique idea started by another classmate.

Suitability of Distance Learning for Meeting Individual Student Needs

The initial diagnostic test results indicate whether students are well-suited to succeed in an online setting. Then, students can each select their ideal learning environment, either face-to-face or online. In the end, the online class roster is presumably comprised of students who are best suited for online learning. However, both instructors include practices designed to compensate for the limitations of the distance learning format.

One effort to compensate for any shortcomings of online instruction is to consider whether participation outweighs a student's mastery of content in an online class. Each instructor held a divergent opinion regarding whether participation should be valued at or above the level of mastery. Because communication from the student can be the sole assurance that the student has "gotten" the content, both instructors believe that a student's communication with the instructor in the online environment is crucial to the grade the student receives.

Liz clearly validates herself as an instructor and gauges student quality by how frequently the student contacts her. She believes a good experience in an online course follows from an instructor and student keeping good communication. This interaction includes teacher and students electronically sharing questions, suggestions, and plans about the course. Liz wants feedback and gives feedback quickly. It makes her feel good to have this contact.

In Liz's online practice, outstanding student participation can even compensate for a poor exam score. Similarly, a lack of communication can diminish a student's grade in Liz's class. She tells of a student who had done well on four quizzes through the middle of the semester, earning an A for her quiz average. Liz says, "the problem is that I cannot get in touch with her. I e-mail her and never get anything back. So, this is distance learning. We can feel the distance." Because this student had not participated in any online discussions, then, Liz gave her a B at the midterm with a warning that her final grade would be lower still if her participation did not improve.

Patty recognizes that taking a course online meets a number of student needs, including overcoming obstructions that geography might create and enabling students to take a class in the vicinity that is most convenient for them. However, this convenience may present additional obstacles, including situating students far from a university lab or personnel that could offer assistance. Patty recognizes that students may need more aid than they can receive in an online setting, and in at least one instance, Patty invited to her office an online student who requested help. The student drove two hours from her home computer to meet with Patty on campus. Patty gave assistance and was able to assuage the guilt she felt for recommending that this student take a course online.

Unlike Liz, Patty believes that an instructor must expect performance that exceeds mere participation, and that the quality of student work should be the sole determinant of a student's grade. The incentive to participate should originate with a student's desire to do well on major assignments; therefore, Patty does not assign a participation grade. She says,

> The student who participates, just like the student who comes to class, will get a better grade whether [or not he receives participation points]. The students who complete these quizzes in preparation for major assessments do better on the major assessments. The [participation] points may have been motivation to get the students to do it, but the bottom line is that the students who do it make better scores.

Patty believes faculty members have the responsibility to design meaningful assignments for online courses to encourage students to take part.

Expectations for Student Responsibility

Beyond the students' responsibility for their own activity, however, these instructors believe that the online setting also requires students to motivate their peers. Liz has assigned teams and team leaders in her classes previously. Despite this level of organization to complete an assignment, though, she has found that some students are content to let others do all the work. Liz has chastised a team leader who completed the group assignments himself instead of motivating team members to pull their own weight. The leader reported to Liz that it was less work to complete the assignment himself than to attempt to motivate his classmates.

Nevertheless, both instructors say the future of their courses will be more group-oriented to maximize the interactivity of the online class. In this vein, then, they will assign students to teams, assign team leaders, and increase the value of online group assignments against the overall course grade. Patty says,

> The worst thing is if we have no class interaction — which means this person missed out. They didn't get it, as far as the on-line tools. I was hoping none of my students would say that.

In her current classes, Liz sets peer assistance as the pinnacle of online interaction. She invites students to post their questions on a bulletin board and for students to answer one another's questions. This peer assistance exceeds the level of interdependence required for group assignments, and Liz awards extra credit for assisting online classmates.

Conclusions and Implications

Our findings indicate that instructors can link skills to student success that differ from the skills that instructors actually ask students to demonstrate while participating in online courses. In this case, it is as if these instructors hold performance expectations for divergent versions of the same student: the autonomous learner that diagnostic testing singled out vs. the team player who can motivate others during the course. Liz indicated the CIS 101 instructors sought students who were "highly motivated" and "self-disciplined" and "who [could] conquer [the course] themselves." However, as assignments were given and participation was

observed during the semester, instructors were asking students to maintain regular contact with them. Notably, instructors' evaluation of student performance hinged on a student's participation in group assignments. Further, both instructors indicated that future online versions of their courses would be increasingly interdependent, requiring students to function not only as team members but as team leaders.

Certainly, one strength of online learning is the interactivity that the medium provides – fingertip access to documents, video files, and databases, as well as to classmates. In fact, the online setting may be more intimate than even a face-to-face setting. Unlike the traditional classroom, the online instructor can "eavesdrop" on side conversations between class members, and she can tailor specific, detailed responses to individuals' questions. The interactive forum in which students work differentiates the isolated online experience from a correspondence course. Perhaps the intimacy of an online setting is especially well-suited to help each learner feel connected, and online communities may be created more easily than first imagined. Future researchers may explore best practice for establishing this intimate setting for instruction.

Universities' current focus on the business of online instruction raises questions about faculty members' preparation for teaching effectively online. Implicit in these business considerations is the assumption that all/most courses and all/most students are a good fit for learning online. This assumption carries with it the supposition that faculty members are naturally skilled to make the transition to online instruction with the requisite abilities and attitudes that will transfer from the traditional classroom to the online setting. The reality is, however, that levels of preparedness for both faculty and students exist. The instructor has to be flexible to move students along together while providing a challenge for students who are advanced. Likewise, instructors must encourage, support, and resist punishing students who are "not there yet."

Kasworm and Yao (1992) offer a framework that is still relevant to online instruction and to which we can offer additional thinking in light of our research. Because this framework designates three stages defined by the amount of exchange between instructor and student, an observer might expect to see instructors mediating a level of online interactivity students may (or may not) be prepared to assume. According to this framework, because CIS 101 is an introductory course, the design and the instructors' expectations should be at Stage One. However, their actual practice includes both instructors wishing students were more

autonomous, and creating a requirement that students be collaborators with other students. In this study, our instructors' expectations may in fact surpass students' skill levels for a Stage One course because collaboration does not enter into this framework until Stages Two and Three. An instructor may need to vary her level of dominance within the course from week 1 to week 16.

This study reveals what Liz and Patty expect and demonstrate regarding student success in their online classes. Within the limits of technology and the attitudes that many students bring to the online experience, an effective learning community may be difficult to establish. Many students seemed drawn to an online learning environment because this setting lacks a requirement to attend a regular class meeting. Therefore, these students may be resistant to the group projects that Liz and Patty devise in their community-building efforts.

Part of the challenge for these instructors involves designing ways to build a connection with individual students. Instructors may seek unique methods to provide assistance, such as virtual office hours. However, online instructors' extraordinary efforts as communicator, planner, and builder of an online community indicate that interdependence is required of the online learner and not merely the independent role that our instructors claim they are seeking. For these instructors, this successful learner will productively contribute to team projects (beyond self-discipline), motivate others (beyond self-motivation), communicate with the instructor, and assist classmates with their work.

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