ABSTRACT
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experiences as e-learners as reflected in papers based on their journals. The
study examined what students experience as they take an online course, and how
students express their buy-in or lack of buy-in to an online course. Students'
initial concerns about their transition to this new environment were related
to learning strategies and inexperience with technology. They described their
personal growth in adjusting to the online learning environment, and they
personalized their journal papers with their unique writing styles, including
metaphors and analogies. In general, buy-in or lack of buy-in to the online
course was not necessarily dependent on students' entering levels of
technological experience but seemed to reflect the students' initial mindset
or a mindset change that occurred during the course. Guidelines for e-learning
are offered. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/MES)

Buy-in to Online Courses: Reflections from E-learners' Journal Papers

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Abstract: This paper is a qualitative study of graduate students' experiences as e-learners as reflected in papers based on their journals. The two research questions were: What do students experience as they take an online course? and How do students express their buy-in or lack of buy-in to an online course? Students' initial concerns about their transition to this new environment were related to learning strategies and inexperience with technology. They described their personal growth in adjusting to the online learning environment, and they personalized their journal papers with their unique writing styles, including metaphors and analogies. In general, buy-in or lack of buy-in to the online course was not necessarily dependent on students' entering levels of technological experience but seemed to reflect the students' initial mindset or a mindset change that occurred during the course. Guidelines for e-learning are offered.

New E-learners

Higher education worldwide is using the Web for delivering online courses and programs, with the result that e-learning enrollments are rapidly increasing as more courses are converted to this environment. Online courses allow e-learners greater flexibility in balancing their work, school, home, and social schedules. Such courses require students to have an expanded set of course prerequisites and requirements. No longer is content knowledge the only prerequisite; students must also possess the ability to function effectively and efficiently in an online environment (Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994).

Although students flock to online courses in an attempt to gain course credit without having to sit in a classroom, they experience difficulties adapting to this innovative approach. Rogers (1995) defines an innovation as an idea, practice, or object that an individual perceives as new. Students must adapt to multiple elements in their first online class—getting an Internet Service Provider, configuring the computer, using the software required, accessing the course web site, and participating in the online classroom (Eastmond, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

E-learners face a complex, multi-faceted scenario that they must approach in a "mindful" (Langer, 1989) manner. The transition from the traditional to the online classroom can be difficult if students approach this new environment in a "mindless" manner by assuming the experience will be the same as the traditional classroom. Because students believe they know how to function in a classroom, their premature cognitive commitment, or mindset, can actually work against their successful transition to e-learning. Harasim (1989) pointed out that those who approach this new domain from old mindsets may apply incorrect metaphors to the online environment, such as assuming that e-learning is easy. Hara and Kling (2000) described students' frustrations in an online course—lack of prompt feedback, ambiguous instructions on the Web, and technical problems. Researchers have identified skills needed for transition to the online classroom: a new vocabulary; new or

revised learning practices; technology training; and patience with the instructor, the coursework, the delivery system, and the computer (Eastmond, 1995; Gibson, 1998). Palloff and Pratt (1999) asserted that student "buy-in" (p. 19) is essential for a successful online class.

Frustration with the above factors can cause students to become disenchanted with the online classroom. Students with learning-how-to-learn skills reach into their "bag of tricks" (Eastmond, 1995, p. 100), either choosing strategies that have worked previously or adapting a known strategy. Eastmond suggested that students learn about the online classroom in two ways: (a) being in the environment; and (b) becoming part of the online community by sharing ideas, troubleshooting problems, and finding solutions to the questions that inevitably plague students.

Yet the research literature on the use of Web is short of analytical studies as well as qualitative studies. Burge (1994) asserted that most of the literature on computer-mediated communication in higher education is "cautious optimism to hyperbole" (p. 22). The field has not critically addressed negative implications, especially from students' perspectives. Brace-Govan and Clulow (2000) contended that although a large body of literature addresses the issues of teaching online, little research investigates students' concerns about learning online. Hara and Kling (2000) charged that researchers must examine the actual experiences of students in online courses instead of reporting only on the positive aspects.

E-learners' Journals

Having students keep journals encourages them to reflect on their experiences and ideas and also fosters development of student-teacher discourse. Student journals have been used to encourage e-learners' reflections in the areas of political science (Hammer, 1997), nursing (Naidu & Oliver, 1999), anthropology (McKee, 1999), adult learning (Gibson, 2000), and business (Brace-Govan & Clulow, 2000). Although the method of obtaining information was similar in each case, the purposes and findings differed. For instance, Hammer illustrated how online technologies can be extended to the traditional journal assignment by "creating a space in which the student and teacher more closely enter into a discourse" (p. 70). Naidu and Oliver designed a problem-based learning assignment in an online course for nursing students to reflect on critical incidents and then gave "informative and corrective feedback concerning [the] use" of reflection (p. 333). As a result, the nursing students were able to describe what happened and assess their own actions while adopting more structured and systematic approaches to problem solving. McKee reported that journal assignments can "offer the opportunity to engage in a non-threatening extended conversation with the instructor" (p. 70). Gibson portrayed adult learners' "perspective transformation" (Mezirow, 1991) in an online class as the "ultimate disorienting dilemma," a view derived from analyzing student papers of reflections on their e-learning experiences. To organize and analyze the students' comments, Gibson used Mezirow's 10 steps of perspective transformation, which begins with a disorienting dilemma. Brace-Govan & Clulow's study of undergraduate business students' journals of their perceptions of the learning experience found that students needed information about how to interact online and favored an induction exercise at the beginning.

This paper reports on a qualitative investigation of the distance learning journal papers of graduate students' experiences of learning in an online course. The following research questions framed the study:
- What do learners experience as they take an online course?
- How do learners express their buy-in or lack of buy-in to an online course?

Methodology

Qualitative inquiry focuses on meaning in context and requires the researcher to look for underlying meaning while gathering and analyzing the data (Merriam, 1998). The online course was for graduate students enrolled in a 15-week course at a large southwestern university in the United States. The 18 participants were 12 female students and 6 male students with a range of telecommunications experience: 6 novice computer conference users, 7 intermediate users, and 5 experienced users.

"Foundations of Distance Learning" was a graduate course focusing on applications of effective instructional methodologies to educational settings via distance education. Students examined the foundations

of distance learning from a theoretical perspective while practicing distance learning. The students met face-to-face one full day at the beginning of the semester for the course and syllabus overviews, technology training, and getting to know one another. All other sessions took place via the Web to obtain course information, and FirstClass computer conference software to post coursework and communicate with classmates and the instructor. Students used asynchronous computer conferences, synchronous chats, and shared workspaces for their work.

One course requirement was to keep a journal and write a reflective paper on learning at a distance. In their journals, students described their recent distance learning activities and reflected on their growth based on comments made in previous entries, and the instructor inserted her comments periodically. They wrote in FirstClass collaborative document writing spaces, which were open to their classmates. Approximately halfway through the semester, they wrote short papers about their distance learner experiences and described their process of learning at a distance.

The data sources were the students' distance learning papers. The data collection consisted of downloading and printing the papers that had been posted in FirstClass. To analyze the data, we used the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to categorize the data according to the two research questions. We reported on the data using the participants' words corrected only for comprehensibility.

Results

E-learners' Course Experiences

What do learners experience as they take an online course? The students' reflections of their online learning experiences in their distance learning papers disclosed the difficulties they encountered in the online course and their feelings about attempts to overcome the difficulties.

Students' reflections revealed difficulties in learning to use technology and functioning effectively online. Students unfamiliar with FirstClass found it difficult to use initially. Not having regular class meetings to help them organize their time efficiently was another difficulty. A student with no previous distance learning experience and limited technology skills wrote that his initiation as an e-learner would have been enhanced had he "received prior exposure to the mechanics of online interaction in a classroom environment utilizing distance learning only in a supplemental capacity." He explained, "Students who have experience with distance learning enjoy a considerable advantage in knowledge of both subject and self. I began this course with only the barest of knowledge about distance learning and even less knowledge of how much mental and organizational effort a distance learning class requires." Even students with distance learning experience and skills acknowledged difficulties: "Personally, I do find learning at a distance challenging.... I find that even those of us that are the most organized and disciplined experience difficulty with keeping on track. I still fall behind in some areas, misplacing calendars and forgetting what day it is."

In describing their strategies to overcome the difficulties, students expressed isolation, frustration, and stress due to juggling many responsibilities. They commented that it took a great deal of time to adjust to the online environment, although they tended to remain hopeful as they established their own learning strategies. "I hope the 'just do it' response strategy I devised for remedying my performance shortcomings will work," reported the student with limited distance learning experience and skills. One student relied on her intuition: "Just as the experience got started, I found myself calming down and working on the assignments in an orderly fashion. Personal instincts of organization begin to kick in and I find myself scheduling tasks."

Expressions of Buy-in or Lack of Buy-in

How do learners express their buy-in or lack of buy-in to an online course? In their distance learning papers, the students expressed their buy-in or lack of buy-in to an online course in two ways. Students recognized and described their personal growth in adjusting to the online learning environment. They also personalized their papers with unique writing styles, which included metaphors and analogies.

Some students attributed their gains in adapting to the online environment to the journal and paper assignments, which required reflection on the process. The student who entered the course with minimal background and skills described his buy-in to the online course with these words:

> I feel I have gained valuable insight into why my previous attempts at success have proved unsuccessful. In implementing certain changes to my study habits and contribution efforts, I will gain, by semester's end, a much clearer picture of my true prospects for success in utilizing distance learning technology.

A student with more advanced telecommunications skills portrayed her growth towards buy-in as a reflection on the cyclical nature of the online course: "The ups and downs of the cycle include satisfaction of completing a task and the depressions of falling behind for one reason or another. In the end, however, I do know in my heart that the actual completion of the course will break the cycle and leave the experience on a high note."

The papers contained numerous metacognitive reflections indicating buy-in to the online experience. One student reported, "The knowledge and experiences I have had in distance education have greatly inspired me to go further to pursue my research interests—web-based instruction." The students acknowledged that they gained new forms of valuable information, including the course content, the online environment and specifically FirstClass; and new information about themselves and their ability to transition to a new environment.

The other way the students expressed buy-in or lack of buy-in to online courses was by personalizing their journal papers with graphic analogies and metaphors, and several used direct quotations from their own and others' distance learning journals. Lack of buy-in to online learning was indicated in the following metaphors: "a mental, intellectual, and creative death-trap," a "learning experience [that] bordered on the metaphorical equivalent of first learning how to drive on a racetrack during a Grand Prix," and "walking into a university library without a directory; sometimes I feel like I am lost!!" Some students were ambivalent about the online experience, as indicated in these metaphors: "It is not the Garden of Eden described by its boosters, but neither is it the barren wasteland of my worst fears" and "It is both lonely and full of camaraderie. It is dull and exciting. It is everything and nothing. It is a paradox.... [In times of frustration] I exist in a dark cocoon of technology that has no way out." Descriptions indicating buy-in included the following metaphors: "Meeting learner needs is like meeting with customized product versus mass product" and "interactions have kept me from feeling like a widget on an assembly line."

Conclusions

Students may perceive the online classroom to be the same as the face-to-face classroom initially, but they soon discover that taking an online class is vastly different. Although the students in this study reflected on their experiences in a variety of ways, many of their papers yielded similar ideas about coping mechanisms and learning strategies. Rogers (1995) suggested that the process of adopting or rejecting an innovation is an information-seeking and information-processing activity that occurs as an individual obtains information about an innovation, in an attempt to decrease the uncertainty that surrounds it. Many students acknowledged the need to "settle in" by allowing themselves to feel overwhelmed at the beginning of the course. Several studies reported discoveries about students' frustration with technology and instructor's lack of experience (Hara & Kling, 2000) and the need to ensure that students can function effectively and efficiently online at the beginning of the course (Harasim, 1989; Hillman et al., 1994; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Buy-in or lack of buy-in to this online course was not necessarily dependent on students' entering levels of experience with technology or content, as those with limited previous experience often expressed commitment to e-learning later. Instead, students' buy-in or lack of buy-in seemed to reflect either the initial mindsets or a mindset change (Telg, 1995) that evolved during the course. Those who began the course with negative mindsets about e-learning ended the course with negative, grudging acceptance, idealistic acceptance, or positive mindsets. Those who began the course with positive mindsets ended the course with either positive or qualified positive mindsets about e-learning.

The online journals created a space where students were encouraged to reflect and a student-teacher discourse was allowed to develop. Several students commented on the sense of continuity of their journals as a collaborative document, in which they merely added their newer reflections at the top of the existing text. This

practice allowed "the participants to see their comments as part of a continuing discourse" (Hammer, 1997, p. 70). The process of keeping a reflective journal and reading their classmates' journals helped several students gain self-assurance. Gibson (2000) acknowledged that in a similar assignment requiring student reflections on the experience of learning at a distance, she hadn't assigned the responsibility of asking them how they as learners could enhance the teaching/learning transaction for everyone. She also wondered if the assignment needed more structure. In other words, would introducing concepts of disorienting dilemma and perspective transformation lead to the latter stages of Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformation: provisional trying of new roles, building competence and self-confidence in these new roles, and reintegration of one's life? Similarly, we wonder if we should redesign the journal assignments to include initial information about difficulties of online learning or to structure the students' reflections more directly by having them reflect on a critical incident and identify specific learning that may have occurred as a result, as Naidu and Oliver (1999) did with nursing students.

McVay (2000) reported on research that learning is a cyclical process that involves reflecting, connecting, deciding, and doing. Students often need to be guided into metacognitive thinking and reflective learning: "Students need to find ways to tap into this cycle—to create not only time to think and notice feelings, but time for questioning assumptions and brainstorming solutions" (p. 21). McVay recommends that students practice reflective learning by writing associations and feelings in two columns labeled "What I liked" and "What I didn't like," which would lead to a third column "What I will do" for decisions about future action (p. 22).

An outcome of this research was the development of guidelines for e-learners to use reflection to ease their adjustment and foster buy-in to the online course. The guidelines are categorized according to the general times during the semester: at the beginning, during, and at the end of the semester.

Guidelines for E-learners

Before the semester begins

- prepare for inevitable technology problems
- accept that an online course is different from a traditional course and likely to be completely different from what you expect
- accept that you may experience new feelings, frustrations, highs and lows, and confusion
- plan how you will change the way you communicate with your classmates and instructor
- accept that change is hard work
- accept that any time you encounter a change situation, it will probably take you longer initially to complete tasks
- be patient with yourself and others
- accept that you, your instructor, and your classmates are not on 24-hour call
- become comfortable with the reflection process

During the semester

- continue to practice patience and make new discoveries
- share methods and tips for collaborating and for using the software
- get to know your "learning" or "student" self—examine how you learn, read, study, approach tasks, organize yourself, etc.
- continue to be self-observant. Reflect on what happened—what did you do? did it work? did it fail? why? why not? were there critical incidents?
- continue to discover—what new information or skills have you learned? how has it helped you?
- learn to interpret what your discoveries mean for you—will you be different? in what ways? will you act differently next time?
- push yourself to be self-observant of your own thinking, feelings, and actions. We all like to "people watch." We need to become adept as "self-watchers"

End of the semester

- evaluate yourself—how have you changed? what did you learn? what will you do differently next time?
- evaluate the class in terms of how it worked for you—likes/dislikes? what worked/didn't work? what will you do differently next time?

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