

APRENDIZAJE EN LÍNEA: ¿LO DISFRUTAN LOS ESTUDIANTES?

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Resumen

Una de las tendencias actuales en la educación es crear y proveer acceso a materiales y cursos en línea. Aunque existen universidades venezolanas que han invertido en plataformas o adoptado enfoques en los que el profesor utiliza el Internet, la mayoría de las instituciones de educación superior en el país enseñan con metodologías tradicionales. Se cree que el proceso para introducir recursos en línea es demasiado costoso, complejo y arriesgado. Mejorar la comprensión acerca de los múltiples factores que influyen en la implementación exitosa de tal iniciativa podría ayudar en el proceso de transición. Este artículo considera algunas de los temas que los estudiantes han planteado en relación con los ambientes de aprendizaje en línea, en particular, el asunto del disfrute. El análisis de los datos sugiere que, en general, los estudiantes disfrutaban una exposición moderada a cierto tipo de experiencias en Internet más que estar involucrados en un curso que sea totalmente en línea. El contenido de este artículo puede resultar interesante y útil; sin embargo, debido a que este estudio se realizó bajo la metodología de investigación en aula y el enfoque investigación-acción, las conclusiones se limitan a los estudiantes en cuestión.

Palabras clave: Educación superior, ambientes de aprendizaje en línea, disfrute de aprendizaje en línea.

Abstract

ONLINE LEARNING: DO STUDENTS REALLY ENJOY IT?

A recent trend in higher education is to create and provide online access to course materials. Although some Venezuelan universities have either invested in platforms or adopted a teacher-driven approach, most higher education institutions in the country remain traditional in their teaching. The process of introducing online resources is thought to be far too expensive, complex, and risky. One way to encourage transition would be to more deeply understand the multiple factors influencing successful implementation. This paper considers some of the issues raised by students with regard to online learning environments, and in particular the issue of online learning enjoyment. The analysis of the findings suggests that, in general, students would rather be moderately exposed to certain types of online learning experiences than involved in a completely online course. The content of this paper may prove interesting and useful; strictly speaking, however, since this study was undertaken under the classroom research methodology and action research approach, conclusions are limited to the students in question.

Keywords: higher education, online learning environment, online learning enjoyment.

Introduction

Universities are encouraging the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) as teaching tools. There is no question about the importance of some of the factors supporting this trend: students' need for competence in ICT's; changes in student demography such as the rise of "full-time part-time students" as well as lifelong learning; changes in the market for delivery of education; and government policy towards higher education (UNESCO, 1998; Blackstone, 2001; Krücken, 2003; Jones, N. *et al*, 2004; Concannon *et al*,

2005; Pedró, 2005). However, the move to ICT's remains controversial. The process is expensive and complex, and there is still the issue of effectiveness: Does this approach really contribute to more and better learning (Hodson *et al*, 2003; Pedró F., 2005; Tastle *et al*, 2005)?

To improve the chances for success of a transition to ICT's, efforts have been carried out to better understand the complex nature of the process. Infrastructure; quality of content and assessment; quality of learner support systems; assumptions made about learners and educators; and attitudes held by learners and educators concerning the learning experience itself—these figure among the many factors that have come under consideration (Macnish *et al*, 2003; Concannon *et al*, 2005, Timucin, 2006).

The present study aims at providing insight into one aspect related to learners' assumptions and attitudes: Do students really enjoy online learning? Enjoyment, motivation and learning are believed to be closely related (Harms, 1994; Lumsden, 1994; Raffini, 1995; Rogers, 1997; Mendler, 2001; Hwang, 2002). Knowing what and how much online learning is enjoyed by the students will help to (a) develop an assertive, balanced approach to incorporating the resource; (b) change the instructional design of courses; and (c) improve online tools. It is hoped that the findings and suggestions herein will provide ideas for enhancing the experiences of those students and teachers who engage in teaching and learning using ICT's.

Method

The present study is framed under the classroom research methodology and the action research approach. Hence the researcher uses her students and classroom as subjects and setting, and the results aim at the improvement of her practices as a teacher (Mackey, 2005). Although the issues and results discussed here may prove useful to anyone interested in online supported learning, the results must not be understood to apply to all students in all classrooms.

Instrument

The Online Learning Environment Survey (OLES) (Pearson J. and Trinidad S., 2005) is a web-based instrument (<http://www.monochrome.com.au/oles/survey.htm>). The OLES can be used to gather and represent data on students' "actual" (experienced) and "preferred" (ideal) learning environments. Estimates of reliability for OLES were found to be satisfactory. The internal consistency (Cronbach *a* reliability) estimates ranged from 0.86 to 0.96 for the "actual" version and from 0.89 to 0.96 for the "preferred" version (Trinidad, 2004). It is a Likert-type scale with 54 items arranged in nine categories: Computer Usage (CU), Teacher Support (TS), Student Interaction and Collaboration (SIC), Personal Relevance (PR), Authentic Learning (AL), Student Autonomy (SA), Equity (EQ), Enjoyment (EN), and Asynchronicity (AS). Respondents are asked to rate items using a five-point scale (Almost Never; Seldom; Sometimes; Often; Almost Always).

The present study used the OLES instrument "actual" version with four adaptations, to wit: (a) the survey was not administered online, but was printed out; (b) of the nine categories only one was used, "Enjoyment-actual" (items 43-48 in the original survey); and (c) item number 48 "I am satisfied with this online class" was changed to "I am satisfied with this course's online tool." The main reasons for these changes were (1) since the course itself was not online, taking the survey online made no sense; (2) the main interest of the researcher was limited to discovering her students' feelings and predispositions towards online learning; and (3) because an online tool was being introduced into a traditional course, it made more sense to ask about the tool than about the class itself.

Setting

Universidad Simón Bolívar is one of the most prestigious universities in Venezuela. It is a science-based institution. Engineering, basic sciences (math, physics, chemistry), architecture and biology are among its majors. With the exception of the future architects, all students have to pass a three-level EFL scientific reading course in their first year. Students can be exempted from this course by performing well on a special placement test. Still, more than 800 students have to take the course. Although the course has been designed under a traditional approach, teachers are free to introduce resources and methodologies, including online tools, to aid learning.

The researcher applied the instrument to 50 of her students from the second-level EFL scientific reading course (January-April term). The students attended class on campus the traditional four hours a week. The online tool was introduced in the middle of the term. The OLES instrument was applied at the end.

The online tool that was introduced was not meant to constitute a learning environment in itself, but rather a learning aid (see <http://id1112usb.wikispaces.net/>). It was intended to give students permanent access to important information such as (a) cumulative grades, upcoming events, course content with chronogram, and assessment activities; (b) guidance on achieving success in the different challenges that the course set, including assessment and bonus points; (c) extra practice and reading, with teacher's notes to encourage autonomous learning; and (d) the teacher's contact info.

Results and discussion

Students' responses on OLES for the present study are presented in the following sections. "Enjoyment-actual," the category that was used for the present paper, features six items: (a) I prefer online learning; (b) online learning is exciting; (c) online learning is worth my time; (d) I enjoy studying online; (e) I would enjoy my education if more of my classes were online; and (f) I am satisfied with this course's online tool. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, whereas Tables 2 gives frequencies and percentages for each item. The numbers in the scale are interpreted as follows: (1) almost never; (2) seldom; (3) sometimes; (4) often; (5) almost always. The results, analyzed by item, appear below.

I prefer online learning

The results in Table 1 suggest that most students would prefer online learning sometimes or seldom. The number repeated most is 2 (seldom). Fifty percent of the students are above 2 (seldom) and the other 50% fall under this number. Averaged, students are at 2.68 (somewhere between seldom and sometimes). They deviate 1.40 units from the average.

According to Table 2, 12 students (24%) would prefer online learning almost never; 15 students (30%) would prefer it seldom; 8 students (16%), sometimes; 7 students (14%), often; and 8 students (16%), almost always.

Online learning is exciting

The results in Table 1 suggest that most students think online learning is exciting sometimes or seldom. The number repeated most is 1 (almost never). Fifty percent of the students are above 3 (sometimes) and the other 50% fall under this number. On the average, students are at 2.74 (somewhere between seldom and

sometimes). They deviate 1.41 units from the average.

According to Table 2, 13 students (26%) think online learning is exciting almost never; 10 students (20%) say seldom; 12 students (24%) say sometimes; 7 students (14%) say often; and 8 students (16%) say almost always.

Online learning is worth my time

The results in Table 1 suggest that most students think online learning is worth their time sometimes. The number repeated most is 3 (sometimes). Fifty percent of the students are above 3 (sometimes) and the other 50% below it. On the average, students come out at 3.10 (sometimes). They deviate 1.29 units from the average.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the students’ “Actual-enjoyment” category on the Online Learning Environment Survey (OLES).

		I prefer online learning	Online learning is exciting	Online learning is worth my time	I enjoy studying online	I would enjoy my education if more classes were online	I am satisfied with this course’s online tool	Average Category mean
N	Valid	50	50	50	50	50	50	
	Lost	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Mean		2.6800	2.7400	3.1000	2.8800	2.4200	3.7600	2.9300
Median		2.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	2.0000	4.0000	
Mode		2.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	2.00	4.00	
Standard Dev.		1.4061	1.4115	1.2976	1.2395	1.2469	1.1168	
Variance		1.9771	1.9922	1.6837	1.5363	1.5547	1.2473	

Table 2.

Frecuencies and percentages for the students’ “Actual-enjoyment” category on the Online Learning Environment Survey (OLES).

Item	Scale	Frecuencies	Percentages
I prefer online learning	1	12	24.0
	2	15	30.0
	3	8	16.0
	4	7	14.0
	5	8	16.0

Table 2 (Cont.)

Online learning is exciting	1	13	26.0
	2	10	20.0
	3	12	24.0
	4	7	14.0
	5	8	16.0
Online learning is worth my time	1	7	14.0
	2	9	18.0
	3	15	30.0
	4	10	20.0
	5	9	18.0
I enjoy studying online	1	9	18.0
	2	10	20.0
	3	13	26.0
	4	14	28.0
	5	4	8.0
I would enjoy my education if more of my classes were online	1	14	28.0
	2	15	30.0
	3	11	22.0
	4	6	12.0
	5	4	8.0
I am satisfied with this course's online tool	1	3	6.0
	2	5	10.0
	3	5	10.0
	4	25	50.0
	5	12	24.0

According to Table 2, 7 students (14%) think online learning is worth their almost never; 9 students (18%) say seldom; 15 students (30%) say sometimes; 10 students (20%) say often; and 9 students (18%) say almost always.

I enjoy studying online

Table 1 suggests that most students enjoy studying online sometimes. The number repeated the most is 4 (often). Fifty percent of the students are above 3 (sometimes) and the other 50% fall under it. Averaged, students come out at 2.88 (sometimes). They deviate 1.23 units from the scale.

According to Table 2, 9 students (18%) enjoy studying online almost never; 10 students (20%) do so seldom; 13 students (26%) do so sometimes; 14 students (28%) do so often; and 4 students (8%) do so almost always.

I would enjoy my education if more of my classes were online

Concerning whether most students would enjoy their education if more of their classes were online, the results in Table 1 suggest that this is seldom the case. The number that was repeated the most is 2 (seldom). Fifty percent of the students are above 2 (seldom) and the other 50% fall under it. On the average, students are at 2.42 (seldom). They deviate 1.24 units from the average.

According to table 2, 14 students (28%) would enjoy their education if more of their classes were online almost never; 15 students (30%) would do so seldom; 11 students (22%), sometimes; 6 students (12%), often; and 4 students (8%), almost always.

I am satisfied with this course's online tool

The results in Table 1 suggest that most students are often satisfied with this course's online tool. The number that was repeated the most often is 4 (often). Fifty percent of the students are above 4 (often) and the other 50% fall under it. On the average, students are at 3.76 (somewhere between sometimes and often). They deviate 1.11 units from the average.

According to Table 2, 3 students (6%) were almost never satisfied with this course's online tool; 5 students (10%) were seldom satisfied with it; 5 students (10%) sometimes were; 25 students (50%) often were; and 12 students (28%) almost always were.

Average mean of the "Enjoyment-actual" category

The average category mean is 2.93 (the "sometimes" scale; see table 1), this data seems to indicate that, on the whole, students would rather be moderately exposed to certain types of online learning experiences than involved in a completely online course.

After reflecting on the data, it seems appropriate to suggest that (a) an assertive, balanced approach to incorporating online learning to traditional courses would be to aim at moderate exposure (sometimes) instead of an extensive one (almost always); (b) the instructional design of courses would be enriched if they included an online learning aid tool as an option for students to carry on autonomous learning activities; and (c) online tools should be relevant to the students' needs and preferences; an online tool that is centered on the students would probably be more successful than one that is centered on the content.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered the question “Do students really enjoy online learning?” We have used the OLES instrument to describe how much a group of students from a Venezuelan University enjoy learning online. It appears that, contrary to what Canning-Wilson (2000) states, traditional means of education and assessment will not cease to exist as distance learning and online courses become more available to students. The present study’s results show that students enjoy online learning environments only sometimes. This suggests that, in general, students would not prefer online classes to traditional ones.

On the other hand, students expressed high satisfaction regarding the online tool used for the course. This suggests that they would be willing to use certain types of online tools, especially ones that would give them permanent access to important information and useful learning tips. Since attitude is considered a very important aspect in the success and effectiveness of introducing and developing online learning environments (Concannon, 2005; Connolly, 2005; Surry *et al*, 2006), further research should be undertaken to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Such data will shed light on the many factors influencing the present findings, and could help significantly in developing good attitudes towards online learning on the part of both students and instructors.

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