



SUCCESSFUL ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNERS: AN EXPLORATION OF LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS AND PATTERNS IN ONLINE LEARNING

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Abstract

The rapid growth in online learning over the last two decades has led to a considerable focus on researching a range of issues that impact on the online distance learner experience. These investigations have focussed primarily on instructional or learning design, interaction and communication in learning communities and learner characteristics. Online distance learning research which has had a focus on learner characteristics has been essential over the past two decades for understanding how to support diverse learners within this mode especially given ongoing high attrition rates. While much focus has been on the types of interventions that organisations might deploy, it remains that learners cannot be easily classified into homogenous groups and there is a need to understand more deeply who they are and how they behave as individual online distance learners. With this in mind, the focus of the research reported here was ‘how do mature-age distance learners go about learning?’ by providing insight into the lived experience of individual learners. The study focused on developing an understanding of the kinds of student-centred learning experiences that support students to be successful online distance learners.

The paper situates the research in the macro, meso, micro theoretical framework for researching online distance learning and focuses this study at the micro-level. The paper explores learner characteristics in relation to learner behaviour patterns and discusses the general findings of the project in relation to learner characteristics. The paper also provides two case studies that demonstrate the patterns that some distance learners have developed or adopted to support successful outcomes in online distance learning. The paper outlines the methodology used to uncover these patterns and learner characteristics and the importance of these patterns to support successful participation in online distance learning and concludes with some suggestions for further research.

Introduction

Research into online distance learning has contributed considerable understanding of a learning mode that has grown in popularity over the last two decades (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014; Allen & Seaman 2014). While this work has undoubtedly contributed to improvements in online learner's experiences, online distance learning continues to be plagued by problems such as high attrition rates (Woodley & Simpson, 2014; Hart, 2012), concerns about quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Ehlers, 2012), poor understanding of how to teach effectively online (Maybery et al., 2009), and the role of technology in online learning (Andrews & Tynan, 2012) amongst many other issues.

Researching online distance learning

These continuing concerns, as outlined above, highlight the importance of the need for ongoing research into online distance learning but equally importantly, identify the requirement to develop understanding within a framework that provides a more holistic view of the field, its truths and issues. Zawacki-Richter and Anderson (2014) have suggested that:

...research questions must be posed within a theoretical framework that is 'embedded within a holistic structure of research areas within a discipline. Furthermore, the structure, cultures, history and past accomplishments of a research discipline for the foundations for identifying gaps and priority areas for researchers (p.1).

In their work Zawacki-Richter & Anderson identified three layers of research investigation in online distance education. These were identified as follows in Figure 1. Essentially at the macro-level the focus is on distance education systems and theories, at the meso-level the focus is on management, organisation and technology whereas at the micro level the focus is on teaching and learning issues and concerns.

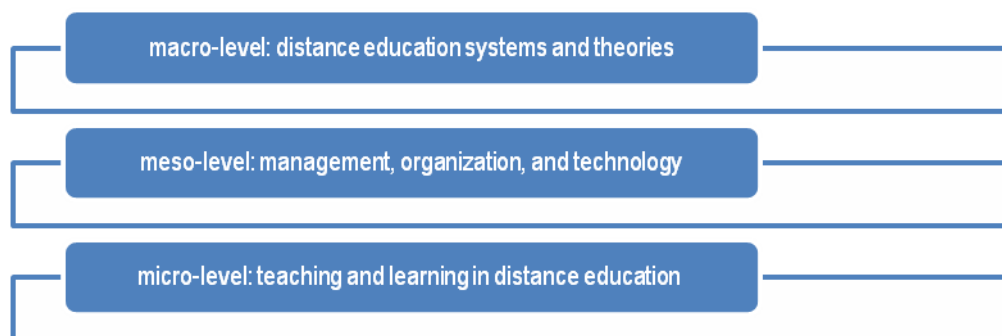


Figure 1. Characterisation of online distance learning research

Within these layers various topics are categorised as displayed in Table 1. The research reported in this paper has a focus at the micro level and specifically on learner characteristics and patterns of learning. In particular the study explored the lived experience of online distance

learners, their aims and goals, their different approaches to learning, their dispositions and how they manage their learning.

Table 1: Examples of topics within the macro, meso and micro framework

Macro -level	Meso-level	Micro level
Access, equity and ethics	Management and organization	Instructional and or design issues
Globalisation of education and cross-cultural aspects	Costs and benefits	Interaction and communication in learning communities
Systems and institutional partnerships	Educational technology and infrastructure	Learner characteristics
Convergence of DE and blended	Innovation and change	
Theories and models	Professional development	
Research approaches, literature reviews and knowledge transfer	Learner support	
	Quality assurance	

Learner Characteristics

Much has been written about the characteristics of learners in online and distance education. The focus has been largely on mature age and lifelong learners who have, since the 1950's, expanded in larger numbers as education has become more accessible. In an increasingly technologically mediated world distance learners are a changing demographic and the characteristics of these learners are also changing (Dabbagh, 2007). Moving away from the traditional notion of the distance learner as independent and place-based, Dabbagh suggests that digital literacy is an increasingly important characteristic for online distance learners. Successful online learners will need to know how to communicate and interact in a variety of online learning environments and without these abilities will struggle in contemporary online learning environments. Dabbagh also identifies other characteristics of successful online distance learners including:

- having a strong academic self-concept,
- possessing interpersonal and communication skills,
- understanding and valuing interaction and collaborative learning,
- possessing an internal locus of control,
- exhibiting self-directed learning skills.

Stoter, Bullen, Zawacki-Richter and Von Prummer (2014) identify a similar list to Dabbagh and include entry point, learners personality traits and dispositions for learning, their self-directedness, level of motivation, time (availability, flexibility, space) and the level of interaction between their teachers, the learning tools they have at their disposal and level of digital competency amongst many other characteristics. Hart (2012), adds to this picture characterising online learners who are successful in persisting in their studies as ones who

exhibit good time management and skills and have the ability to establish good relationships with other learners.

Notwithstanding these findings, it is important to recognize that part-time learners are not an homogenous group. While they may share an increasingly intertwined social, work and personal life within which learning is situated, they display behaviours that make each of them unique (Andrews & Tynan, 2012; Andrews, Tynan & James, 2011). Combined with the increasingly technological world in which learners live there are many influences on their individual goals and success factors when studying online distance education. The research however in these areas has been largely focussed on the traditional learner and while some work has been undertaken in the area of the online distance learner (Hart, 2012; Dabbagh, 2007) there remains a need for prioritising further work in the micro level of learner characteristics which draws upon the lived experience of individual learners in online distance learning modes. The field needs this research as online distance learning enrolments grow, attrition rates remain high (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Paterson & McFadden, 2009) and the world in which our learners learn is increasingly complex with many drivers impacting learner success.

Research approach

The key objective of the project discussed here was to contribute to effective and positive learning experiences for the online learner in distance programs. Thus, the central research question of this study is '*how do mature-age distance learners go about learning?*' This research questions fits well within the micro context for research into online distance learning (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014) and to identifying learner's behaviours in relation to their learning activities. The project was funded by the Australian Government and the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) and involved four Australian universities – two research intensive traditional face-to-face institutions and two dual mode institutions offering both face-to-face and distance learning programs. The project also investigated the spaces and places (physical and virtual) within which distance learners participate in ICT supported teaching and learning activities.

The project took a "lived experience approach (Groenewald, 2004) and collected 'student voice' data, to illuminate understandings of distance learners' experiences in relation to the ways in which they engage with ICTs, including mobile and social networking technologies. Within the phenomenological study frame, multiple methods were applied to collect data from students. Firstly, interested students were invited to join a Skype information session with a member of the study team. They completed a short demographic (9 question) survey form at that time, providing particulars of their study, work and domestic circumstances, and received a study pack in return. The pack contained the detailed study information sheet, method guidelines and a consent form for return to the project. Participants were invited to provide two types of diary data in various textual, audio, video and photographic formats, Charting the Weeks activities and the Day Experience Method, photos of learning spaces and

to participate in a focus group discussion. In total 43 students from the 4 participating institutions completed the study.

Charting the Week's Activities

Charting the Week's Activities is a record of the amount of time participants spent, each day for a week they selected, on working, learning, personal, and social activities. Participants recorded the places they used for learning and the resources they utilised and could use video, audio or print diaries. This approach is well-suited to uncovering patterns in the ways in which online learners engage with their learning activities and resources.

The Day Experience Method

The Day Experience Method was developed for the Learning Landscape Project at Cambridge University (Riddle & Arnold, 2007) and adapted for this project. Participants provide a detailed record of their activities during an 18 hour period on a 'usual' study day. Irregularly timed SMS prompts are used to ask students to make a detailed record of their activity using either a video, audio or print diary immediately or as soon as possible after receiving the prompts.

Additionally, participants sent photos of their learning spaces and joined a focus group discussion conducted via Skype or, in some instances, teleconference. Focus group discussions were recorded for transcription. Email correspondence during the data collection period was also included in the dataset. The inquiry strategy provided a rich multi-media dataset from the perspective of the learner.

Results and discussion

The results of this study identified a number of learner characteristics and patterns of learning behaviours for the learners in this study. The participants in the study identified as successful online learners who are highly motivated individuals developing unique patterns of learning and self organization to support their learning activities and complete study requirements. A significant learner characteristics identified in the study was orchestrating time which is accomplished through managing self, using technology, learning on the go and participating in concurrent activities. While the theme of orchestrating time is consistent with the views of Stoter et al, (2014) and Hart (2012), that time management is an important characteristic for persisting in online distance learning programs, it goes beyond the concept of simple time management. Other characteristics related to connectedness, and technology use. An interesting theme that also emerged was the focus on wellbeing, the need for students to feel that they were happy and enjoying the different aspects of their lives. Notwithstanding the commonalities, students varied widely in the way they demonstrated these different characteristics, as found in a previous study by the authors (Andrews & Tynan, 2012; Andrews, Tynan & James, 2011).

Finding ways to fit studies and learning activities in and around busy lives with multiple commitments was a major issue for 41 (95%) of the study participants. How participants managed their time for learning and other activities varied, highlighting the uniqueness of individual approaches, partly influenced by preferred learning style, partly course structure, but mainly by “...constantly juggling ... different jobs” as Rosemary (fictitious name) indicated in our study.

Managing self, learning on the go and concurrent strategies were integral to orchestrating time. Being able to manage themselves and their time was remarked on by two-thirds of participants. Strategies to manage learning, and especially to fit learning around other activities, varied from structured planning, relying on routine, to preparing for opportunities during the day or some mix of these.

Table 2: Christine (Wednesday)

Times & Duration	Type of task relating to learning	Technology used	Location	Comments on context
Wednesday				
9.00am	Skim readings and lecture notes	Smartphone	shops	Having a milkshake while watching kids play
11.00 am	Check what other students are doing	Laptop, Facebook Skype	Lounge at home	Preparing for a collaborative quiz task
Midday – 4.00 pm	Talk with other students about quiz	Laptop, Skype	Lounge at home	‘we all have kids so at times the numbers dropped to pick up kids from school, etc. 3pm had lunch while talking on Skype
7.00 pm	Helping others with quiz questions. Starting on assignment	Laptop, Facebook Skype	Lounge at home	
9.00 pm	Writing an assignment	Pdf & standard word processor	Lounge at home	Reference pdfs for assignment and reading these while doing assignment
11.00 pm – 11.30 pm	Complete online quiz	Laptop, Blackboard	Lounge at home	While taking a break (from assignment)
11.30 pm – midnight	Resumed assignment	Laptop, Pdf & standard word processor	Home	
Midnight – 2,00 am	Exchanging assignments via email	Laptop, Email, MSN	Home	At midnight talking to a student doing same assignment. Exchange assignments for editing. Realise they have tackled assignment in a different way – decide this is a good thing and insightful for both.

Successful Online Distance Learners:

An Exploration of Learner Characteristics and Patterns in Online Learning

Trish Andrews, Belinda Tynan

As an example of the variability of individual students, two case studies, Christine and Zara (fictitious names) are discussed in relation to the learner characteristics identified in the study and the different patterns of learning behaviours that successful online distance students display.

As can be seen in Tables 2 & 3 both Christine and Zara are expert orchestrators of time, making use of opportunities as they arise and also planning time carefully while juggling different activities and responsibilities to manage their study. Table 2 demonstrates how Christine learns on the go and uses concurrent strategies as part of her learning behaviours.

Zara (Table 3) also makes use of learning on the go and concurrent strategies, but in very different ways. Technology is an important enabler for learners in managing their learning (Stoter, et al, 2014; Dabbagh, 2007). Learners vary greatly in the way they use technology again as demonstrated by the differences in Christine and Zara's experiences. Mobile technologies are increasingly integral to learners orchestration of time and both Christine and Zara made use of these technologies not just to learn on the go but also to enable them to engage concurrently in learning and other activities.

Table 3: Zara (Tuesday and Wednesday)

Times & Duration	Type of Task relating to learning	Technology used	Location	Comments on Context
Tuesday				
10.00 am – Midday	Deliver presentation + Study	Work laptop, no internet	Small town bowls club	Doing study u "downtime" from work activity
4.00 pm – 6.00 pm	Deliver presentation + Study	Work laptop, no internet	Small town bowls club	Doing study in downtime from work activity
9.00 pm	Check email		Motel room	This may be work related
Wednesday				
5.00am – 7.00 am	Study	Work laptop, hotel internet, Mobile personal iPhone	Hotel room	Details of study not provided. iPhone is personal tool
4.00 pm – 6.00 pm	Study	Work laptop, hotel internet, personal iPhone	Hotel room	Details of study not provided

Connectedness was identified as a key characteristic of the learners in this study and moves away from the concept of independent distance learner that was typical of more traditional distance learning prior to the widespread adoption on online distance learning. In this project connectedness was understood as distance learners' ability to interact and engage with the people and other learning resources that frame their learning spaces. The theme built on coding for the people that students' viewed as important to their learning experience, feelings (of inclusion or isolation) as well as the personal choices and strategies that made things work

for them. For Christine connectedness was achieved by using a range of social media and online communication tools to interact with other learners (Table 2). For Zara, this was demonstrated through connecting with resources when internet access enabled her to do so.

A somewhat surprising characteristic that emerged from the study was that of wellbeing. Wellbeing identified as an important driver for many of the choices students make, not only about when but also about where and how they engage in their learning. Student wellbeing is defined here as a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and learning experiences. In Christine's case (Table 2) spending time watching her children play while she also did some study contributed to this sense of wellbeing. For Zara this was accomplished through concurrent work and learning activities (Table 3).

Conclusion

This study, which focused on the 'lived experience' of learners provided deep insights into learner characteristics and patterns in learning behaviours and the ways in which individuals applied these to their particular circumstances in order to be successful online learners. Understanding the complexity of the different ways in which the students such as Christine and Zara manage their learning is important for supporting their progress. University administrators, instructional designers and their teachers for example can learn about how best to create learning experiences that can take into account how learners orchestrate their time so as to support them in managing their learning. Recognizing the ways in which they use technology for learning on the go, balance concurrent activities and connectedness, while aiming for a sense of wellbeing also highlights the need for ongoing research of online distance learners' behaviours.

As the online distance learning environment continues to evolve with the ongoing and widespread adoption of technology, learner behaviours and characteristics will also change and evolve, requiring ongoing research to ensure that our understanding of learners keeps pace with these changes and universities can provide the kinds of learning experience that contribute to successful online learning and potentially minimising attrition.

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