INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, online learning has emerged as an increasingly popular alternative to traditional classroom instruction for many students and universities (Al-Asfour & Bryant, 2011; Larreamendy-Joerns & Linhardt, 2006; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Not only have higher education institutions been using distance education as a form of delivering education, many companies have also been using the Internet to provide education to their employees. In 2006, a survey of Fortune 500 companies by the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) found that the percentage of companies who have computer-delivered training programs has increased drastically. According to the study, 60% of these training programs were conducted using e-learning (Rivera & Paradise, 2006). Government agencies are no exception to the practice of employing e-learning. The U.S. military has recognized the importance and flexibility of online learning. This method of learning is utilized by the U.S. Department of Defense through the Advanced Distributed Learning Initiative program. The program is intended to provide education and training to more than three million personnel any time of the day and anywhere they are located (Curda & Curda, 2003).

The Sloan Consortium (n.d.) defines a traditional course as one that uses no online technology, which refers to the use of the Internet or any hybrid method of learning. On the other hand, an online course is one in which all of the content of the course is delivered through the use of the Internet (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The use of the Internet was slow in the beginning of the 1990s and later, within the same decade, had expanded exponentially (Al-Asfour, 2012). In addition, based on a report of 2,500 colleges and universities by Allen and Seaman (2010), it was mentioned that online enrollment had increased significantly. To illustrate this increase, online enrollment has increased from 9.6 percent in 2002 to 25.3 percent in 2008. It is estimated that there were 4.6 million students enrolled in 2008 who were registered for at least one online course. The growth rate for online courses currently exceeds that of face-to-face in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Because e-learning has been used in education, business, and government agencies, it is imperative for researchers to investigate all dimensions of this form of learning. More importantly, researchers should examine novel methods of how to motivate e-learners. There are significant challenges when it comes to understanding the reasons for attrition of online learners, among them motivation. Scholars in the field of distance education have indicated a lack of research concerning the motivational needs of students (Gabrielle, 2003). In addition, a need exists for simpler approaches to motivating and retaining online learners (Huett et al., 2008). These approaches for motivation should fit within the time restraints of the class and be systematically designed as e-mail messages to communicate to students in a timely manner (Gabrielle 2003; Huett et al., 2008; Keller & Suzuki, 2004).

Research has shown that motivation is an essential component of students’ success in distance education and educational providers should be creative in their motivational methods (Crossley & Mubarik, 2002). According
to Koehler and Spatariu (2009) motivation plays a crucial role in promoting quality learning in distance education and it affects online discussion by producing “in-depth posting” (p.195). Thus, in order to provide effective education, the educational institutions should examine and investigate how to motivate and retain distance education students. Because motivation arises from the satisfaction of students, Sloan (n.d.) found when students are satisfied with taking an online course; retention of these students will increase considerably. In addition, students should be viewed as customers of the educational institutions, and their satisfaction is an important factor to the survival of any higher education entity.

Rational of the Study

The role of motivation is frequently overlooked in the area of distance education by educational providers (Koehler & Spatariu, 2009). Educators and educational providers need to become innovative in their motivational methods for their learners. Hence, the researcher chose to use e-mails as a method of increasing enthusiasm and delivering feedback to students who lack motivation in their online course to increase the odds of them accomplishing better results in the course. Koehler and Spatariu (2009) stated that “although some important prior research has investigated students’ critical reasoning, it has not focused on a motivational perspective or addressed online contexts sufficiently” (p.198). Online learners perceive that there is a lack of communication and isolation between them and their instructors. Consequently, it is the purpose of this article to enrich the literature by examining the usage of e-mails to target the behavior of lack of motivation in e-learning students.

Traditionally, research in the field of online learning has focused primarily on group comparisons, which are studies comparing online students’ attitudes and academic achievements to those of traditional classroom students. Many other studies analyzed e-learning using qualitative research methods. However, the majority of these studies have concluded that there are no statistically significant differences in their various outcomes (Bernard et al., 2004; Zhao, Li, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005). Subsequent to examination of the literature review, it is apparent that there is a paucity of research using a single case study design with online learners. Therefore, the researcher decided to utilize this method of research in this article.

**METHOD**

Participants and Settings

Four college students, two males and two females, taking an online course titled Human Resource Management (HRM) participated in the study. The selection of these students for participation in the study was based on observation by the instructor and the reasons that these students were earning in their discussion posts. The researcher, who was also the instructor, observed that there was a lack of motivation by these students in their online course. For three weeks, the researcher observed the students’ number of discussion posts in order to quantify the number of postings for each week. Students were required to post a minimum of three posts per week. These postings involved answering the question(s) for the week and providing feedback to their classmates. The discussion posts needed to be constructive, informative, and thoughtful to other classmates. In table 1, the researcher summarizes the students’ backgrounds and figure 1 shows students’ performance for each week during the entire research investigation.

All of the students fit the definition of non-traditional students and were juniors and seniors majoring in business administration. In order to protect the students’ identities, the researcher used pseudonyms and, for the purposes of this paper, they will be called Julie, John, Kim, and Scott. Even though these students were considered non-traditional students, they were full time college students. The software that the class used was Blackboard, which allowed the researcher to track the number of times that students logged into the class and the number of posts each student made. Because this was an online

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1 STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
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<tr>
<td>John</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
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<td>Scott</td>
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**Dependent Measures and Data Collection**

The target behavior that the researcher wanted to increase was the number of posts students gave to their classmates. The three posts assigned in the course each week were to consist of one original post composed by each student and two responses to their classmates. The students in this study did not provide the required number of posts. Because of this, the researcher wanted to increase the number of occurrences of the targeted behavior for each of the participants in this study.

**Data collection**

The researcher collected data throughout the baseline, the intervention, and a second baseline phase after the intervention. Each of these three phases lasted for three weeks. From the time that the data were collected; the researcher logged online and accounted for the number of posts that each of these four students made. Based on one of the requirements for the class, students needed to post discussions that are considered constructive, informative, and thoughtful at a minimum of 150 words per discussion. To further illustrate how the data were collected, the study was divided into three parts; the first part was baseline, which took three weeks for observation of the students and recording of their number of posts; the second was intervention, which took three weeks; and the third was another baseline for three weeks to ensure that the intervention had an effect on the students’ behavior.

**Observer training**

The observer was an online instructor. The observer training consisted of two steps. First, the observer learned the definitions of the target behavior and what the data collection system needed to look like. This included the recording system in order to quantify the number of discussion postings per student. Once the definitions and the method of collecting the data were learned and observed, the observer moved to the second part of the study. The second part of the training process was on the kind of intervention that the researcher would conduct. When all of these processes were learned, the observer began to observe and report of the targeted behavior by each student and report the findings.
Inter-observer agreement

There was only one observer, who was the researcher, so no agreement data were collected. However, if there were other observers, inter-observer agreement data would have been collected throughout the baseline, intervention, and the second baseline, which would be across all of the phases of the research. The independent observers would have collected the data with regard to the number of times the students posted in the weekly discussion threads. The observers would have recorded the observed behavior of each student in the study and attempted to find an intervention that would increase students’ motivation, which would accordingly increase their persistence in the class.

Experimental Design and Intervention

An ABA design was used for this study. The design had three phases: baseline, intervention, and baseline. The target behavior identified would be addressed by sending e-mails to the students who were not motivated in their online courses. The reinforcement for each week was an individualized e-mail praising the students for their hard work during the week.

Baseline

Following the three week intervention phase, the intervention was withdrawn and the participants were informed that they would not be receiving any more e-mails from the instructor/researcher regarding their online class. The researcher, in the last e-mail encouraged students to maintain their momentum in their course. This baseline lasted for three weeks. The main purpose of this phase was to ensure that there was no contact between the researcher and participants regarding their number of discussion posts in order to confirm that the intervention had an effect on students.

RESULTS

Baseline 1

Figure 1 displays the performance data of each participant. Julie made two posts the first week, and one post for the second and third week. John, on the other hand, started with one post for the first week and then made two posts the second week and made one post for the third week. Kim had the same number of posts as John during the baseline phase. Scott made two posts for the first week and one post for the second and third week. The number of posts for each of them did not exceed the minimum requirement outlined in the syllabus.

Intervention

There was a marked increase in performance of the four participants for this study. During the intervention, Julie made five posts during the first week of the intervention week and maintained four posts in the second and third week of the intervention phase. John made three posts the first week; increased participation to five posts the second week and ended with four posts on the third week of the intervention. Kim’s number of posts were four the first week, three posts the second week, and five the third week of intervention. The final participant in this study was Scott who started the intervention phase with four posts the first week, three the second, and five the final week. These results indicate that the intervention changed the students’ behavior in the manner desired by the researcher.

Baseline 2

All four students maintained their performance at a level similar to that of the intervention phase. In this stage, the researcher did not make any contact with the students regarding the number of posts. In the first and second week of this phase, Julie made five posts and finished with four posts. During the first week of this phase, John made four posts and then maintained five posts for the second and third week of this phase. Kim made five posts in the first week, increased participation to four for the second and third week of this phase. Scott, on the other hand, kept changing. He made four posts the first week. In the second week, he made three posts, and ended the phase with five posts.

Social Validation

Social validation data were obtained from the four participants. When the research was concluded, the researcher and the participants met to review the intervention and provide feedback. Julie and Scott mentioned that during the intervention they felt that the instructor/researcher was trying to stimulate them to become more active in their class. Kim, on the other hand, stated that online learners need the “extra push” from the instructor to keep them motivated and satisfied in order for students’ retention to increase. John commented that “your words of encouragement inspired and motivated me to do better in class.” All of the participants knew that they needed to do better, but had a difficult time with time management.

Overall, the four participants reported a positive view of the intervention and recommended it for other classes.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this present investigation was to examine the effects of communicating with e-learners using e-mails to increase their motivation and persistence in their online courses. All of the students achieved the required level and maintained their performance for the duration of the intervention and the second baseline. The results showed overwhelming that the students responded to the intervention made during the fourth week of the study and the momentum continued during the intervention until week nine. Furthermore, the social validation data obtained from the participants were generally positive. Because there is a paucity of research regarding using e-mail as a tool of motivation and retention of e-learners, this study adds to the growing research literature in this area. In addition, single case study designs have been rarely used in the literature with e-learners and this study contributes to the body of literature for single case designs in the educational research field.

Using the ABA design is significant in that it enabled the researcher to test the effectiveness of the intervention. The researcher counted the number of posts for each of the participants for three consecutive weeks, and then introduced the intervention for another three consecutive weeks. Subsequent to collecting data for six weeks, the researcher followed the study for another three weeks to collect data to observe its effectiveness. It is apparent from the data shown (Figure 1) in the appendix, that the intervention made a difference in all of the participants’ behavior. Moreover, the effect of the intervention remained effective for participants after the intervention was made. These results confirm the power of communicating with students and indicates that following up with students is a valuable tool to increase their motivation and retention in their courses.

Despite the reported changes, a number of limitations warrant attention. First, given the small number of participants in this study, the findings are specific to those students and the target behavior. The researcher feels that additional research is needed to investigate the effects of the model on other target behaviors and students with various learning and support needs. In particular, multi-generational students might not respond to the intervention in the same manner as the original participants. Hence, it is important to develop a tool of motivation and persistence that is suitable for a wide range of students. Second, the findings of the current study are based on a limited sample, and generalization data were not collected. This is because the design of the study does not focus on generalization, but rather a
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Review of Educational Research

There is no question that teaching online comes with many challenges in order to create and maintain a productive and caring online classroom environment. This kind of educational environment should engage all students and faculty members reach out to students who might be struggling in their online courses and show interest in students’ education. This study attempted a new method of reaching out to those students who were struggling in their online courses and show interest in students’ education. This study attempted a new method of reaching out to those students who were struggling in their HRM online course.

REFERENCES


