CHALLENGES FACING THE INTEGRATION OF ONLINE TUTORIALS IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Enhancing teaching and learning has increased in emphasis, with educators now strongly debating effectiveness. Teaching effectiveness has been challenged from three pedagogical aspects: psychological, social and more recently, technological. Online learning methods have grown substantially with students demanding increased flexibility. Many studies document positive learning outcomes, but do students like this mode of learning? In this study a survey was conducted to determine student's attitudes and perceptions of online tutorials, because perceptions of learning environments vary.

INTRODUCTION

Effective teaching and learning methods have been debated for many years, (Jonassen 1988; Rose 1999), with a paradigm shift occurring within higher education. Educators are debating effectiveness more seriously than before (Babin, Shaffer et al. 2002).

Higher education institutions are commonly using a variety of computer based learning tools which offer the necessary educational needs and fulfil student expectations. Offering greater flexibility provides learning environments that are easily accessible, allowing for more opportunity for interaction plus a variety of different learning opportunities (Franklin and Peat 2001). The learning environment should offer flexibility in structure and include opportunities for the development of self directed learning (Candy, Crebert et al. 1994). Technological effectiveness for online teaching has been challenged and this study focuses on technology enhancing communication in learning.

Use of technology in marketing courses offers an unsurpassed real world opportunity for universities, and students. The shift in technology has seen teaching and learning move toward a student centred approach, with far more active learning and process based strategies employed, rather than passive transfers of communication messages (Bobbit, Inks et al. 2000; Jeffries 2001; Kennedy, Lawton et al. 2001).

However, there are still concerns as to opinions of online education. These include, but are not limited to inferiority, high dropout rate and time required for adequate instructor training. Online learning is sometimes viewed as an lesser form of education (Eastman and Owens-Swift 2001). It can be seen as a cost saving exercise for some unprofessional universities trying to increase their intake of students. As many as 50% of students drop out because they feel isolated and have to take responsibility for their own learning (Aron 1999). Furthermore, instructors need to be trained in how their students need to use this technology to ensure successful, efficient learning. Therefore, the objective of this study was as follows:

to determine student *attitudes and perceptions* in an online marketing tutorial.

New teaching methods and flexible learning approaches are constantly being researched in education (Graham and Scarborough 1999; McLoughlin 2002). Many educators are now implementing new technology into their courses such as online syllabus, Internet term project and online homework assignments (Clarke III, Flaherty et al. 2001). The use of technology in online classrooms can encourage creative teaching and promote learning within smaller classes with students who can work on their own and, require learning flexibility (Abernathy 1999; Benbunan-Fich 1999; Eastman and Owens-Swift 2001).

These new approaches came into fruition with a postgraduate course, Integrated Marketing and Communication (IMC) in semester one, 2003. Each week students were given a choice of topics and had to choose one to discuss online. They were asked to present ideas in regards to defining the subject area, identifying models and theory, how apt their topic was to the real world in particular the Australian context, giving real and practical examples. They were also asked to relate this information to class discussions from that week's lecture.

Student experiences revealed insights into what the students' attitudes and perceptions about online learning. This article consists of six sections. The next section details literature and the background to students' perceptions to different learning styles, namely lecture and active learning and how the online classroom affects learning. Next we detail the methodology and how the data was collected via a web survey. The findings are discussed. We give limitations and conclude with recommendations and future implications. Then we describe the literature on attitudes, perceptions, learning styles and the online classroom, followed by the method, findings and limitations.

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Three important aspects of this research investigate the relationship between perceptions, learning and attitude. These will be briefly discussed. A student's perceptions about learning online is important because it is the explanation of how students see, select, organise and interpret information and stimuli into meaningful information and pictures (Liang 1967). Therefore enhancing their learning within a classroom environment. A student's behaviour can be affected by their perception of the relationship with another communicator. In this instance this would be the lecturer or tutor, other students and online learning experiences. Their learning environment (eg home or study environment) can also effect their perceptions. As shown in figure 1, the noise that can effect learning perceptions can include other home activities taking place, other students participating online at the same time, and current attitudes and perceptions that students possess. Learning is how individuals acquire experience, attitudes and knowledge. This will be discussed next.

FIGURE 1:
COMMUNICATION PROCESS FOR STUDENT LEARNING
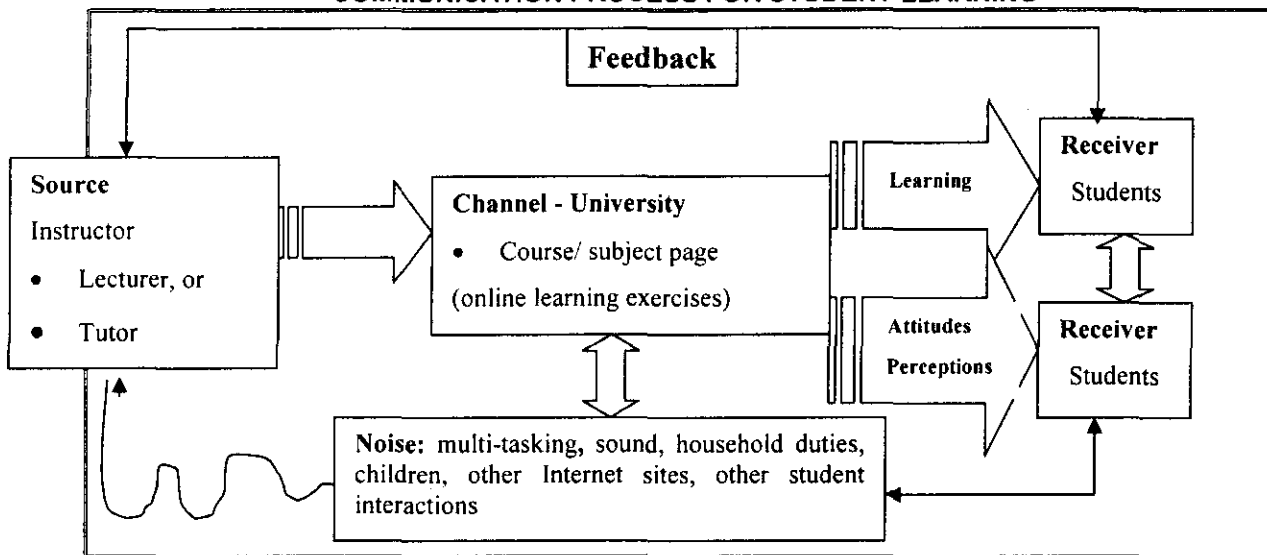
Source: developed for this study

Learning is how individuals acquire and experience information. Learning styles are varied. Students can be visual, aural, kinaesthetic or a combination of these. Computer based instruction can provide greater potential for an interactive environment than other mediated teaching methods (Jonassen 1988).

Attitudes are a group of beliefs that are organised around a specific object and predispose a person to behave in a specific manner toward that object. Robeach (1969) believes that each individual has an organised system of attitudes that direct our behaviour. This therefore can result in a positive or negative emotion (Robeach 1969; Bem 1970; Insko and Schopler 1972; Oskamp 1977).

An individuals' communicative behaviour can be affected by their perception of the relationship with the other communicator (Liang, Phillipson et al. 1966). Consumer behaviour is explained as "continued repetition of behaviour is determined by habits rather than by attitudes or beliefs" (Ronis 1989, p. 217). Therefore by providing an online discussion learning environment, research suggests it can provide positive effects on students motivation and their attitudes (Slavin 1996).

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Lecture verses Active Learning

Learning to teach is a journey through many mazes, and there is no guarantee that you make it to the other side. Highly effective teachers are professionals who have the taste to be the best they can (Smart, Kelley et al. 2003). With many different teaching strategies available to teachers, knowing what is best for you and your students is of utmost importance. Freeman (1998) suggests educators are increasingly looking for innovative teaching methods for learning in order to assist with problems associated with information delivery to large classrooms of students. Educators of marketing are placing greater emphasis on developing communication skills within courses (Smart, Kelley et al. 1999). This study looks at how this is possible with the findings of online tutorials.

Educators have a greater responsibility of providing levels of education (Young and Murphy 2003) that not only meet, but exceed student and industry expectations. One way is to be creative. Creativity is evaluated as being high on the agenda for skill development within classrooms (Shipp, Lamb Jr. et al. 1993). However, there are still questions concerning the validity of creativity in marketing disciplines (McIntyre, Hite et al. 2003). Educators within the marketing discipline need to enhance creative thinking and teaching practices, and one possible method is the use of technology and online learning. Not all academics are creative, however most would agree that the ability to think creatively is of utmost importance to industry (Brabbs 2001). As teaching professionals, pedagogies need to be more creative than traditional lectures to keep abreast with a changing student cohort and technological advances. Students' also demand courses that allow them to graduate with real marketable skills (Young and Murphy 2003), and using technologically based courses can better prepare them for the real world.

A population of students with increasing diversity challenges today's academics (Ekroth 1990). These included gender, age, culture and diversity of academic knowledge. These issues were identified by providing a survey to all students within the class, prior to the commencement of the study. It requested specific details of each student, namely age, level of tertiary education and country of origin. This clearly identified any discrepancies or weaknesses within the study.

The Online Classroom

Students can be passive recipients of information. Educators' cyber-blackboard has never been so exciting. We can place students in an endless time zone where learning and activity can take place whenever the student wants to engage. We can put them into different situations one day to the next. They can practice a multitude of skills: research, communication, fact finding, fun, as well as managerial decision making by altering exercises to suit the weeks topic of study. Students need to develop an interconnecting and integrated approach to learning. They need to develop holistic views to solve complex, every day problems in unstructured situations (November 1993). Although there are downsides of using technology for learning, benefits include time and location flexibility and no ethnic labelling (Smith 2001).

Giving the learner more autonomy when choosing how to interact with provided information and with others can be an effective learning environment (Megarry 1989). Self directed access can help students to self pace and explore more options about their topics of interest as opposed to information that is already known to them (Berge and Collins 1995). Online teaching is also an effective medium for developing social interactivity allowing the student to organise and reorganise information and create their own conceptual framework based on discussions from other students as well as receiving feedback (Godat and Whiteley-De Graaf 2003). Individual learners see the benefits of online education as opportunities for further interaction with peers (Harasim 1987); a more democratic appeal to learning and convenience of access.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia during Semester One, 2003. Postgraduate students enrolled in the Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) class were included in the study. Each student had the option of completing the survey in the final week of semester. All surveys were anonymous.

Type of data collected

A number of variables were taken from prior studies. Instructional variables included in the study were learner characteristics, learning location (Strauss and Frost 1999), time (Henke, Locander et al. 1988; Wager 1998; Strauss and Frost 1999; Marks 2000), level of interactivity (Harner 2000; Jonassen 2000; Kayama and Keesling 2000) and real world experience (Atwong and Hugstad 1997; Kearsley and Schneiderman 1998).

Survey

One survey was completed at the end of semester to enquire as to student's attitudes and perceptions on online tutorials instead of classroom tutorials. It is more beneficial to ask both qualitative and quantitative questions, therefore this study applied this principle (Fraser 1991). Of the 80 students enrolled in the unit, 32 completed the survey in the final week of semester. The sample was mostly female with 27 females and 5 males. Most students (85 percent) were aged between 20 and 29, with 75 percent being full time students. Ethnicity was 50 percent Australian and 37.5 percent Asian.

When the questionnaire was designed, we kept in mind measuring students' perceptions of the online learning environment. With special regard of how effective it was for student's individual learning styles, how and if they participated, if it was enjoyable, helpful and what level of satisfaction they would gain from this new mode of learning. The survey was developed using certain criteria:
1. Being **consistent** with other survey instruments used,
2. **Dimensions** such as past study modes, study habits and learning types and styles,
3. With regard to our **purpose** of the online learning environment which was relevant to our study (Sweeney and Ingram 2001; Granitz and Greene 2003).

FINDINGS

The majority of students had only participated in on campus delivery (72 percent), with 75 percent stating that they studied regularly and 80 percent fitted in studying wherever they could. As to the notion of study groups, 60 percent said that they did not like studying in groups, with 87.5 percent preferring to study on their own. However, 94 percent liked to study in a familiar environment. With a student population who had only participated in on-campus learning, 85 percent preferred academic contact during semester, with 15 percent not enjoying academic contact. This was not a surprising result.

Adding computers to the learning equation

Time spent by students on the Internet per week varied, with an average of 20 hours per week. Student's perceptions as to being comfortable spending large amounts of time in front of computers was not an issue with 72 percent stating that they did not mind. Access mostly was from both home and work, with weeknights for study from home. Of

those who believed the Internet was of benefit to their studies (78 percent), 69 percent liked online tutorials as a means of learning. Reasons included they could work in their own time without attending class and they could think about their answers before answering. It is possible that if students can think before answering, then here may be some merit that this thinking enhances learning. If researching answers in students' own time is considered fun, as well as relating the topic to theory and practice, then this also has pedagogical merit.

Communicating with others, feeling embarrassed researching and the Internet being an equitable environment were not issues for liking online tutorials. A full list of reasons for liking on line tutorials can be seen below in table 1.

TABLE 1:
STUDENT'S REASONS FOR LIKING ONLINE TUTORIALS

Reason	%
Work in my own time	63
I can think about the answer to the question before answering	56
Do not have to attend class	50
Helps me relate theory (class discussion) to real world	28
Research was fun doing it in my own time	28
Communication with other students	19
No risk of embarrassment	15
Much more equitable environment	15
Other	

Source: analysis of survey data. N = 32

TABLE 2:
STUDENT'S REASONS FOR NOT LIKING ONLINE TUTORIALS

Reason	% percent
Time consuming eg face to face tutorials shorter	3
I like the class interaction	22
Other – Impersonal, liked contact	See comments below

Source: analysis of survey data, N = 10

Many respondents did not answer question about not liking online tutorials, with only 10 useable responses from the sample. Reasons for not liking online tutorials did not include being time consuming, nor missing our on class interaction. Of the respondents who believed the Internet was of benefit to them, 71 percent liked to maintain contact with academics. Likewise, 71 percent also preferred to study individually, while believing the Internet was advantageous to them. A comprehensive list can be viewed in table 2.

Many students gave reasons for not liking online tutorials even though they may have found them beneficial for reasons stated above. The main themes of feedback about online tutorials were themed around common perceptions of convenience, assessment, class contact and discussion abilities. Although students' said that they liked the convenience of online tutorials, however many negative comments regarding missing out on classroom discussion should not be overlooked. Students like to hear others opinions and stories. Postgraduate learners like to here what others are doing and how they are achieving it, as well as how they are using theory and what things have not worked. Students like flexibility and self paced learning (Candy, Crebert et al. 1994; Abernathy 1999), however possibly this technology shift does not suit every learner type. Instructors need be aware of this, but if technology is to be accepted as a learning style, possibly developing communities for students will allow a class to bond (Eastman and Owens-Swift 2001). Increase electronic word of mouth between the community of students as online discussion information is a strong within communities and can effect consumer behaviour (Whyte 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Students' positive and negative comments can be seen in table 3. The following discussion discusses the limitations to the study.

TABLE 3:
POSITIVE VERSES NEGATIVE THEMED COMMENTS

Common themes	Comments made by students
Convenience (+)	'Whilst I found them more convenient, I didn't learn anything new from having the online tutorials, whereas I may have if attended face to face tutorials.'
Assessment (+)	'I thought the tutorial questions were an excellent form of assessment – it was more enjoyable being able to research and write about topics that interested me. It was great!'
Class contact (-)	'I must admit that even though I liked the online tuts for being able to complete in my own time, but I really missed the contact and discussion possible in classroom tuts.' 'I perceive it as a cost cutting and ineffective tutorial method.' 'I did not find it interactive.'
Discussion (-)	1. 'The discussion was interesting enough to read, but didn't provide for proper discussion or 'thrashing out' of ideas.' 2. 'By talking about the subject with others is a way I enjoy learning and the way I remember things.' 3. 'I welcome personal interaction, communication and a more pleasurable and natural learning experience.' 4. 'Online tutorials do not allow for clarification. The written word lacks tone.' 5. 'QUT has many postgraduates working in industry. This means that class is great networking opportunities, as well as giving students an opportunity to hear about how others are applying theory in the workplace.' 6. 'The discussions we had in class were exciting and informative.' 7. 'I am a person who likes discussion and I find it a really good was of consolidating reading and study of theory with practice.'

Source: derived from this research

LIMITATIONS

The sample used was a relatively small convenience sample from one class of postgraduate students. Issues such as nationality and educational background were not considered. However both would impact on the response type provided by individual students. The study needs to be replicated in other marketing courses for any applicable findings to be reliable.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Technology can enhance learning experiences. Critical in marketing education is what is applied in the online classroom and needs to represent the real world. Marketing educators need to seize opportunities to experiment and use creative and integrated communication tools such as the Internet, as it has proven to be a powerful tool (Clarke III, Flaherty et al. 2001).

Employers and industry demand skills from graduates including the creativity and ability to communicate interpersonally and to possess problem solving skills (Kennedy, Lawton et al. 2001). This research has shown that technology does not necessarily mean that an exciting online class will occur (Market 1999). Creative academics must guide and challenge their cohort, no matter what the environment, to enhance learning and students' perceptions and attitudes toward learning.

If marketing educators have gone down the online learning path, they must be prepared for pitfalls. The Internet does not cover all topics well (Benbunan-Fich, Lozada et al. 2001); therefore much pre-thought must go into each semester's topics and exercises. Continuous information management must be a priority to avoid angst within the student cohort.

Students were more active and very committed to their task of their discussion topics. Tasks completed online need to be part of assessment or incentives need to be provided to track and measure success of exercises (Benbunan-Fich, Lozada et al. 2001). In this study, students need only complete their chosen topic from a total choice of four or five topics. This was found to be more beneficial than if the entire student cohort was given only one or two topics. The lecturer monitored the answers, with some being used as supplemental discussion in the lecture the following week.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Many academics see active online learning as one of the answers to some existing educational problems. This study has shown that overall, although online tutorials were perceived as being advantageous to student's study, time constraints and lifestyles, it did not mean that this mode was their preferred way of learning.

This study presents a continuation of the many studies that exist to compliment change within the teaching paradigm. We have an increasingly diverse student cohort, new workplace demands on academics, new technologies and learning environments. "Education is a process, not a place" (Eastman and Owens-Swift 2001) and active learning can occur in online environments. Online learning will never supersede face-to-face traditional learning. Integration is the key to provide students with a diverse range of learning situations.

REFERENCES

Available upon request to the author.