Learners’ Attitudes and Perceptions of Online Instruction

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Overview

Background of the MSIDT Program

Purpose of the Study

Review of the Literature

Methods and Findings

Conclusions and Recommendations
Background of the MSIDT Program

- Master of Science in Instructional Design and Technology (MSIDT)
  - Brief history
  - Program focus and description
Background of the MSIDT Program: Brief History

- First online MS degree program at the university
- Created by interdisciplinary team of faculty
- Went through extensive review process
- WASC approval
- New strategies and protocols
Background of the MSIDT Program: Focus and Description

• Program focus
  – direct applications of technology for teaching, learning and curriculum development
• Ten courses: two per segment
• Learning goal strands throughout curriculum:
  – Assessment/evaluation, collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving, media literacy, research, written communication
• Cohort model
• Boot-up camp and midpoint
Purpose of the Study

• Background
  – majority of online students are adult professionals seeking advanced training or a degree
  – Rapid growth in online instruction – large source of ongoing higher education
  – Quality of instruction cannot be overlooked
  – Multiple variables can influence students’ online learning experiences:
    • prior experience with computers, peer interaction, teacher/student interaction, and institutional support.
Purpose of the Study

• Objective: To address each of these variables as they relate to the MSIDT program.

• Purpose: To provide guidelines and recommendations for helping instructors create effective and positive online learning environments.
Review of the Literature: Prior Experience with Computers

- More experience = more positive learning experience
- Positive attitude toward computers = positive perceptions of online learning
- Previous online experiences influence students’ attitude toward online instruction.
Review of the Literature: Peer Interaction

• Positive online experiences result from active interaction with other learners
  – Small group activities can enhance learner motivation
• Positive experiences = better course completion rate and motivation
• Peer interactions are “…more evident in an affective domain such as attitude, satisfaction, or motivation toward distance learning rather than in a cognitive domain of learning”
Review of the Literature: Teacher/Student Interaction

• Key factors:
  – the teacher’s presence and instructor’s social interactions with students
  – Instructor expectations
  – Instructor assistance and interpersonal encouragement
Review of the Literature: Institutional Support

- Includes student services, technical support and interface, etc.
- Can affect the students’ academic success and course completion
- More significant than peer or teacher interaction
Methods

- two reports filed by an external evaluator
- responses to a discussion board prompt, “Being an Online Student”
- midpoint reflections written by each of the students
- end of the program survey
Findings

• Prior Experience with Computers
  – Students come into the program well-prepared
  – Some more advanced than others
  – Students are less likely to feel intimidated if they are comfortable with their own technology skills and ability to learn
  – Findings support previous research
Findings

- **Peer Interaction**
  - Positive perceptions/attitudes were the result of social posting threads, group projects, group discussions, and face-to-face meetings (orientation and midpoint).
  - 74% used social networking to decrease their sense of isolation
  - 93% felt a sense of belonging to the MSIDT online learning community.
  - Only 26% stated that the most meaningful learning came about through their interactions with others.
Findings

• Peer Interaction (Continued)
  – Negative interactions = exclusion and decreased motivation and interaction
Findings

• **Teacher/Student Interaction**
  - Negative effects:
    • lack of consistency, communication, help, interactivity, and instruction
    • Rude and uncaring demeanor
  - Positive effects:
    • instructors’ awareness of students’ personal situations and commitment to the students’ success
    • Instructional approach
    • Instructor presence and level of interaction
    • Responsiveness
    • Positive feedback
Findings

• *Institutional Support*
  – Technical difficulties = decreased sense of community
  – Lack of hardware and software support = heightened levels of frustration and stress
Conclusions and Recommendations

• Prior experience with computers
  – Adds to self confidence and ability to learn

• Peer interaction
  – Sense of online community; increased motivation

• Teacher/student interaction
  – Disposition, presence, instruction

• Institutional support
  – Access to online learning environment
Conclusions and Recommendations

• Prior experience with computers
  – Assess the minimum computer skills (saving files, logging into and navigating the Internet, etc.) needed to be successful in the online program.
  – Determine which software products in which students will need to have basic, intermediate, or advanced skills.
  – Establish minimum computer requirements (e.g., Internet speed, memory, etc.) and whether or not a specific platform and operating system are required.
  – Ensure students have the necessary computer skills and meet the requirements before accepting them into the online program.
Conclusions and Recommendations

• Peer Interaction
  – Create opportunities to support social interactions among students (e.g., an online social forum where students can talk about topics outside of the program.)
  – Establish a safe learning environment; review and enforce rules of netiquette and cooperation.
  – Assign group projects.
  – Establish group discussions.
  – Hold face-to-face meetings (e.g., orientation and midpoint, as well as optional end of the program event).
Conclusions and Recommendations

• **Teacher/Student Interaction**
  – Establish consistency in all courses across the program.
  – Balance workloads among concurrent courses.
  – Communicate clear goals and expectations.
  – Be aware and supportive of students’ personal situations and needs.
  – Be committed to the students’ success.
  – Maintain a constant presence on discussion boards.
Conclusions and Recommendations

• **Teacher/Student Interaction** (cont.)
  – Provide weekly summaries of discussions – citing students by names for their contributions.
  – Provide timely responses to emails.
  – Give supportive and positive feedback.
  – Ensure instructors have the necessary disposition and time to teach online.
  – Teach – do not put the responsibility of instruction on the textbook.
Conclusions and Recommendations

• Institutional Support
  – Ensure students have the necessary support and instruction to use required tools (software, hardware, etc.)
  – If possible, provide 24/7 technical support.
  – Provide a handbook of how to access and use support services and who to contact if students encounter difficulties.