



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

The Student Experience

Proceedings of the

32nd HERDSA Annual Conference

6-9 July 2009

Darwin, Australia

Watson, S. (2009) Distance education students' attitudes towards increased online interaction: desired change or unwanted imposition?, in *The Student Experience, Proceedings of the 32nd HERDSA Annual Conference, Darwin, 6-9 July 2009: pp 453-462.*

Published 2009 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 0155 6223
ISBN: 0 908557 78 7

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Distance education students' attitudes towards increased online interaction: desired change or unwanted imposition?

Sharon Watson

Chifley Business School, Melbourne, Australia
eduresearchmail-mba@yahoo.com.au

This paper reports on the second phase of a mixed methods study investigating the attitudes of students enrolled in a distance education MBA program towards engaging in greater online interaction with other students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four respondents from the project's first phase to explore key issues in greater detail. The results indicate a division in the attitudes of Australian and Indian students that may be a product of different perceptions of the nature of distance education courses, different learning preferences and different ways of managing their time and other commitments. They also suggest that wholesale unit design changes based on social-constructivist pedagogy would not be received positively by many of the students studied. Further research is required to explore these findings and determine their applicability to other distance education programs.

Keywords: Distance education, online interaction, student attitudes

Introduction

This paper reports the results of the second phase of a mixed methods study investigating the attitudes of students enrolled in a distance education Master of Business Administration (MBA) program towards engaging in greater online interaction with other students. The program is delivered by Chifley Business School, the training arm of the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia (APESMA). It currently has almost 1000 enrolled students located around Australia and across the globe and has had more than 8000 graduates since its inception in 1989.

From its print-based beginnings, the program has evolved to include online asynchronous discussion forums known as e-Communities. However, for most units in the program, the minimal discussion that occurs on e-Communities tends to be between the students and the academics rather than between the students themselves. To some degree this is a product of the pedagogical design of the units, and consideration has been given to changing this design to encourage greater online interaction between students. However, little was known about the students' attitudes towards interacting with each other, and a literature search failed to unearth any studies that grappled with whether successful distance education programs should change their pedagogical design to promote increased levels of online interaction between students. Given that Chifley is a private provider, there is considerable financial risk involved in making design changes without knowing whether such changes would be well received by students. This study aimed to address this knowledge gap.

Changing models of interaction in distance education courses

Moore (1993) identified three types of interactions that occur in distance education: those between students and the subject content, those between students and the subject academic, and those between the students themselves. Traditionally in distance education programs, interpersonal interaction was limited and the program design tended to follow the instructional model (Okada, 2005) and focus heavily on facilitating student interaction with the subject content.

During the past 15 years, the rapid spread of the Internet has made daily interaction possible between distance education students. During a similar period, social-constructivist pedagogy has gained prominence through the works of Vygotsky (1978), Duffy and Jonassen (1992) and Holmes, Tangney, FitzGibbon, Savage and Mehan (2001), amongst others. Social-constructivist theorists argue that learners actively construct knowledge by linking new information to their existing knowledge base through social interaction. The combination of these trends has facilitated the creation of two new models of design for distance education programs: the interactive model and the collaborative model (Okada, 2005). Both emphasise the importance of students interacting with each other online.

Online and distance education students' attitudes towards interacting with other students

A number of researchers have investigated students' attitudes towards interacting with other students in online and distance education courses. O'Reilly and Newton (2002) found the majority of their respondents valued interaction with peers and reported a wide range of benefits including mutual support, friendships, a reduced sense of isolation and new insights into the concepts being studied. Yildiz and Chang (2003) likewise reported broadly positive responses and found that most respondents perceived they learnt a lot from their peers and felt they received more immediate and higher quality peer feedback than in face-to-face courses.

More complex outcomes were reported by Motteram and Forrester (2005), Fung (2004) and Kear (2004) who found that whilst some students gained support and reassurance from interacting with other students, others placed little value on such activities or struggled to find the time to engage in them due to work and family commitments. Similar findings were made by Su, Bonk, Magjuka & Lee (2005) who also found that the extent to which students actually desired and engaged in such interactions varied greatly and they generally accepted lower interaction levels as a natural result of their multiple commitments. Kear (2004) and Hatch (2002) respectively identified a disinterest amongst students in posting or reading what they perceived as superfluous messages. Hatch (2002, p. 247) further reported one student as saying they had "moved to distance learning to get away from the interaction". Collectively, these studies appear to support the contention of Anderson (2002) that students' need for interactivity varies. They also lend weight to his theory that meaningful learning will occur if any one of the three types of interactions identified by Moore (1993) is present at high levels, and that even though high levels of two or more types of interactions may provide a better or more satisfying educational experience, it may also be more time-consuming which may prove problematic for some students.

Ke and Carr-Chellman (2006) conducted a phenomenological study into the effects of this new style of course design on students with a 'solitary' cognitive style. They found that whilst solitary learners valued the multiple perspectives provided by online discussions with peers,

they still preferred independent learning activities such as reading and disliked being forced into interdependence. Their findings are congruent with those of Liu (2008) who also conducted a phenomenological study and found that the level of interaction between students was affected by five interrelated factors: students' learning styles and preferences; the instructor's teaching style and course design; students' perception of the nature of distance education courses; the course subject matter and level of difficulty; and the way students managed their time and other commitments. As with many of the other studies cited, Liu reported that whilst some students enjoyed interacting with other students, others preferred to study independently and keep interaction to a minimum. In some cases this reflected a choice to study by distance in order to balance multiple commitments and a consequent reluctance to invest time in interacting with other students unless there was a clear reason for doing so. Low levels of interaction between students therefore tended to have little impact on independent learners, whilst for social learners it led to a decreased interest in the course.

A key feature of each of these studies is that they investigate the attitudes of students enrolled in online and distance education courses that already use the new interactive model of educational design. What is missing in the recent literature are studies that explore the extent to which students enrolled in traditional distance education courses are desirous of greater online interaction with other students or are alternatively happy with the status quo.

Methodology

A sequential two-phase mixed methodology using an explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) was chosen to identify the proportion of students who hold different views and then explore issues arising from this data. A diagrammatic representation of the methodology is shown in Figure 1. Ethics approval for this study was provided by the University of Southern Queensland.

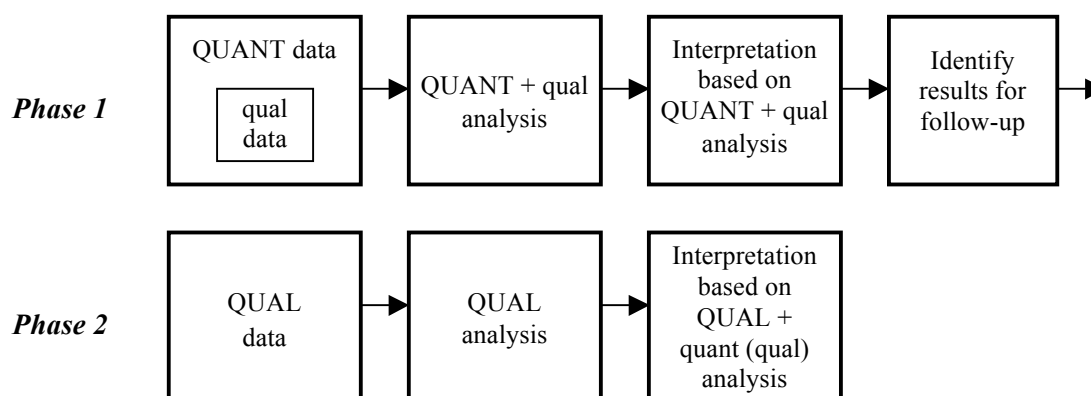


Figure 1: Methodology

In the first phase, a predominantly quantitative online survey was used to explore whether students would be likely to respond positively if the design of the MBA units was changed to facilitate and encourage more frequent, meaningful, online interaction between students. Detailed results of this first phase will be reported in a separate paper. However, the most significant pattern to emerge was that Indian respondents were less satisfied with the status quo and more interested in changes whilst Australian respondents exhibited the reverse tendencies.

As part of the survey, students were invited to volunteer for the second phase of the study which involved semi-structured one-on-one interviews of 20–30 minutes that explored several issues arising from the first phase. Results related to the following issues are reported in this paper:

1. Respondents' views on a hypothetical scenario describing what a modest increase in asynchronous interaction levels might involve.
2. Respondents' views on Skype and whether they would consider using it to interact synchronously with other students if Chifley encouraged its use.

Four volunteers were purposefully selected using a maximal variation sampling strategy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) designed to achieve representation from Australian and Indian respondents with divergent views. Participants were given the choice of being interviewed via telephone, Skype audiovisual, Skype audio or Skype chat. Three chose the telephone and one chose Skype audio.

The four interviews were recorded electronically then transcribed, condensed and compared to identify differences and commonalities as well as links to the Phase 1 survey results. Each interviewee has been given a fictitious name to preserve confidentiality.

Overview of interview participants

'Emma' is an Australian who is dissatisfied with the quantity and quality of discussion between students on e-Communities. She lives in a rural/remote location and has completed one MBA unit. Whilst she reads e-Communities about once or twice a month, she has never posted messages to other students for fear of standing out.

'Ranesh' is an Indian who is dissatisfied with the quantity and quality of discussion between students on e-Communities. He lives in India and has completed two MBA units. He reads e-Communities several times a week and posts messages to other students on e-Communities once or twice a month to share information.

'Kerry' is an Australian who is indifferent about the quantity and quality of discussion between students on e-Communities. She lives in a capital city and has completed one MBA unit. Whilst she reads e-Communities about once a week, she has never posted messages to other students because she is still getting a feel for the forum.

'George' is an Australian who is fairly satisfied with the quantity and quality of discussion between students on e-Communities. He lives in a capital city and has completed seven or eight MBA units. Whilst he reads e-Communities several times a week, he posts messages to other students on e-Communities less than once a month because he generally finds the information posted by the academics to be sufficient.

Response to hypothetical scenario

Each interviewee was asked how they would respond if hypothetically the design of some units in the MBA program were changed to require each student to post:

- four e-Communities discussion items per unit of 100–500 words each discussing key concepts from the unit; and
- four meaningful responses to other students' posts.

Emma responded positively to this scenario and echoed the desire for a richer learning experience expressed by several survey respondents:

Yeah, that would be good for getting an idea of what other people are thinking as well as getting an opportunity to clarify what you're thinking and how it sits. ... I do see that we're missing out ... there's an opportunity that we're not having... if I had to [post] once I might be more inclined to do it again, but it's not compulsory to do it so I may never do it.

However, when asked whether she would feel comfortable if such discussion posts were assessed as part of the overall mark for a unit, Emma responded negatively and suggested that posts should be monitored and corrected but not assessed.

Ranesh also responded positively to the scenario and suggested that it might be achieved using existing activities in each unit's study guide. He then took the concept further and suggested that students might post audio or video presentations of their responses, or participate in synchronous online video sessions. Whilst acknowledging the challenges posed by students' different time zones and work schedules, he suggested that such approaches might reduce the difference between distance education and classroom study and accommodate those who are more skilled verbally than in writing:

As we have all studied in a classroom type of environment in an early part of our life, maybe it gives more of a comfort level to someone like say me, who is starting studies maybe after 16 years [and] may not be good in putting those ideas in actual words, but when I'm talking to somebody I may be able to express it in a better way than writing it down on the paper.

When asked how he would feel if such discussion posts were assessed, Ranesh responded positively and suggested this type of formative assessment would be valuable.

In direct contrast to Emma and Ranesh, Kerry responded negatively to the scenario based on her previous experience with mandatory online discussions:

...this is now my third course done by distance education and certainly I'd prefer to do it without having these compulsory postings on boards—which I have done before—but I just find that too much pressure, too much extra work to do; I mean, I already have enough things working full-time. ...in the end you're posting things that is not necessarily helping your learning but is responding to what you need to do for an examiner or a course.

When asked if she would feel differently if some or all of the discussion posts were assessed, Kerry replied no and indicated she preferred the freedom of learning at her own pace:

I choose distance because I am self-directed and want to do it at my own time and when I've got the time. ... it's not like I didn't use the e-Communities, [but] I was doing Financial Management and it was a completely new language to me, so it took me a while to get a grasp on it, so the postings were well ahead of where I was learning...

Like Kerry, George initially responded negatively to the scenario because of the potential workload involved. However, when asked if he would feel differently if some or all of the discussion posts were assessed, George reconsidered and tempered his position:

I think as long as the overall work burden didn't increase it would be okay ... but if it was to result in the overall workload increasing I would be uncomfortable with it. In fact, I'd be quite unhappy with it.

During the interview with George, a digression revealed an important insight into why current levels of interaction between students on e-Communities can vary substantially from unit to unit, regardless of the actions of the unit's academic:

I think ... that variation unit to unit has an element to do with how easy or hard the students are finding that unit. Harder or more difficult units tend to prompt more discussion cos people have more issues they need to clarify. Some of the easier commerce units seem to prompt less discussion because I think people read the material and by and large they're comfortable with their understanding of it. You know, we're all—I mean, it's trite to say it—we're all time poor and you tend to ration your time appropriately which means that ... if you're comprehending the materials, you're comfortable with your level of understanding, you tend to not interact.

Views on Skype

Each interviewee was asked whether they were familiar with and used the free online call software Skype. Whilst three of the four interviewees were aware of Skype, only Ranesh was using it to interact with others, and even then only rarely due to access limitations at work. Ranesh was also the only interviewee to respond positively when asked whether he would consider using Skype or similar technologies to interact with other students if Chifley did more to encourage this:

Yeah, I would always prefer something ... like Skype or any other software which allows you to interact with someone not only in the text mode but on the audio and video part.

In contrast, Emma expressed discomfort with all forms of teleconferencing, particularly where established relationships did not exist:

I think I would find it quite difficult. When I'm involved in telephone conferencing, even with people that I know, I find it is sometimes difficult. But doing it with people that I don't know I would find very hard.

A different position was expressed by George, who acknowledged the potential benefits of synchronous communication but suggested that different time zones and study schedules would render such an idea impractical:

...a lot of the time that I interact through e-Communities, I do it at odd times ... therefore the ability to do audiovisual online... it may not be as advantageous as you'd like.

However, the strongest negative response was expressed by Kerry who indicated that synchronous audiovisual interactions clashed with her learning preferences and conception of distance education:

...when you choose distance ... you should know what you're choosing—you're not choosing contact, you're not choosing to be with students particularly, because it's easier and this is the way I learn... {laughs}. Like it sort of defeats the purpose to me of having distance ed if you're gonna have to all be online at certain times with a camera on!

Her views are echoed in the final words of George, who urged that a cautious approach be taken towards change:

I'd really encourage people to look carefully at not compromising what I think attracted me to the program originally [which] was the flexibility and the efficiency ... I mean [a university] in this state have an MBA program which is done on the weekends—you work all week and then you spend all weekend away from your family boxed up studying. It's just not a lifestyle I would want to have, so... I guess it's just not throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Discussion of Phase 2 interview results

Each of the four interviews provides a distinct perspective and represents a different position on the continuum of responses to the potential changes explored. Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of this continuum.

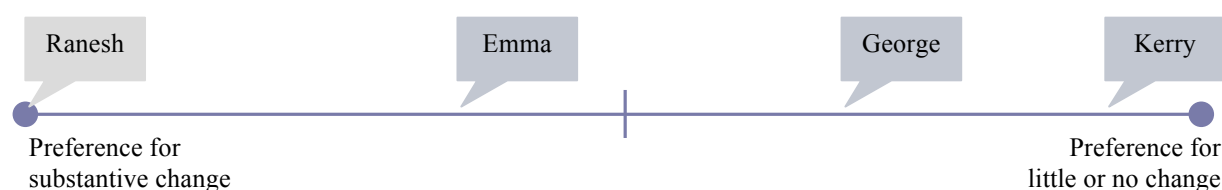


Figure 2: Continuum of responses to changes that encourage more interaction

At one end of the continuum is Ranesh, an Indian student dissatisfied with the current quantity and quality of interaction between students on e-Communities and desiring not only greater asynchronous text-based interaction, but also greater synchronous and audio-visual interaction including forms that go beyond those proposed in the interview. Occupying a rather different position at the same end of the continuum is Emma, a similarly dissatisfied Australian student who is supportive of changes that would increase the level of asynchronous text-based interaction but uncomfortable with proposals involving either the assessment of

discussion posts or the use of synchronous audio or audio-visual interaction. Towards the opposite end of the continuum is George, an Australian student who is satisfied with the status quo but open to changes provided they do not increase the overall study-load. Close to the very end of the continuum is Kerry, an Australian student who is indifferent to the status quo but is the least supportive of changes and would particularly prefer that compulsory assessed discussion posts were not introduced.

Underlying these four different positions appears to be several distinct motivations for choosing to enrol in this particular MBA program. For Emma, this MBA program allows her to study without travelling large distances; for George, it offers the flexibility and temporal freedom to combine work and study without sacrificing his family life; for Kerry, it offers not only flexibility and temporal freedom, but also a mode of study that matches her independent learning style; for Ranesh, the appeal of this particular MBA program is less clear—however, what is clear is that it is not currently meeting his learning preferences.

This final point is worthy of further exploration. Over the past several years, Chifley Business School has invested significant effort into expanding into the Indian market, particularly targeting the engineering and information technology professions that dominate the program's Australian enrolments. However, discussions with Chifley's staff revealed that little research has been conducted into why the program appeals to Indian students and what their expectations are when they enrol.

From the results of both the survey and the interviews, it appears that Australian students and Indian students may have different perceptions of the nature of distance education courses and perhaps also different learning preferences and ways of managing their time and other commitments—three of the five factors identified by Liu (2008) as influencing interaction between students in distance education courses. Where Australian students seem likely to 'know what they're choosing' when they enrol in this distance education MBA program, as Kerry so saliently observed, and to be willing to trade-off interaction with others for flexibility of time, place and pace of study, this does not necessarily appear to be true of their Indian counterparts. This discord in views appears to be at the heart of the sharp divide in satisfaction levels and attitudes towards change identified in the study's first phase. Why this difference seems to exist is unclear, but its effect is to suggest that whilst most Indian students such as Ranesh would be likely to warmly embrace design changes to the MBA program that encouraged more frequent and meaningful online interaction between students, most Australian students would probably be more circumspect, particularly if the changes involved synchronous online audio-visual technology.

None of this is to say that there aren't Australian students who desire greater interaction. However, the contrast in the views of Emma and Ranesh supports the finding of the survey that 'greater interaction' tends to mean different things to Australian and Indian students. For Ranesh, it seems to mean recreating the classroom environment online through synchronous audio-visual interaction; for Emma, it seems to mean more asynchronous text-based interaction that will provide her with a wider range of views and learning experiences than she can access living in a relatively isolated rural community.

The interview with Emma also shows how the lack of any requirement to post discussion items on e-Communities can reinforce the behaviour of those uncomfortable with posting and allow them to lurk indefinitely. It is arguable that this problem might be overcome if the design of the units—another of the factors identified by Liu (2008) as influencing

interaction—was changed to make some level of posting mandatory. However, it is clear from the interview with Kerry that a requirement for students to post four meaningful discussion items and four meaningful replies per unit may be met with unhappiness by those students with a preference for independent learning. It is equally clear from the interview with George that it may be unpopular if it increases students' study-load. The interviews with Kerry and George further suggest that consideration needs to be given to the last of Liu's five factors: unit subject matter and level of difficulty, and the twin challenges of maintaining flexibility of pace in harder units and providing incentives for students to interact in easier units. Unless all of these issues are addressed, any attempt at changing the pedagogical design of units in the MBA program to promote increased online interaction between students is likely to be met with complaint.

Conclusions and further research

The results from this study show a division in the attitudes of Australian and Indian students enrolled in the APESMA MBA program towards interacting with other students. They suggest the reason for this division might be that Australian students and Indian students have different perceptions of the nature of distance education courses, different learning preferences and different ways of managing their time and other commitments. Why this may be the case is unclear, and it is possible these results are specific to this program rather than indicative of a general difference between Australian and Indian students who choose to study by distance education. Further research is required, both within and beyond this program, to explore these issues.

The results also suggest that wholesale unit design changes to promote greater interaction based on social-constructivist pedagogy would not be received positively by many students in this program. To meet the interaction needs of those dissatisfied with the status quo without disenfranchising those who are broadly satisfied, it was recommended that Chifley trial the introduction of an optional non-assessed e-Communities exercise linked directly to the assignments in two units, and provide students with information about widely available synchronous audio-visual technologies but not alter the design of units to make use of these mandatory. These conclusions and recommendations may have applicability to other traditional distance education programs, however, more published research is required for the extent of applicability to be assessed.

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