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The Online Learning Experience

Project Title	The Online Learning Experience
Project Team	Dr Greg Shaw (SiMERR NT), Dr Mike Grenfell, Professor Ellie Chambers
Period	June 2005 – June 2007
Funding Agency	Charles Darwin University Internal Research Grant
Organisational Base	SiMERR NT

Description　⬆Top

Online learning via the Internet has now become a mainstream activity within education across all sectors. This is particularly the case when people are located in rural and remote contexts, and are unable to attend face-to-face at an institution. Distance education within school education has been a significant aspect of the profile of education in Australia for well over 100 years. For example, in the Northern Territory, the School of the Air provides services to children who are located in rural in remote locations. More recently, Internet-based technology is being used by the School of the air, and other schools, as a way of linking students and teachers and facilitating collaboration. Within the university sector such distance education approaches also have been use for some time. Charles Taiwan University has been providing programs at a distance using Internet-based technology now fall over five years. The School of education, which trains teachers for the Northern Territory uses the Blackboard learning management system, to deliver content, and to provide for various kinds of interaction. Despite the significant growth and provision of technology within education, educators have been slow to adjust their pedagogy to take account of, and best use this technology. In particular, the concepts of collaboration and interaction are highly valued by educators, and yet within online environments educators typically still struggle with finding ways to make this work.

The research involved the selection of 20 students located in rural and isolated contexts who were studying at a distance using online approaches. Each participant kept a journal log of items or incidents that were significant to them. This journal was done online and participants could make it a private log or public log and thus through this combination there was opportunity for participants to interact with each other in regards to their learning experiences. In addition each participant was interviewed three times over the course of his or her study through a telephone interview that was recorded and later transcribed. Analysis involved identification of themes and issues from this data. The research picks up on a number of significant issues for consideration of teaching students online, including; the form, type and frequency of interactions with tutors; the importance and supportive nature of student to student interaction; and the resourcefulness of students in accessing support and resources. The research also identified the importance of students understanding 'the self', study habits and what factors ensured success.

Participants　⬆Top

20 students undertaking a distance education degree at Charles Darwin University, half of the students were preservice teachers.

Findings　⬆Top

The study provided an opportunity to identify the processes of learning from the perspective of the learner. This is often an area that is neglected in research of teaching and learning, and yet it is a significant, and important aspect when considering how to improve learning. This study looked at the use of online learning. Online learning using computer-based approaches and using learning management systems are becoming a dominant feature of learning in all sectors, and is particularly useful to help students located in rural and remote contexts unable to attend an institution to engage in learning.

The study identifies the importance of a social context within the learning process. That is, learners engage in learning within a social context, and that this context can include a number of social elements to it. For example, there is a clear link between learners that are established within a learning environment in online environments. An online learning environment does this through discussion boards and through student-student interaction. The study emphasised the importance to student learning of this collaborating and networking aspect. Other elements of the social context also included student engagement with their family, and with work colleagues as well as others in the broader social context. Linked to the social element within the study is the importance of the student emotional and social presence, that is, their own sense of worth and achievement and how this is linked with others within the social learning context. Where students have a strong social and emotional presence, they tend to do well.

What the study also identifies, and confirms, is the importance of the tutor as a facilitator of learning. Schools and universities are struggling to find ways of helping students learn, in an environment where there are often fewer resources to cater to individual needs and differences. The study identifies the importance of the relationship that can be, and should be, fostered between the student and teacher—in this case a university tutor. Feedback and communications are particularly important. Students learning within geographically isolated contexts can feel at times isolated in their learning. The links that tutor facilitates in terms of communication, feedback, and encouragement have a significant effect on student morale, and on the learning outcomes.

Finally, the results of the project provide some direction to teachers and institutions in how to better facilitate learning of students using online learning environments. Often such environments do not take full advantage of facilities available to facilitate discussion, interaction, and networking. In this study students often initiated aspects of this themselves, indicating for some the importance of this.

Though this study was primarily focused on the university learning environment, the authors note that increasingly schools are using similar online-based learning management systems for teaching and learning within the schools sector. The issues and problems identified in this study, it is believed, are also relevant in such situations.

Outcomes
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Journal article

- Shaw, G. & Chambers, E., (2008) (in preparation), What makes online learning work: learners in rural and remote contexts and learning online, [for: International Journal of Education and Development using ICT]

Conference presentations

- Grenfell, M. (2007, November). Emotionality and Social Presence: stories of learning online. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, University of Notre Dame, Perth, WA.
- Grenfell, M. (2005). Knowledge Constructed online: The role of the tutor. AARE, Parramatta, NSW.
- Grenfell, M., (2007). Emotions and cognition: the emotional lives of students studying online. Paper presented at the annual LERN Conference, Johannesburg, SA.

Impact
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Increased understanding of the use and effectiveness of online learning systems and approaches, with particular reference on the activity of learners and the roles that tutors play.

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