

PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE LEARNING IN AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY: AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' (ASIAN REGION) PERSPECTIVE – ENJOYMENT

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Abstract— Several researchers have reported that cultural and language differences can affect online interactions and communications between students from different cultural backgrounds. Other researchers have asserted that online learning is a tool that can improve teaching and learning skills, but its effectiveness depends on how the tool is used. To delve into these aspects further, this study set out to investigate the kinds of learning difficulties encountered by the international students and how they actually coped with online learning. The modified Online Learning Environment Survey (OLES) instrument was used to collect data from the sample of 109 international students at a university in Brisbane. A smaller group of 35 domestic students was also included for comparison purposes. Contrary to assumptions from previous research, the findings revealed that there were only few differences between the international Asian and Australian students with regards to their perceptions of online learning. Recommendations based on the findings of this research study were made for Australian universities where Asian international students study online. Specifically the recommendations highlighted the importance of upskilling of lecturers' ability to structure their teaching online and to apply strong theoretical underpinnings when designing learning activities such as discussion forums, and for the university to establish a degree of consistency with regards to how content is located and displayed in a learning management system like Blackboard.

Keywords- Asian international students, Online learning, Online learning environments, Online learning environment survey (OLES), Net Gen, Enjoyment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Online learning, for the purposes of this study, is defined as learning which takes place via a web browser on the Internet, intranet, and extranet (Chiu, Chiu, & Chang, 2007). The usability of the learning management system is important as are its applications such as interactive video, bulletin boards, chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, and document sharing systems (Martins & Kellermanns, 2004; Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006).

A review of existing research literature on students' perceptions of online learning reveals several gaps in the body of knowledge necessary for the informed utilization of blended online courses with Asian students studying in Australian universities. An example of this is the lack of research on the influence of different culturally-based learning styles on the Asian students' engagement with and perceptions about online learning. According to Wang (2007), cultural attributes affect online presence and learner perceptions. Another gap is the limited corpus of knowledge about how differences in online learning environments influence Asian students' perceptions of online learning. These student differences in online learning environments have been reported in the literature (e.g., McLoughlin, 1999, 2001a, 2001b). In terms of student experiences, the research study focused on the problems that these students faced when studying in an online learning environment, the strategies they employed to address these problems, and how they used the online learning tools (e.g., chat rooms, conference/video conferencing and emails) to overcome these challenges.

Learning Environments

Researches on learning environments have led to the development of a range of learning environment instruments. In the past decade, quite a number of tools have been developed to specifically evaluate online learning environments including Constructivist On-Line Learning Environment Survey (COLLES), Web-Based Learning Environment Inventory (WEBLEI), Technology-Rich Outcomes-Focused Learning Environment Inventory (TROFLEI), Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (DELES), and Online Learning Environment Survey (OLES). The OLES instrument is the most recently developed online learning environment evaluation tool compared to others (before 2004) that have been used to evaluate the university's online learning environment. This instrument was used to evaluate the Masters degree and Postgraduate Diploma students' perceptions towards the actual and preferred online

learning environment in the university (Trinidad & Pearson, 2004, 2005). Although the review of the research literature implied that OLES was probably the optimal learning environment instrument to utilize in this research study, the review of the research literature also reflected the need for an additional three scales to adequately ascertain Asian students' perceptions of these important factors: Evaluation and assessment of individual and group learning, Online learning tools, and Interface design.

Net Generation

The term Net Generation refers to those who were born in 1982-1991. The majority of Net Genners are known for their obsession with achievement that has been initiated even from before university days, where guidance counsellors, parents and lecturers have been emphasizing college education and the need to attain the best possible results (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Net Gen students are mobile, comfortable with fast tempo, and are good in multitasking (moving back and forth rapidly) between real and virtual spaces (Brown, 2005).

International Students: Cultural Differences and Learning Environments

Previous research (Smith & Smith, 1999; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001) reported significant differences between Asian international and Australian students studying in Australia. Leder and Forgasz (2004) suggested that international students are often assumed to be disadvantaged because many do not have English as their first language and their educational backgrounds are different from those of their Australian peers.

Teaching online to an international audience can be significantly different, when compared to teaching in a traditional classroom setting with the same audience. In a traditional classroom setting, the learners are usually removed from their own cultural context and required to operate in the educator's context. However, within online learning environments, factors related to the differing cultures that Asian international students bring to the university online courses have the potential to have a more significant impact on their experiences and their perceptions of online courses.

II. METHOD

This study was conducted with the international students from the Asian Region countries who were enrolled at an Australian university. The students sample comprised 109 international students ($n=109$) and 35 Australian students ($n=35$). All of the students in the study were first or second year undergraduate degree students. The survey consisted of twelve OLES scales, (three of which were added by the researcher) used to investigate the students' perceptions on online learning. The modified version of OLES contained a total of 71 items broken into twelve scales – CU (Computer Usage), LS (Lecturer Support), SIC (Student Interaction & Collaboration),

PR (Personal Relevance), AL (Authentic Learning), SA (Student Autonomy), EQ (Equity), EN (Enjoyment), AS (Asynchronicity), EA (Evaluation & Assessments), OLT (Online Learning Tools), and ID (Interface Design). A Likert scale questionnaire (1-Never; 2-Sometimes; 3-Quite Often; 4-Frequently; and 5-Always) was used to gather responses from the students. An open-ended item was attached at the end of each section to generate qualitative data that could be utilised to supplement the quantitative data. To facilitate the collection and analysis of data derived from the survey, the twelve modified OLES scales were clustered into four categories: Enjoyment, Usability of the Online Learning Tools, Support for Learning, and Quality of Learning. In this paper, the Enjoyment category will be reported. In order to adequately address perceptions about enjoyment of an online learning environment, the students in the study were asked to complete the Enjoyment Scale (EN). The collected data was analysed via ANOVA to investigate the differences between the Asian international and Australian students. The feedback on the open-ended questions were then analysed via thematic analysis.

III. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

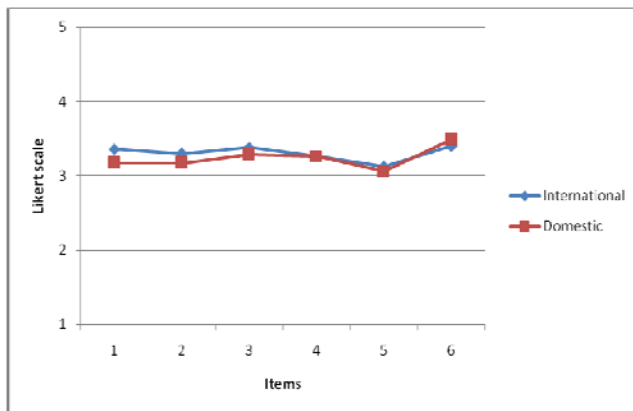
The Enjoyment scale evaluated the extent of the students' enjoyment of learning in the online learning environments. Data with respect to the Enjoyment scale (Table 1) showed no statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$). The F-value was small and did not reach statistical significance. Furthermore, effect size was small (less than 0.1) with low standard deviations reported.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviations for the Enjoyment Scale

OLES Scales	Descriptive Analysis						Differences		
	Mean		Standard Deviation		Valid Cases		Effect Size	F	p
	Intl	Dom	Intl	Dom	Intl	Dom			
EN	3.30	3.24	0.79	0.83	106	35	0.04	0.08	0.78

Respondents in both groups viewed the items of the Enjoyment scale similarly. Item six (I am satisfied with this online class) had the highest mean. This indicated that both international and domestic students in the study were indeed satisfied with the online classes. Item five had the lowest mean among all other items on the Enjoyment scale - this indicated that most students did not like their classes to be entirely online (Figure 1).



- 1 - I prefer online learning.
- 2 - Online learning is exciting.
- 3 - Online learning is worth my time.
- 4 - I enjoy studying online.
- 5 - I would enjoy my education if more of my classes were online.
- 6 - I am satisfied with this online class.

Figure 1 Means of Individual Items in Enjoyment (EN) Scale

Qualitative analysis of data derived from the students' responses to the open-ended question at the end of the Enjoyment (EN) scale provided further insights into the students' perceptions about enjoyment of the online learning experience. Five themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. Three of these themes were positive: Enriching Experience, Overcoming Barriers, and Satisfying Experience. However, two of the themes that emerged from the analysis (Lack of Motivation and Technical Problems with Blackboard) focused on issues that had the effect of limiting their enjoyment of the online learning environments.

Enriching Experience

Many of the international Asian and domestic students indicated that they found their engagement in the online learning environments to be an enriching experience. Another international student indicated that the online learning had enriched her by providing her with different learning experiences. She could attend the lecture classes and while at the same time being able to liaise with her lecturers and peers online through emails and discussion boards. An Australian domestic participant indicated that he found online learning an enriching experience because it provides access to real world scenarios, entertaining content, and relevant information about the subject matter.

The analysis of the comments with respect to enriching learning experiences indicated very little differences between the international and the domestic students. Both international and domestic students provided similar reasons such as these for why they found the experience enriching: it was

interactive, it was entertaining, and it provided access to real world scenarios and information.

Overcoming Barriers

Overcoming barriers to learning was another reason put forward by both the international and domestic students for why they found the experience with the online learning environments enjoyable. With online learning, the students felt that they were able to seek assistance when they needed it from their peers, lecturers, and the Helpdesk. Many of the students felt that by catering for the different needs of the students, online learning overcame barriers to learning. Similarly, a Taiwanese student pointed out convenience to facilitate learning anytime was the reason why he liked online learning

Satisfying Experience

Another reason why both sets of students found their experiences enjoyable was that the online learning environments provided them with satisfying experiences. In particular, many of the students found that independent learning mediated by the online learning environments was a most satisfying experience.

Lack of Motivation

Many of the responses to the open-ended question indicated that some students still preferred face-to-face teaching. The qualitative analysis of the data derived from the open-ended question at the end of the Enjoyment (EN) item indicated that their preference for face-to-face seemed to be primarily based on lack of motivation when it comes to studying online. As seen in these students' comments, no classes to attend, accumulation of the workload, and perceived difficulties of online learning were the reasons why some of the students found online learning environments less motivating than face-to-face learning environments.

However, perhaps the most cogent finding from the qualitative analysis of the data from the open-ended question about Enjoyment was that most of the students tended to prefer blended learning environments where they could benefit from the encounters in face-to-face to pure online learning environments. The comments from both international and domestic students were consistent with assertions about blended learning environments made by Aspden and Helm (2004) and Baldwin-Evans (2006). According to Aspden and Helm (2004), blended learning utilizing online learning as a supplement to face-to-face learning allows students to facilitate and engage better between their peers and lecturers. Baldwin-Evans asserted that blended learning captures the best of both worlds by enabling learners to pick and choose how they want to learn and affords them greater flexibility and convenience about when they want to learn.

Technical Problems with Blackboard

The possibility of encountering technical problems was perceived as being another factor that hindered students'

enjoyment of learning in the online learning environment. An international Singaporean student also has stated that technical problems annoyed him when it comes to online assignment submission.

Other technical problems such as audio and video clips not appearing or loading properly online also seemed to impede the students' enjoyment of learning in the online learning environment. Students also faced slow internet connection that made download of audio and video files harder.

As indicated in students' comments, there were a wide range of technical problems that impeded the students' enjoyment of learning in an online learning environment such as audio and video clips did not appear or load properly online, slow internet connection, and time consuming to do repetitive submission online due to system's problems were the reasons that refrained students' preferences to study online.

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study appeared to contradict the findings from most previous studies in the field, namely that there were significant differences in the perceptions about online learning between international Asian and domestic Australian students based on cultural-background factors. This study found only a few differences in perceptions between the international Asian and the domestic Australian students. With the sample of participants in this study, it seemed that commonalities based on joint-membership of the Net Generation overcame most of the cultural difference factors. In addition to advancing the corpus of knowledge in the field of students' perceptions about online learning, the findings from this study have generated important implications for research and practice in this field.

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