Student perception of helpfulness of facilitation strategies that enhance instructor presence, connectedness, engagement and learning in online courses

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ABSTRACT

Instructors use various strategies to facilitate learning and actively engage students in online courses. In this study, we examine student perception on the helpfulness of the twelve different facilitation strategies used by instructors on establishing instructor presence, instructor connection, engagement and learning. One hundred and eighty eight graduate students taking online courses in Fall 2016 semester in US higher education institutions responded to the survey. Among the 12 facilitation strategies, instructors' timely response to questions and instructors' timely feedback on assignments/projects were rated the highest in all four constructs (instructor presence, instructor connection, engagement and learning). Interactive visual syllabi of the course was rated the lowest, and video based introduction and instructors' use of synchronous sessions to interact were rated lowest among two of the four constructs. Descriptive statistics for each of the construct (instructor presence, instructor connection, engagement and learning) by gender, status, and major of study are presented. Confirmative factor analysis of the data provided aspects of construct validity of the survey. Analysis of variance failed to detect differences between gender and discipline (education major versus non-education major) on all four constructs measured. However, undergraduate students rated significantly lower on engagement and learning in comparison to post-doctoral and other post graduate students.

1. Introduction

An online instructor plays two major roles in the design and delivery of online learning, as a designer and a facilitator. An online instructor first designs the course and then implements it with online learners. However, not all universities expect instructors to design their course. During the implementation process, the instructor acts as a "facilitator" and must actively engage to be present in the course and facilitate learning (Riva, Davide, & IJsselsteijn, 2003). A facilitator guides the learning process by providing opportunities for the learners to build knowledge and skills. As a facilitator, the instructor is also constantly monitoring the activities to be readily available to provide support to the students when needed. Facilitation strategies are the various strategies used by the instructor when implementing the course with the students. As an online facilitator, instructors keep discussion on track, assist students with technical problems, provide periodic announcements to the class, respond to student emails, and grade work promptly (Correia & Baran, 2010; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010).

While researchers have examined various aspects of facilitation in

online learning, most of them have focused on facilitating asynchronous discussions. Hew (2015) found students preferred online discussions to be facilitated by their instructors rather than their peers, even though prior studies have found benefits of peer facilitators. Similarly, Phirangee, Demmans Epp, and Hewitt (2016) compared instructor and facilitation methods in which they found that students participated more actively in instructor facilitated discussion than peer facilitated discussions. In instructor facilitated discussions, the students were more active by writing notes, editing, and creating connections. Shea, Li, and Pickett (2006) found that instructor facilitation strategies such as questioning and providing feedback were positively related to students' perceived connectedness and learning. There is a need for research to examine the various facilitation strategies an instructor can use in an online course.

1.1. Facilitation effects on four construct (instructor presence, instructor connection, engagement and learning)

In this study, we measure student perception of facilitation strategies on four constructs (instructor presence, instructor connection,

engagement and learning) based on Cho and Cho (2016) in their validation of scaffolding strategies to promote interactions which found these as four out of the five factors to promote interaction.

1.1.1. Instructor presence

Richardson et al. (2015) define instructor presence as "the specific actions and behaviors taken by the instructor that project him/herself as a real person" (p.259). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), state that teaching presence occurs when instructors facilitate the flow of the course and content. Instructors also act as facilitators when they interact with their students and encourage them to actively participate in the course. Another key role of facilitators is responding to student questions in a timely manner and also be involved in the online discussions. In this study, focusing on the facilitation role that the instructor takes in an online course, we define instructor presence as "having perceived authenticity among a community of learners and validating one's personal identity by formally acknowledging and conducting their role through various strategies".

Establishing instructor presence in an online setting is challenging but essential to the success of asynchronous online courses. Research has found that instructor presence relates to students' success or satisfaction in online courses (Brinkerhoff & Koroghlanian, 2007), enhances student motivation to learn, increases the depth and quality of students' interactions and discussions (Dennen, 2011), and reduces the sense of isolation and improves student performance (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006; Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 2003). Instructor presence is the intersection of social presence and teaching presence and usually occurs during the live part of the online course (Richardson et al., 2015). It is important because when an instructor is presence in the online course, it helps bridge the distance and students feel less isolated in the online course (Creasman, 2012). Sheridan and Kelly (2010) found that students value instructors' providing clear course requirements, being responsive to students' needs and providing information and feedback in a timely manner as important indicators of instructor presence.

1.1.2. Instructor connectedness

Instructor Connectedness is defined as "communication behaviors that reduce perceived distance between people" (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998, p. 349). D'Alba (2014) defines it as "Perceived closeness between the student and instructor as well as the instructor and student" (p. 8). Research has found that students who have strong connection with instructors have better learning outcomes and academic achievement (Eccles, 2004; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) and students who have close relationships with the instructors are more confident than those who consider their instructors to be less supportive (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). Creasey, Jarvis, and Knapcik (2009) created a student-instructor relationship scale that contained 36 items to capture central relationship dimension. In their research where they surveyed 94 students, they found that students were less anxious than their counterparts when they felt more connected to their instructors. While most of the research on instructor connectedness is done in face to face context, there is a need for research examining instructor connectedness in online settings where it is more challenging to build a strong connection with instructors.

1.1.3. Engagement

Engagement is the "ability to hold the attention of an individual or to induce the individual to participate in some sort of activity" (Meares, 2013, p. 1). Student engagement is defined as "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newman, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, p. 12). Several researchers have found that student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses.

Banna, Lin, Stewart, and Fialkowski (2015) stress that engagement is the key solution to the issue of learner isolation, dropout, retention, and graduation rate in online learning. Meyer (2014), Banna et al. (2015), and Britt, Goon, and Timmerman (2015) affirm the importance of student engagement to online learning because they believe student engagement can be shown as evidence of students' considerable effort required for their cognitive development and their given ability to create their own knowledge leading to a high level of student success. Lear, Ansorge, and Steckelberg (2010) assert that interactions with content, peers, and instructors help online learners become active and more engaged in their courses.

1.1.4. Learning

Learning is the acquisition of knowledge or skills through experience, study, or by being taught. Visser (2001) defines learning as "To engage in continuous dialogue with the human, social, biological and physical environment, so as to generate intelligent behavior to interact constructively with change" (p. 453). Within the context of online learning, Ally (2004) defines online learning as "the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience" (p. 7). Academic achievement is a commonly studied dependent variable to measure learning. Learning is measured by course grades, course evaluation, standardized tests, pre-posttests, observation, analysis of student products, portfolios, exit interviews and surveys from students.

1.2. Theoretical framework for online course facilitation

Berge (1995) categorizes facilitation into Managerial, Social, Pedagogical and Technical (Fig. 1). (See Table 1.)

Twelve facilitation strategies were identified after conducting an extensive literature review on facilitation strategies in online courses and based on the practical experience of expert online instructors. Three faculty who taught Quality Matters certified online courses were consulted on the facilitation strategies they use in their courses. Based on the literature review and the practical experience of expert online instructors, these 12 facilitation strategies were identified. The 12 facilitation strategies identified for this study are categorized below based on Berge's framework.

1.3. Facilitation strategies

In this section, we describe the twelve different facilitation strategies perceived to enhance instructor presence, instructor connection,

Fig. 1. Assess online facilitation framework (Berge, 1995).