The Relationship between Online Learning Environment and Learning Satisfaction

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Collegiate instruction, including online forms, continue to operate in great part based on the needs and life rhythms of campus residential students between the ages of 18-24 rather than on the more complex lives of non-traditional age learners (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). However, web-based forms of instruction offer a marked and rapidly growing exception to these collegiate norms. Especially, sportIt is important to conduct research on online instruction and learning success across the more diverse cultural and age groups of learners (Chávez, 2008; Tisdell 1995).

This present study investigated relationships among online learning environment, and learning satisfaction of adult students - the ones who returned to or re-entered their post secondary education at an age of 22 or over, or were enrolling on less than a full-time basis. The major objective of this research was to examine the key learning environment that influenced adult students' online learning satisfaction.

The participants in this study were 242 adult students of 15 online courses at a major Hispanic-serving research university in America. The courses ranged in size from 8 to 25 enrolled students, in levels from undergraduate to Doctor's-level classes. These courses were WebCT-based, full-credit courses and shared the following features: (a) adult students were the majority in every course; and (b) participation in online discussions was required by the course syllabus and represented more than about 20% of the students’ study time.

Students in these courses aged 24-59, with 43 as the mean, with 22% aged 24-29, 52% aged 30-49, and 26% aged 55 and above. Thirty-six percent of student participants were minority (Hispanic and Asian). There was no a significant correlation between students’ age and their self-perceived technology competence level and perceived prior-knowledge competency level.

At the end of the school session, participants completed a learning experience survey measuring their perceptions of learning environment climate, learning satisfaction, their online learning strategies, and time commitment. This survey was developed by customizing and integrating the existing Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (DELES, Walker, 2003) and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ, Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991). It included four major sections to measure participant perceptions of online learning environment climate (7-point scaled, α > .90); learning strategies adopted (5-point scaled, α > .90); learning satisfaction and perceived achievement (5-point scaled, α > .95); and time commitment (open-ended questions). A structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was adopted with the survey results to test and provide insights on the potential relations between students’ perceptions of online learning environment climate and perceived learning satisfaction/success.

Structural equation modeling adopted revealed the significant direct/indirect effects between variables in the proposed research model. Learning environment climate factors (perceived relevance, active, authentic and autonomy) had a significant impact on “satisfaction” variables. Interestingly, students’ computer competence had a significant effect only on course satisfaction. Course satisfaction played a mediating role between learning environment and distance education satisfaction.

This study is an important complement to the existing literature on distance education and adult learning by examining the influential environment factors for online learning satisfaction. Moreover, this study will give ideas to sport management educators on how to apply information technologies/systems to facilitate student learning, enhance instructor teaching performance and reduce educational costs (Pituch & Lee, 2006; Selim, 2007).