Students' Perceptions Of Success
In The Online Graduate-Level Classes:
A Self-Directed Learning Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of successful online learning, defined as a higher academic performance (A or 90) and to find if there is the evidence to confirm the role of self-directed learning in the online graduate-level courses. A qualitative method was used to analyze learners' perceptions of online learning experiences. Six graduate students from an American public university participated in this study. The qualitative analysis yielded six major themes, which confirm the relationship between self-directed learning and academic performance.

Keywords: Self-directed Learning; Online Learning; Higher Academic performance

INTRODUCTION

Personal Experience

*B*ased on personal experiences, the researcher considers that self-directed learning is a reliable factor affecting students' academic performances in the web-based environments and traditional face-to-face learning contexts. During the teaching career, the researcher witnessed that numerous students with high level of self-directed learning could perform well in academic performances at any educational settings and learning environments because those learners were responsible people who would self-control their own time for learning, self-manage their learning tasks, own several problem-solving skills, and be suitable for engaging in independent learning activities. For example, when the researcher assigned some learning tasks to all students, those who have a high level of self-directed learning would automatically schedule their own time for completing the assignments. During the learning process, if they face some problems, they would also make use of existing learning resources to cope with difficulties.

Above personal claim exactly reflects Moore's transactional distance theory. Moore argued that dialogue, course structure, and learner autonomy are three crucial elements in the distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Among those three factors, learner autonomy is closely related to self-directed learning. Moore and Kearsley (2005) felt that learners with a high level of self-directed learning are able to "…design their own learning objectives, identify resources that will help them achieve their objectives, choose methods to achieve the objectives, and test and evaluate their performances." (p.120) Although Moore and Kearsley did not report that those who have great self-directed learning would perform well in academic achievement or learning tasks at distance education programs, numerous empirical studies attempted to find the relationship between self-directed learning and academic achievement.

Problem Statement in Literature Review

In the literature, quantitative studies often employed psychological measurements, such as Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) or Oddi Continuing Learning Inventory (OCLI) to access learners' self-directed learning abilities and correlated their online academic performances, defined as final course grades. However, the results of those kinds of studies are not consistent. Pachnowski and Jurczyk (2000) used the SDLRS to investigate

learners' academic performances in a web-based learning environment. The result showed that no significant relationship existed between self-directed learning and academic performance. In Doherty's (2000) study, one of the purposes was to find the existence of a relationship between self-directed learning and academic performance. The instrument Doherty used was SDLRS. The result also reported that self-directed learning did not relate to academic performance. In Corbeil's (2003) study, the instrument for measuring a student's self-directed learning is OCLI. The result indicated that a significantly positive relationship existed between self-directed learning and academic performance. In addition, a subsequent regression analysis also showed that self-directed learning was one of the key indicators for predicting online academic performance.

Compared to quantitative research, the findings of qualitative studies are more consistent. Howland and Moore's (2002) study was to employ a qualitative approach to examine online learners' experiences on successful learning, defined as a good academic performance, from four aspects of viewpoints - learning experience, learning strategy, communication, and difficulty or ease of online course. The researchers designed 12 open-ended questions as the study instrument to survey 48 online students. By examining each sentence that the learners responded to, the result showed that a self-directed learning style leads to successful learning. Bonk et al's (2002) study is another example that adopts a qualitative method to explore factors affecting successful online learning. At the end of the online courses, they interviewed not only online students, but the course instructors. The findings showed that communication, interaction, active learning, course content, and role of instructor were key issues related to successful learning - defined as great academic performance. Among those findings, active learning is related to self-directed learning. In Barbour's (2007) study, the viewpoints of instructors were obtained by a qualitative interview. The result showed that instructors should use instructional strategies to enhance learners' self-directed learning so that online students can successfully complete their learning tasks.

From the literature review discussed earlier, the findings between quantitative and qualitative studies are not the same. Recently, Chou and Chen (2008) reviewed six quantitative studies regarding the relationship between self-directed learning and academic performance. They found that numerous extraneous factors would affect the result from a quantitative approach. These factors are reliability on academic performance, learner's educational background, sample subjects, and measurement of self-directed learning. If related studies could not remove those critical factors, the explored relationship between self-directed learning and academic performance is meaningless. Therefore, Chou and Chen proposed that qualitative research can obtain an in-depth understanding of self-directed learning on academic performance. However, they felt that qualitative studies regarding this issue are extremely sparse.

In the traditional face-to-face learning environments, academic performance - defined as the final course grade - is always regarded as a success indicator. For example, if students obtain higher course grades (i.e., A or 90), they reach a certain level of successful learning from instructors' perspectives. This rule can also be applied to the online contexts. Nowadays, online learning is a popular issue in different disciplines. Whether corporate settings or educational institutions, the number of people undertaking e-learning is exponentially growing. 'How to enhance students' successful learning' is the ultimate goal of most distance education programs. For this reason, it is necessary to examine online learners' experiences as course design foundations, thereby enhancing the understanding of whether self-directed learning may lead to successful learning (good academic performance) in the web-based learning environments.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of successful online learning - defined as a higher academic performance (A or 90) - and to find if there is evidence to confirm the role of self-directed learning in the online graduate-level courses. The study employs a qualitative method to analyze the intrinsic learning experiences from online learners to obtain in-depth and meaningful understandings.

The purpose of this study, as discussed above, leads the researcher to take a phenomenology approach. As what Van Manen (1997) described, "The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual

expression of its essence…" (p. 36). For this study, the lived experiences are learners' online experiences on academic performances in the graduate-level courses. In addition, the research methods described in the phenomenology, such as the bracketing process, allow us to objectively observe and interpret students' intrinsic learning experiences. According to Barritt and Bleeker (1985), "Bracketing is a way to put subjectivity to use in the service of understanding" (p. 29). As a qualitative researcher, one needs to be open to any ideas that online learners express and attend more actively to the participants' views.

Two concrete research questions are:

1.   How do graduate students who have been defined as successful online learners (good academic performance - A or 90) perceive their success?
2.   Are there any patterns from learners' perceptions showing self-directed learning?

Sampling

Two factors involved in sampling decisions in this study are participants and the researcher. For participants, since the purpose of the study is to explore the "success" phenomenon in the online environment, a unique sampling is taken. According to Merriam (1998), "A unique sample is based on unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest." (p. 62) Therefore, in this study, students who obtain higher academic performances (90 or A) are the main focus group. For the second factor, the only online courses the researcher can access are located in one campus at an American public university. For this reason, based on a convenience sampling, numerous online graduate-level courses from this school are selected for the study site.

The targeted population is learners who take online graduate-level courses. Since the school offers numerous online graduate-level courses, this study only selected three courses in the field of adult education. The researcher sent the study proposal to all instructors who taught online graduate-level courses and obtained approvals to study their courses. Subsequently, the researcher sent e-mails to online learners who performed well on academic performances (A or above). Once students agreed to participate in this study, the researcher scheduled time to meet with each of them. In each meeting, the participants were asked several questions listed in the interview guide (see Appendix) to obtain their lived experiences about online courses. Table 1 shows participants' basic profiles.

Table 1: Basic Profile of Each Participant

Pseudo Name	Gender	Age	Major
S1	F	27	Adult Education
S2	M	37	Educational Technology
S3	F	33	Curriculum & Instruction
S4	F	36	Curriculum & Instruction
S5	F	29	Curriculum & Instruction
S6	F	25	Curriculum & Instruction

Data Analysis

Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological analysis steps were used to organize all written transcripts. First, significant phrases or sentences are identified. Second, meanings are formulated from significant phrases or statements. Third, the formulated meanings are clustered into different themes. Finally, exhaustive descriptions for the themes are provided.

Data Trustworthy

In order to increase validity and reliability of this study, a number of techniques were employed. For validity, Creswell (2007) felt that qualitative researchers should take at least two of the following methods to confirm validity: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarification of researcher bias, member checking, thick description, and external audits. Of those techniques, triangulation, peer review, and member checking were conducted. In triangulation, the researcher made use of

multiple sources to corroborate evidence (interviews and observations for online learners' behaviors in the online courses). For peer review, a disinterested professional colleague kept questioning the research design to increase the quality. As for member checking, once interpretative data have been obtained, the researcher brought the data to approach some participants a second time in order to validate the findings.

Concerning reliability, a good quality digital recorder was used to obtain detailed field notes. In order to confirm the accuracy of interview contents, after the researcher transcribed recordings, the other professional colleague was hired to transcribe the data again. However, according to Creswell (2007), reliability also can be defined as "…the stability of responses of multiple coders of data sets" (p. 210). Therefore, in this study, the researcher collaborated with other colleagues to engage in the coding process and did comparative analyses among each coding result.

RESULTS

The interpretation of participants' transcribed interview data resulted in six themes described below.

1.   Perspective of Self-Directed Learning Measurement

Each participant was asked about the perspective of self-directed learning measurement. All students felt that the item descriptions in the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale were appropriately written for them. For example, S1 said,

Two of the factors in (this) measurement are love for learning and motivation for learning. I checked out all items and found that all (descriptions) fully described my learning situations.

Like S1, S2 presented a different viewpoint:

I tried to fill out the scale. I think I will get a very high score because I always checked the item 4 (Likert scale). I am probably a high level learner, I think.

After completing all interviews, the researcher surveyed each participant by using the SDLRS. The quantitative result showed that the score range of the SDLRS is between 240 and 290. According to Guglielmino and Guglelmino's (2012) normal distribution pattern, these scores are above the average score (214). In other words, participants were high-level self-directed learners.

2.   Self-Directed Learning in Online Course

When asked if they may exhibit the attitudes of self-directed learning (descriptions in the measurement) in the online courses, most students responded with positive opinions. For example, S3 said,

Regardless of (the) learning environments, I am always an active learner. In online courses, I not only fulfill the instructor's requirement, but also do a lot of extra work.

S5 discussed this issue from a motivational perspective. She said,

Online learning occurs in the virtual environment. All you do is interact with your personal computer. Few weeks after course beginning, I feel online learning is so boring, but my motivation for obtaining knowledge keeps me going.

3.   Online Learning Behavior

During the interview process, each participant was asked to show evidence of their online learning behaviors. All students were active learners who participated in the online discussions and submitted weekly assignments to the instructors. For example, S5 said,

My instructor wanted us to respond to other classmates' postings'. Weekly, five responses are minimum requirements. In order to gain good impression, I will write more postings.

        S1 related her behaviors to a good grade. She said,

My ultimate goal is to get a higher grade. I make use of several learning resources to deal with any learning tasks. In such a way, the records in online courses will show my active participation.

4.   Final Course Grade

        Since all participants contributed their efforts to engage in online learning, they felt that they deserved to obtain higher academic performances (90 or A). However, compared to the face-to-face learning, students felt that the workloads in online courses were overwhelming. For example, S4 said,

In online courses, I did much more than traditional learning. I should check discussion postings all the time and pay close attention to the interaction.

        S3 also expressed the same feeling. She said,

If I seldom expressed my personal opinions or commented on others' postings by leaving messages on the discussion boards, my instructors might notice my inactive engagement in the discussion activities simply by looking at the frequency counts of names appearing on the discussion boards.

5.   Perspective of Successful Learning

        Students' opinions about the definitions of successful learning were inconsistent. While some thought that successful learning is to fulfill the course expectations, others felt that successful learning is to acquire concrete knowledge. However, all students perceived that the final course grade did not relate to successful learning. For example, S2 said,

It is difficult to define successful learning. For me, successful learning is to learn something meaningful for me. Final course grade is only the outcome.

        In contrast to S2's opinion, S3 stated,

In the beginning of the online courses, I had several expectations about my learning. For example, I expected that the online instructor would give more feedback to me. My expectations directly related to successful learning even though I got a good grade.

6.   Teaching Strategy

        Regardless of what kind of teaching strategies the online instructors used, all participants follow the rules. Most students feel that any teaching strategies only increase or decrease their learning loads, which cannot influence their learning motivation. For example, S4 said,

I show a great expect to my online instructors. I will definitely follow what they said. New teaching strategies often increase my learning loads. But I will try my best to do better.

        S5 expressed gratitude toward the teaching strategies that the instructors used. She said,

I think most instructors use the same teaching strategies in the online courses. But sometimes one of my instructors may propose an innovative teaching strategy, such as wiki collaboration. I deeply appreciate what he did even though the strategy increases the load.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Based on the qualitative findings presented earlier, the high-achievement learners were also high level of self-directed students who exhibited active online learning patterns. Their high learning motivations drove them to deal with any learning tasks even though heavy workloads existed. However, students' perceptions of successful online learning were inconsistent. Success in online courses can be expectation fulfillment or knowledge acquisition. Students' opinions converge in the issue of the final course grade which could not be represented as successful learning.

The study aims to employ a qualitative methodology to explore students' self-directed learning in the online courses. The qualitative evidence confirms the role of self-directed learning, which supports three previous qualitative studies (Bonk et al., 2002; Howland & Moore, 2002; Barbour, 2007). However, this study only obtains six participants' perceptions of online learning experiences. A small sample size may lead to a high-agreement result.

Due to the nature of the qualitative study, the results cannot be generalized to other studies. Furthermore, most student participants in this study come from different Asian countries. Factors, such as culture and educational background, are not considered in this study. Future studies may replicate this study by removing those factors.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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APPENDIX

(Interview Guide)

Questions

1.   How do you feel your online course?
2.   How do you feel your online behaviors (online discussions or interactions)? Please show the evidence.
3.   Do you think you have a successful learning in the online course? (Explain the reason)
4.   What are your opinions about successful learning defined by GPA?
5.   From your online learning experiences, what takes to your good academic performance?
6.   What takes to your definition of successful learning?
7.   How do you perceive the SDLRS?