Learning style, student satisfaction and blended learning

Increasingly, online learning is perceived as an effective method of instruction. Much recent educational research has focused on examining the purposes and situations for which distance education is best suited. Typically, this research has concentrated on five main areas:

- 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?
- What are the particular characteristics of effective online students and teachers?
- 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 paper is largely concerned with action research into the first of these areas and provides a comparative evaluation of two pilot online courses with their traditionally taught counterparts.

A summary of key research studies in this area yields some conflicting findings relevant to the current research. Egan et al. (1991) concluded that conventional instruction is generally perceived to be better organized and more clearly presented than online education. However, Martin and Rainey (1993) found no significant difference in positive attitudes towards course material between online and traditional education. In addition, research by Souder (1993) indicates that achievement on various tests administered by course instructors tends to be higher for 'distant' as opposed to 'traditional' students.

Perhaps the key factor inherent in all of these seemingly contradictory findings is the design of the instructional material, irrespective of whether it is delivered online or through more traditional means. Many teachers and researchers (E.g. Wood, 1997; Littlejohn et al. 1999) point out that the organization and reflection necessary to effectively teach online often improves an instructor's traditional teaching. Downing, (2001) identifies the eventual success or failure of online teaching as largely due to the same factors that have always been central to the provision of a quality learning experience. These factors include the energy, commitment and imagination of those responsible for providing the teaching and learning environment, whether it is virtual or actual.

The suggestion that research should focus on the design of the instruction itself is not new. As long ago as 1987, Whittington was calling for future research into online versus traditional learning to focus on the critical factors in determining student achievement: the design of the learning materials themselves. This paper discusses the results and implications of an ongoing comparative study at City University of Hong Kong to determine those factors students regard as central to a quality learning experience in both traditional and online courses.

Students enrolled in two online applied psychology courses, and two equivalent traditional courses, were asked to voluntarily participate in this study. Students are matched for age, gender, educational background, and learning style. Quantitative and qualitative measures of student satisfaction, are being taken from both groups throughout each course and comparisons made across the two delivery modes. Preliminary results suggest that, whilst similar factors seem to be correlated with student satisfaction, there are some specific key indicators for student satisfaction with online modes of delivery.

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