Can you hear me now? An examination of online learner communication preference

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ABSTRACT

Developments in technology including the Internet, social media, and mobile devices have opened the choices of available means for communication in the online classroom. The emerging means of communication between online students and faculty has spawned an interest for an examination of pedagogical influences in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and best practices. The purpose of this investigation was to examine the communication preferences of a group of students enrolled in an online program of higher education. A panel of 78 knowledgeable online learners was offered a survey that was intended to examine certain preferences and expectations for online communication with faculty and classmates. The results of this investigation offer practitioners insight into communication media preferences of an informed group of undergraduate online students.

Keywords: Online education, learner communication preference

INTRODUCTION

Today's online education offers a wide range of options for learners to communicate with their instructor and other students, both inside and outside of the virtual classroom. Developments in technology including the Internet, social media, and mobile devices have opened the choices of available means for communication. There are synchronous methods including Web-based conferencing and virtual worlds on one end of the spectrum, and asynchronous approaches such as email on the other. Somewhere in the middle lie options such as text and instant messaging, blogs, wikis, multimedia-sharing utilities and an array of social media applications.

Friedman & Friedman (2013) pointed out that online technologies can include 'old' technologies such as email, static lectures notes, or even entries to an online discussion forum. They also include communication through emerging Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., student blogs; a class wiki project; Twitter exchanges; online social networking; video presentations on YouTube; or even a virtual world as found in SecondLife). It appears that today's online learners appreciate the multitude of available channels, but the ever-expanding selection of communication media might also present something of a challenge to online instructors as they seek to determine which means best suits the interests of the learning population they serve.

The emerging options for communication between online students and faculty have spawned an interest for an examination of preference in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and best practices. In particular, given the wide range of available choices for making contact with the instructor and other students, which ones do online learners prefer? An added perspective gained from the study of communication tools typically employed in the online learning environment corresponds with student preference would contribute to an expanded base of knowledge as it pertains to instructional planning and student satisfaction.

This paper reports on the findings of a recent investigation relative to the preferences of a select group of today's online students. The communication preferences of online students are of importance as instructors and instructional designers establish strategies for increased immediacy in classroom discourse, with hopeful gains in student satisfaction and persistence.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Formal investigations have identified various factors that influence online student satisfaction including media richness, communication, and available technology. Dennen, Darabi & Smith (2007) found that online learner satisfaction is more likely tied to a feeling that interpersonal communication needs are met, and they rate items focused on communication needs as most important. Studies have concluded that the use of media-rich communication technologies that are increasingly available for instructor and student use can result in greater student satisfaction, as well as increased instructor-to-student, student-to-instructor, and student-to-student communications (Shepherd & Martz, 2006). In a qualitative 2006 investigation conducted by Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins & Shoemaker, online student participants solidified the importance of having multiple ways to communicate in order to promote interaction. Those interviewed expressed a solid appreciation for multiple lines of communication, including public, private, synchronous, asynchronous, electronic, and face-to-face opportunities.

Learner interest, and even expectation, toward the availability of varied avenues for communication with their instructor has been reported for some time. Hagner (2001) offered that online students possess the skills necessary to use new methods of communication, and that there is an increasing expectation from learners that various communication options will be readily available. A 2003 case study completed by Rogers, Graham, Rasmussen, Campbell & Ure determined that students learning at a distance valued multiple ways to interact with faculty, including face to face classroom engagement, asynchronous communication, and phone contact. Avery's (2010) study found that involvement and choice of communication channels varied according to the context of their use.

Shackelf & Maxwell (2012) validated the findings of these past studies, concluding that students prefer multiple options to communicate with their instructor. Their investigation concluded that an ability to communicate over distance using a variety of communicative approaches promotes a feeling of connectedness and decreases the sense of isolation. Shackelf, et. al. resolved that online learners value opportunities to communicate with their teacher for certain tasks including clarifying instructional expectations, verifying that their work is on track, as well as receiving feedback relative to their learning effort.

Friedman & Friedman (2013) pointed out that online learning is entirely dependent on regular communication, albeit through a technology platform. "Communication technologies can include 'old' technologies such as email, lectures notes in pdf files, or even an online discussion forum. It can also include communication on the new Web 2.0 technologies, using social media, e.g., student blogs; a class wiki project; a twitter discussion; online social networking; video presentations on YouTube; or even a virtual world like SecondLife" (p. 12). Ling and Baron (2007) reported that university students were increasingly using text messaging, because it was considered to be less intrusive than cell phone calls, more immediate than e-mail.

An examination of the communication experiences and perspectives of online students can lend an important perspective regarding effective communication practices. Vonderwell (2003) found that some students display more of a comfort with asynchronous communication, as others might become anxious if they are not able to interact through synchronous means of communication. Online instructors need to be aware of barriers that can create a communication gap in learning environments. Such barriers can be overcome with effective, deliberate planning, and strategies for improved communication between instructors and students and between students and themselves (Vonderwell, 2003). Chang (2000) found that in order for institutions to prepare strategies to increase online enrollment and improve learning outcomes, a deeper understanding of student preference of online communication is needed. Accordingly, efforts toward defining those preferences should prompt faculty and designers to seek out opportunities to find out what it is online students expect.

Study Context and Theoretical Framework

One facet of research pertaining to communication preference has focused the Media Richness Theory (MRT). This theory reasons that the choice of communication media by humans is made in response to the characteristics of the available media, and efficacy in communication improves when media is matched to individual needs and interests (Daft & Lengel 1984, Daft & Lengel 1986).

Richard Draft and Robert Lengel explored MRT in the mid 1980's, proposing proposed that media have different levels of "richness," from low (learn) to high (rich). Rich media has

been described as exchanges that contain multiple cues, "including body language, facial expression and tone of voice, which convey information beyond the spoken message (Daft & Lengel, 1984, p. 200." When considering online communication tools, synchronous Web-conferencing would be an example of a rich media. By contrast, lean media is often asynchronous in nature, contains a minimal amount of visual responses (if at all), has a slower rate of interaction, and "is often subject to more ambiguous interpretations by the recipients. Examples of lean media include letters and emails (Einstein, 2014, para. 4)."

Since its introduction in the mid 1980's, MRT has been widely studied. More recently, researchers have considered how emerging media applications impact MRT, including video and Web-based conferencing. Although the origin of MRT was related to the use of media in communication, later investigations have considered the influence of user choice in the selection of communication media. Lightfoot (2012) sought to determine how a group of undergraduate students preferred to communicate with their instructors and peers in a blended learning environment. The 220 undergraduate participants were offered a two item survey with the intent to determine whether students had a liking for the medium used to communicate with their instructor. In addition, participants were surveyed in an attempt to determine preferences for the medium used to engage with other students.

The results of Lightfoot's 2012 study supported the notion that students prefer in person communication with faculty afforded by face-to-face contact. The query revealed a preference of 70.9% for face to face contact as compared to 20.5% preference for a lean-media experience through email. Telephonic contact was the least preferred (1.8%). Communication with other students faired closely, with face-to-face encounters being most preferred (63.5%), followed by email (16.9%) and telephone (6.4%). Again, participants of this investigation were enrolled in blended courses, so face to face engagement was entirely possible (p. 87-88).

Additional investigations relating to learner preference of communication channels have also been conducted, but few have focused on a purely online learning environment. Based upon Media Richness Theory, it might be presumed that online learners have a preference for communication with their instructor through rich media because such conversations might be more personalized and efficient when it comes to equivocal topics. One the other hand, one might envision a preference toward lean media when it comes to communication between students in the online classroom since the preponderance of such engagement often occurs in threaded discussions.

To explore these notions further, communication preferences of students should be studied to analyze the effects of computer-mediated communication in the online learning environment. In doing so, a modified approach to Lightfoot's 2004 framework was presented to an informed group of online students.

Three research questions surround the current investigation. The questions were easily adapted to a three item survey offered to participants. The questions were:

RQ1: Do online students have a preference in the medium chosen for communicating with their instructor?

RQ2: Do online students have a preference in the medium chosen to interact with other students?

RQ3: What social media applications should be incorporated into online courses?

METHOD

Participant Sample

This investigation involved an experienced participant group of online students seated to examine individual preferences for online communication. To further ensure a panel of knowledgeable participants, a pre-qualification for the successful completion of not less than five online courses was implemented. All participants were recruited from the undergraduate business administration program of an undergraduate program of a regionally accredited for profit university located in the United States.

Research Design

The investigation adhered to a quantitative - non-experimental - exploratory design. Because the participants were not randomly selected, the effort was considered non-experimental. Instead, a purposive sampling scheme was used to recruit a sample of informed participants. The purposive scheme can be applied when there is an interest in seating participants that meet a certain qualification profile (Trochim, 2007).

Procedure

Having secured the appropriate permission from the institution's Review Board, the Academic Dean of the business program asked his undergraduate faculty to announce the investigation to students enrolled in their online classes. Students meeting the pre-qualification guidelines were invited to participate. Those students responding to the invitation were sent an e-mail message that contained additional information relative to the study, and a hyperlink to the consent form required to participate. Ultimately, access to the online survey was granted to 83 participants who satisfied the required steps for qualification. The three item survey developed for this study was created using SurveyMonkey™. Basic demographic information including age and gender were obtained in the first part of the survey, followed by the three research questions. The SurveyMonkey™ collection site was closed after the 14-day participation window.

RESULTS

An informed panel of online students reported their preferences for communication in the online classroom. Only 78 of the 86 that were invited to participate in the investigative effort responded to the three item survey over the two week timeframe. Of the 78 participants included in this study, 41 were male. The age range was 18 through 23, with a mean age of 19.7 years. The online course experience of the group was just more than seven undergraduate courses.

Table 1 (Appendix) presents the student responses regarding their preferred medium for communication in their online studies. Results of the three research questions included in this investigation were as follows:

RQ1: Online Student Preference for Communicating with Instructor

The results show that a majority (n = 24) of the participants preferred email as the primary means of communication with their online instructor, with text (n = 22) and Web-

conferencing (n = 19) falling closely behind. Telephonic contact was preferred by nine of those completing the survey, with four students indicating no preference.

RQ2: Online Student Preference for Communicating with Students

When it came to communication with other online learners, the preferred method was closely split between text messaging (n = 25) and Web conferencing (n = 24). Email was the preferred method of communication for 25% of the participants (n = 20), with telephone contact (n = 7) well down the line. Two participants claimed no preference.

RQ3: Social Media Applications to be incorporated into Online Courses

The supplemental query of which social media applications should be incorporated into online courses identified Twitter (n = 24), Facebook (n = 22), and Snapchat (n = 19) as being of the strongest of preferences. LinkedIn (n = 9) and Instagram (n = 4) were selected less frequently. There were two write in selections, with Periscope and Tumblr each receiving one vote.

Limitations

Investigations of this nature will always have acknowledged limitations and delimitations. For example, the study was limited by the survey design, its delivery method, the sample size and geographic sample. Such limitations could very well lead to questions of reliability and validity. The data for this study was collected over two weeks period of time in the Fall of 2016. Participants that completed the online survey for this investigation represented the undergraduate business administration program of a single Midwestern university. The results of this investigation, therefore, are not generalizable to a larger population. Instead, interested practitioners are encouraged to consider communication preference as they prepare for more effective communications with their own online students.

DISCUSSION

This survey study examined the communication preferences of a select group of today's online students. Although the results of the investigation must be considered exploratory, participants identified their preferences for communicating with faculty and fellow students using synchronous and asynchronous media channels.

Although this investigative effort surrounded the principles of Media Richness Theory, the theoretical premise was not entirely supported. Based upon Media Richness Theory, online students should prefer to communicate with the instructor by way of Web-based media, yet that channel was less preferred over email and text options.

As one considers the results of the investigation, a primary aspect of the participant demographics is worthy of further consideration. The mean age of the population seated for this study clearly had implications on the types of media that the student group preferred, desired and expected. A similar query of a different aged group might very well generate a dissimilar outcome, supportive of the investigator's suggestion that similar surveys should be conducted at the course level, and in an ongoing fashion.

One aspect from Lightfoot's 2012 student that was upheld was the group's lowered preference for telephonic communication as the students opted for text, email and Web conferencing more readily than telephone contact. Again, this might be indicative of the generation of participants, but is clearly an indication that the traditional methods of synchronous communication might not be the most preferred by today's online students.

The practical findings of this study afford an improved understanding of the nature of communication relationships between students and faculty in today's online classroom. The results are important considerations for online instructors as they evaluate their approach to communication with their students, and efforts to improve approaches to instruction, communication and collaboration.

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APPENDIX

Preferred Medium for Online Communication

	Text	Email	Telephone	Web Conference	No Preference
Preference in the medium for communicating with instructor	28.2% (n=22)	30.7% (n=24)	11.5% (n=9)	24.3% (n=19)	5.1% (n=4)
Preference in the medium to interact with other students	32.5% (n=25)	25.6% (n=20)	8.9% (n=7)	30.7% (n=24)	2.5% (n=2)

Online Course Social Media Preference

	Facebook	Twitter	Linkedin	Snapchat	Instagram	Other
What social media applications should be incorporated into online courses?	28.2% (n=22)	30.7% (n=24)	11.5% (n=9)	24.3% (n=19)	5.1% (n=4)	2.5% (n=2)

Note: "Other" included Periscope and Tumblr