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Students’ Perception of an Online Marketing Subject: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Extant literature supports the growing importance of offering flexible modes of learning delivery in order to meet the needs of a diverse student cohort. The increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has lead to an enriched learning experience, but has also posed a number of constraints and challenges for students. Although there is an abundance of research regarding students’ perceptions, attitudes and satisfaction with the online learning environment, most of this is taken from the perspective of the distance education student. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine these issues from the perspective of a mixed cohort of students (both on and off campus), who are required to complete a core, undergraduate marketing unit exclusively online.

Introduction

Recognition of students’ learning styles is regarded by many educators as a vital component of any effective teaching strategy (Morrison et al., 2003). However, it is becoming more complicated to ascertain the most effective teaching style to meet the educational needs of a diverse student population (Spector, 2005) who are required to find a balance between careers, family and further education (Bunn, 2001). It is argued that the students of today are being raised in the information technology era of interactive platforms, communication-intensive and knowledge-based environments which form the framework of their learning environment (Ueltschy, 2001). Higher education institutions are embracing information technology as an important pedagogical tool for delivering courses and programmes to a wide array of audiences (Peltier et al., 2007).

In recent years, there has been a growth in the application of ICT to create a richer learning environment (McPhail and Birch, 2004). Many universities are now complementing their campus-based and distance education programmes with a hybrid learning environment through the integration of traditional face-to-face programmes with various online or web-based programmes including forums, discussion groups and audio-visual material in order to enhance the learning experience for both on and off-campus students. The integration of various ICT techniques into the learning environment appears to offer many advantages over the conventional face-to-face learning style including cost economies, increased access and enhanced educational opportunities for students and more flexible teaching and learning approaches (Holt and Thompson, 1998; Oliver, 1999; Richardson and Swan, 2003). This study aims to gain an insight into student’s perceptions of, attitudes towards and experiences within the online learning environment from the perspective of on and off campus students.

Literature Review

According to the Bell, et al. (2002) study on behalf of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, in 2002 there were 207 fully online courses offered by 23 Australian universities with 31 percent delivered in only online mode. Further, one of the report’s major findings is that this use of technology in Australian universities is likely to only increase (Bell et al., 2002). With this growing importance in the use of technology in the
delivery of the learning experience and the transfer of knowledge, “higher education in general and marketing education in particular are embracing the challenge to continually improve the quality of the educational experience and meet standards of accountability in a highly dynamic educational environment” (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 42). There are numerous studies which have addressed diverse teaching and learning styles within the context of higher education (Davis et al., 2000; Dunn et al., 1990) and research which integrates the importance of information technology in pedagogical approaches to teaching and the students’ learning experience (Taylor et al., 2004) in terms of students’ perceptions, attitudes and satisfaction with the online delivery mode.

Roach et al. (1993) found the introduction of interactive technology lead to increased student participation, improved team building skills, enhanced student satisfaction with the type of learning material and to a certain degree improved assessment outcomes. Petrides (2002) reported participants felt it easier to work in collaborative groups in an online environment without re-arranging time schedules which is often the case in face-to-face situations. Ueltschy (2001) also found the student participation had increased but in addition, the breadth and depth of students’ responses in terms of quality and truthfulness had also improved. This is reiterated by Chizmar and Walbert (1999) who found that the public display of online discussions lead to participants taking greater care and reflection in their responses. Furthermore, the dynamism of two-way interaction impacted on the level of cognitive involvement in terms of a more attentive approach to the learning process such as enhancing their knowledge acquisition (Ueltschy, 2001). Young (2006) found flexibility as the most cited advantage of online courses due to the ability of students to be able to do work “when and where they wanted” (p. 74).

However, Ueltschy’s (2001) study also demonstrated that students did not like the delay in responses encountered when attempting to clarify ‘fuzzy’ concepts and felt the online environment hindered their learning experience (Ueltschy, 2001). Petrides (2002) reported that a number of participants felt the lack of immediacy in responses was a major drawback, particularly in asynchronous online discussions when feedback was reliant on others reading and responding. Isolation and a lack of a sense of community (Song et al., 2004) and interaction with peers and teaching staff was argued to be a major challenge in the online learning experience (Hara and Kling, 2000; Northrup, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003). Other barriers to online learning cited in the literature include the difficulty in understanding the goals and objectives of the course and technical difficulties (Song et al., 2004). Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

- To determine students’ attitudes, perception and satisfaction with a marketing unit delivered in a wholly online learning environment;
- To ascertain the benefits, constraints and challenges for students undertaking a marketing unit delivered in a wholly online learning environment.

**Method**

To gain a broader understanding of student experiences and to offer increased insight into student attitudes, perception and satisfaction with a wholly online unit of study in a tertiary education context, a qualitative method was used. The research method involved conducting an electronic survey, delivered between weeks three through six of semester, to second year undergraduate university students undertaking a core marketing unit at a Melbourne-based University. The unit is only offered online. Students were asked to provide reasons for their
likes and dislikes of the online learning environment through open-ended questions which asked: ‘Which aspects of the unit in its current form do you like?’ and ‘Which aspects of the unit in its current form do you dislike?’ Students were assured of anonymity to ensure their insights reflected their true feelings, attitudes and perceptions. Students were also advised that their feedback would be valuable in terms of assessing the effectiveness of the online mode of delivery for this core unit.

The survey, accessible via a secured link, was posted on the unit’s online teaching and learning platform with responses collected utilising an opt-in approach where students clicked on an embedded link. Respondents could only be students enrolled in the undergraduate marketing unit. To improve the response rate, electronic reminders were regularly posted to encourage completion. Of the 860 students enrolled in this unit, data was collected from 112 respondents (13% response rate). Open ended questions were open coded and then broad themes were developed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). For the purpose of this paper, only themes relating to student perceptions and satisfaction will be discussed including flexibility of online teaching and learning and perceived self-directed learning; temporal benefits and constraints; replication of the on-campus experience (interaction); and, perception of the online learning environment (information provision).

Findings

Based on the analysis of open ended questions, students’ responses indicate that the online environment brings its own benefits, constraints and challenges to learners (Motteram and Forrester, 2005). The results of the study indicate that there are a number of key themes which impact on students’ satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the unit’s online mode of delivery. Firstly is the theme of Flexibility as illustrated by the following responses:

“I like how flexible it is, it is good for busy students who may be juggling work and school.” (R48)

“…..allowing us to (if we wish) get ahead….instead of waiting….allowing us to manage our time better (especially for those of us working full time and supporting a full time course load.” (R59).

Reflecting back on the literature it is clear to see that these findings are consistent with extant literature as flexibility is a major advantage of online learning (Young, 2006) in terms of fewer time constraints and the notion that the learning experience is of an asynchronous nature (Peltier et al., 2007) allowing students to interact at a time and place of their choice leading to a more convenient learning environment (Morrison et al., 2003; Taylor, 2002; Taylor et al., 2004). This is supported by Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) and Ortega (1997) who found that, as we did in this study, flexibility is an important facet of online learning with most students being satisfied with the ability to learn at a time and place of their convenience.

The second evident theme was termed Temporal benefits and constraints. Continuing on in the theme of time management and the fulfilment of educational needs, students were satisfied with the temporal benefits that a wholly online delivery offers:

“The fact it is completely online works well with my schedule” (R71)

“…..so not having any [lectures] for this subject is a relief…..also, it is encouraging us to increase our time management skills, which I have found to be essential from my
work in an accountants firm where every staff member has to deal with numerous clients and files at any one time” (R40)
“I can work through the topics in my own time. No wasting time travelling to uni.” (R75)

Along with flexibility comes a need for self-direction and personal drive on behalf of the individual student. The theme of Self-directed learning was the third finding. Although, it must be noted, that students in this unit were given clear directions indicating what was expected and were provided with various strategies they could However, utilise to ensure they remained focussed in the online learning environment some respondents indicated a problem with motivation.

“(…)have difficulties of catching up with it all the time as it is not in the timetable, and tend to neglect it.” (R53)
“Being an online unit, you tend to leave the subject last on the list when studying for it and completing the weekly readings” (R58).
“I appreciate the flexibility that it offers being a totally online unit. However, I am struggling with motivation” (R49)

According to Garrison (2003), due to the asynchronous nature of online learning, it is imperative that learners become self-directed and take control of monitoring and managing the cognitive and contextual aspects of their learning experience.

The fourth coded theme was titled: Replication of the on-campus experience (Interaction) as illustrated by the following indicative quote from students;

“I enjoy the interaction of students and lecturers … being able to ask questions and discuss issues relating to the topics… it feels similar to attending lectures on campus” (R42)

However, at the other end of the continuum, a critical area of difficulty for some students was the lack of face-to-face communication with teaching staff and peers;

“I do not like the online aspect of this subject…..I learn more when I am able to participate and ask questions and talk face to face. I find it is more personal and therefore I feel more motivated.” (R70)
“Marketing was the subject I was looking forward to the most, and it has turned out to be disappointing. Not because the material is bland, but I am not a person who will benefit from zero personal contact and explanations. I am, by nature, not easily self-motivated and this is proving evident by my lack of commitment to this subject” (R95)
“I learn more when I am able to participate and ask questions and talk face to face. I find it is more personal and therefore I feel more motivated. Doing this subject online makes me a bit lost and confused and I wish I had someone I could talk to about it” (R70)

Extant studies have revealed that student participation in online discussions are integral to the development of effective online communities (Peltier et al., 2007). Drago and Peltier (2004) state that members of online communities are more likely to interact and be committed to the community if they perceive their interaction adds value to their learning experience through the receipt and dispersion of value-added information. Rovai (2002) reported a significant
positive relationship between students’ perceived sense of belonging to a community and perceived cognitive learning outcomes in the learning environment. Furthermore, socially and pedagogically, students seem to enjoy the ability of a classroom situation to stimulate discussion about subject content and to make any queries to gain a relatively immediate response from others. An online environment where this is also enabled to occur is perceived by the students to be important (Althaus, 1997; Stacey, 2002; Turcotte and Laferriere, 2004). In addition, positive attitudes toward the online learning experience does exhibit traits of constructivist learning (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999; Stacey, 2002) whereby students recognise the need to be proactive and independent in their learning experience (Howland and Moore, 2002):

Face-to-face communication with teaching staff and peers (Freitas et al., 1998; Perreault et al., 2002) is perceived as being a critical element in the learning experience (Reisetter and Boris, 2004; Rourke et al., 2001). Furthermore, Billings et al, (2001) suggest online communities can lead to feelings of isolation and a lack of interaction with peers thereby being detrimental to the educational experience and leading ultimately to student dissatisfaction. This is also reiterated by Hara and Kling (2000), Northrup (2002) and Rovai (2002) who contend that the online learning environment can lead to isolation, frustration and a lack of motivation (boredom).

In general, the teaching and learning platform used was perceived as being an important aspect of student satisfaction in the online delivery mode. This perception of the online learning environment (Information provision) was found to be quite important to students:

“I like that everything is so accessible such as the discussions and modules” (R29)
“I like very much how the whole [learning and teaching platform] is organised, everything is excellent from lecture notes, lecturer is outstanding with excellent and very quick replies” (R15)
“The [learning and teaching platform] is easy to navigate” (R40)

However, perceived disadvantages encountered by students in an online environment revolved around “information overload”

“(…..)checking [the online teaching and learning platform] and reading through the module discussions. I find it time consuming” (R64)
“(…..)the way [the online teaching and learning platform] discussion board is setup is really annoying not just this unit it’s the same for every unit its so slow and hard to follow” (R99)

Reflecting back on the literature (Jones et al., 2004). In the context of this research, information overload can be attributed to information entropy (Hiltz and Turoff, 1985) whereby messages are not sufficiently organised by topic or content to be easily recognised as important or relevant (Hiltz and Turoff, 1985):

**Conclusion**

It is becoming increasingly important to undertake research that examines the use of information technologies and their application to the learning experience in the higher education sector. The increasing use of this mode of delivery may impact on students’ subject
or course perceptions, attitudes and ultimate satisfaction. The results from this exploratory study have allowed a better understanding and insight into students’ perception and attitudes toward the online learning environment. In the context of our research, it can be inferred that undergraduate students enrolled on campus who were more accustomed to face-to-face peer and teaching staff interaction prefer a hybrid mode of teaching delivery. These findings are consistent with Ryan (2001) who suggests there is a growing body of evidence that students lack the capacity and inclination for independent learning required in an online environment. On the other hand, students enrolled off-campus prefer the flexibility of the online mode of learning. Finally, as information delivery technology continues to evolve, instructors will need to adapt available technology to meet the needs of the online learners (Eastman and Swift, 2001) with further research required to develop strategies that overcome the constraints and challenges identified with a wholly online mode of delivery in order to better meet the needs of a diverse student population.

References


