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N E W H O R I Z O N S I N A D U L T E D U C A T I O N
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EDITOR'S PREFACE

In her article **Transformation and Tension: The Experience of Returning to School in a Liberal-Arts Program** Marina Micari describes the results of her interpretative study, which reports the experiences of ten adults. According to Micari "six themes emerged from the interviews: having experienced a lack of academic success earlier in life, having had the sense that something was missing in one's life, feeling confident that one is a smart person, believing that the degree does not carry as much weight as is commonly believed, wanting to be practical in one's academic work, and feeling that one has changed throughout the process." This thorough and well-presented study demonstrates the complexity of education for adults and the mixed feelings it may produce. Her title says it well: transformation and tension.

With the rise of online courses, new questions have been raised regarding how various modes of online instruction match the learning styles of students. The article **An Examination of the Learning Styles of Online MBA Students and Their Preferred Course Delivery Methods** by F. Barry Barnes, Robert C. Preziosi, and Doreen J. Gooden examines the differences of learning styles using the Kolb Learning-Style Inventory, as well as the preferences for various course delivery modes. Their results indicated a significant relationship between these students' learning styles and their preferred course delivery modes.

With the rapid growth of computer-based distance education throughout colleges and universities today, understanding the characteristics of successful online learners has become especially important. In the article **The Characteristics of Successful Online** Students, Drick Boyd describes several different aspects of the online learning environment, as well as several different areas impacting student success: technical factors, environmental factors, personal characteristics, and learning characteristics. Educators and course designers should find this review very useful, as well as current and potential adult learners considering taking online courses.

Readers are invited to make these articles "interactive" by responding on AEDNET (the Adult Education NETwork) and sharing their comments. (Directions to guide this discussion are given in this issue on page 40). Readers also are encouraged to submit an article for consideration by the editorial board of New Horizons on a related topic or other topic relevant to adult education philosophy, research, and practice. (See Call for Manuscripts on page 40 for details.)

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N E W H O R I Z O N S I N A D U L T E D U C A T I O N
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TRANSFORMATON AND TENSION: THE EXPERIENCE OF RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN A LIBERAL-ARTS PROGRAM

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Abstract

This interpretive study examined the experiences of ten adults returning to college in a liberal-education degree program. Six themes emerged from the interviews: having experienced a lack of academic success earlier in life, having had the sense that something was missing in one's life, feeling confident that one is a smart person, believing that the degree does not carry as much weight as is commonly believed, wanting to be practical in one's academic work, and feeling that one has changed throughout the process. Further, personal transformation and contradictory feelings about academics were common elements of the experience.

Introduction

The tradition of continuing liberal education for adults in the United States is older than the nation itself. In the early 1700s, Benjamin Franklin established the Junto debating society, which encouraged its adult members to reflect on, discuss, and write about a broad array of issues, and which eventually led to the inception of the first public library in the nation (Elias & Merriam, 1980; House, 1991). The public lectures in early-1800s Boston, the Lyceum study-group movement of the early 1800s, the free arts-and-sciences night courses in 1850s New York, and the Church-driven liberal education Chautauqua movement of the late 1800s provided a model for what was considered by many, including Franklin, a democratic and *liberalizing* form of education in the newly established nation (Elias & Merriam, 1980; House, 1991).

During the middle part of the 20th century, however, vocationally oriented adult education programs took hold. In fact, there was a sense among some leading educators that industry was gaining control of adult education — that "the corporate age of adult education" was upon us in the United States, as one 1948 adult education handbook proclaimed (Grace, 1999, p. 221). Liberal education of the time, writes Grace (1999), "without apparent utility in the mainstream techno-scientific learning world, had to struggle for space and place in this culture" (p. 228). And although the 1960s and '70s brought a number of adult liberal arts programs into existence (House, 1991; Liveright & DeCrow, 1963), they may also have been the years during which an insistence on technological specialization carried unprecedented weight in the adult continuing education domain, shifting the balance even further in the direction of the vocational (Podeschi, 1994). By the 1990s, the scale had tipped toward continuing *vocational* education: as Zwerling wrote in 1992,

Usually when we speak about the reeducation of adults, we are in fact speaking

> about retraining. Displaced teachers seeking to change careers return to school to learn computer operations. Computer operators take courses to upgrade their skills in order to become systems analysts. Unemployed industrial workers learn to be medical assistants. . . . Much less frequently do we speak about reeducation in the liberal arts. (p. 102)

In an economy that offers reward to workers who retrain for higher-paying or more abundant jobs, those who return to school in search of a liberal education are in a sense acting against the norm. Why, as House (1991) has put it, would adults choose to return to study in liberal-education programs when there appears to be little societal support for such activity?

Extrapolating from previous research on adults returning to college in general, one might surmise that adults returning to school in programs of liberal education encounter greater challenges than do those who enter more occupationally oriented programs. For instance, several studies have indicated that adults who return to college may feel out of step with both their fellow students and their age-group peers (Breese & O'Toole, 1995; Holliday, 1985). Adults who return to liberal education — an activity generally considered more appropriate for youth than for adults, as suggested by Marks (1999) — might experience even greater role stress because of their engagement in an "off-time" activity (Neugarten, 1979). Other research has suggested that psychological support from others is a key factor in returnees' success (Dill & Henley, 1998; Holliday, 1985). If continuing liberal education is in some sense considered less worthy a pursuit than strictly job-related continuing education, it may be that adult students pursuing liberal education experience a lack of support, and, perhaps, that this hurts their chances for success in school. Related inquiry suggests that low status in the university may present a barrier to success for adult students in general (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001); it may be that adults engaged in liberal study enjoy even less status because their efforts are not directly linked to work.

Greater understanding of adults' experiences with continuing liberal education can offer fresh perspective on the vocational–liberal divide. In particular, such an understanding might broaden current knowledge of the manner in which adults combine school and work; add new dimensions to discussion of the ways in which adults take responsibility for their personal growth; point to areas potentially in need of improvement in continuing-liberal-education programs; identify variables that might be examined in future research comparing liberal and vocational adult education; and contribute toward theory-building in the area of adult liberal education.

In this study I sought to contribute to such understanding by offering a rich and comprehensive description of the experience of adult participation in a program of liberal study. My goal was to answer the following question: What is the nature of the experience of becoming and being a participant in an organized program of continuing education that emphasizes liberal education?

Method

In an effort to provide a substantive description of the experience of participating in a liberal-education program as an adult, I took an interpretive, phenomenological approach in this

study. Hultgren (1989) describes phenomenological research as seeking to "come to a deeper understanding of what persons go through as they conduct their day-to-day life in the language of everyday life" (p. 50). The presentation of phenomenological data is the presentation of examples, in this case examples of a variety of themes related to the experience of participating in a program of adult liberal education. Phenomenological description, it has been argued, should produce in the knowledgeable reader a sense of recognition, the "phenomenological nod" of example ringing true to life experience (van Manen, 1990). As Bruner (1986) has written, "Arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness" (p. 11).

Data Collection and Analysis

I recruited ten participants from a pool of students in a B.A. completion program that emphasizes liberal education at a large Midwestern university. They ranged in age from 27 to 70 and represented a variety of economic backgrounds; six were women, and four were men; and all were white (reflecting the program's lack of ethnic diversity). I conducted in-depth interviews with each of the participants; following the interviews, I used a respondent validation, or "member-check," approach (Bryman, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; van Manen, 1990), in which participants reviewed the themes I had devised and offered feedback, to help ensure that the themes matched the participants' understanding of their experiences.

In my analyses, I used a narrative lens as a potentially rich additional vehicle for understanding these stories as personal explanations for individual histories. The narrative approach begins with the premise that *saying* is no less a reflection of reality than is *doing* (Bruner, 1990) and seeks understanding through the stories people tell to explain their histories and how their histories are connected to their present conditions. As Polkinghorne (1988) has written, the narrative approach "provides a framework for understanding the past events in one's life and for planning future actions" (p. 11).

To organize the raw text, I used van den Hoonaard's (1997) thematic-analysis technique. This approach entails finding key concepts in the data, reading and rereading the texts to verify that these concepts are present and to consider alternative concepts; carefully examining all instances of a concept and looking for overlap in conceptual groups; and organizing concepts into umbrella themes.

Participants' descriptions of their experiences fell into six thematic categories, each with several subthemes. To qualify as a theme, a topic had to have been addressed by all ten participants.

Findings

Following are descriptions of each of the six themes, along with one example of interview text for each subtheme within each of the themes. All names used throughout the paper are pseudonyms.

Theme 1: There Were Barriers to Success in School for Me Earlier in Life

For all of the participants, there was a sense that school — whether earlier attempts at

college, high school, or even primary school — was not a successful experience because of some barrier. For several, this was an internal barrier, most commonly academic insecurity, while for others the barriers were external, for instance, lack of encouragement from others. Each of the participants, though, now understands the reasons for his or her lack of earlier academic success in a manner very different from the way he or she understood it at the time.

This theme emerges in four variations, or subthemes: having lacked confidence, having struggled in school, not having been focused, and having experienced a lack of support for succeeding in school. Examples of each of the four subthemes follow:

> My high school counselor told me not to waste my parents' money and go to college. So, I thought I was really stupid, and my grades definitely reflected a lack of . . . trying. (Betsy)

> I've tried to analyze why I wasn't a good student; I mean, I had a good mind. I think it was partly the growing-up period. . . . it was difficult for me. I didn't have much confidence in myself, although I knew I had brains, but I just didn't know if I could handle it. (June)

> I really envied people that had sort of singularity of thought – that they knew that they were gonna go work on computers [or some other field]. . . . And I always feared putting so much effort and hard work into something like that, and then: the possibility of it not playing out. So to me it was *and then what do you do*? You know? What if you spent all your time in microbiology, and you go through this, and you go through graduate school, and do all this, and you realize you hate it? (Jeff)

> Really, my confidence level went from down here [gestures low] — because, you know, my mother never achieved what she wanted to achieve, and, I mean, in a way, my parents were really comfortable with . . . *not* having me get my degree, because they didn't want to see me surpass where they had gone. . . . It was kind of a threat to them to see – no one else had gotten their degree in our family, and it was just: you don't really need it. (Melanie)

Theme 2: I Knew I Was Missing Something Before I Returned to School

A number of the participants described having had a sense that something was missing in their lives before the return to school. For some, this feeling was highly personal and explicitly related to their own self-definitions, whether developed through self-assessment, assessment by others, or a combination of the two. For others, it was a notion of external restrictions placed on them because they lacked a degree.

This theme comprises three forms of the feeling that something is missing: first, a general sense that one has not reached one's potential; second, a feeling among participants who had completed two-year degrees that this education was somehow inadequate; and third, the more practical concern that one lacks job credentials. Examples follow:

> I think probably all those years, there was something in me that said, well, there's more to you than this. (June)

> During the process of the two years that I was completing my [A.A.] degree plan, I knew

> that a two-year degree plan was not sufficient enough; I needed to go farther than that. . . . I wanted something that I could build on. (Fred)

> I could see the opportunity that [the degree] was a way to move up. Because what I was doing at this company, there was 100 of us doing the same type of work. So somehow you had to shine to move up the ladder. (Denise)

Theme 3: I Am a Smart and Talented Person

In many different ways, the participants portrayed themselves as smart people who enjoyed using their minds. Some did this indirectly by highlighting their good grades, curiosity, or particular talents; others spoke explicitly about their own solid intelligence. Participants expressed Theme 3 in five variations: first, a perception of oneself as a deeply curious person; second, a belief that one is talented and hardworking; third, a profoundly felt love of learning; fourth, a sense of academic accomplishment; and fifth, a belief that one had always been intelligent but didn't recognize this earlier in life. Following are examples of each:

> I can go to the library, I can pick out books on genetics and primatology and meditation – it's like, I'm so curious, and I can read about so many things . . . . (Ann)

> I was a 4.0 student, third in my class. . . . And I always, I always, in high school, did my homework; I studied, you know, and that never bothered me. Doing all that, you know, extra preparing – some people kind of went by the seat of their pants . . . . (Denise)

> I love learning; I never want to stop. And I plan on continuing to learn. It just broadens my view of the world. (Melanie)

> I feel really proud of myself with this degree, because it was a lot of work . . . . It's made me think a lot more, a lot harder, about where I'm at and why. (Paul)

> Sometimes I think if we could go back to eighth grade, when I took biology, I feel like maybe — I loved biology when I was in eighth grade, and my father thought that that was not a good thing for a woman to do, and so he wanted me to be a secretary . . . . I mean, if I had done my life differently, who knows? Maybe I'd be a biologist or something. (Ann)

Theme 4: The Degree Isn't Everything

Although all of the participants conveyed great pride in the work they were doing and in their academic accomplishments, they also exhibited a clear belief that the degree is not as valuable as it is generally deemed to be. This theme revolves around four notions: that degrees are in general over-valued, that a degree is not always necessary for finding a good job, that having a degree doesn't guarantee intelligence, and that there is great value to informal – that is, non-degreed – learning. Examples follow:

> But the funny thing is . . . I still don't give the status to a degree that a lot of other people do. To me a degree is a tool that you have achieved. I don't think it's got a damn thing to do

with — I have nothing against degrees. But I do think that there are an awful lot of people that know an awful lot of things that have got nothing to do with degrees. (Luke)

Nobody I work with cares if I have a degree. And right now, the degree really doesn't mean anything, a four-year degree. Whenever I go out and get work, people don't ask me. (Paul)

Unfortunately, there's people that have gotten *doctorates* that still, I don't think, understand what they were supposed to be learning in college. (Fred)

You know, you can also become a well-rounded person just by what you do in your daily life. I mean, I can go get some culture at the museum. (Denise)

Theme 5: I Want to Be Practical

Although many of the participants expressed disregard for undergraduates who are concerned *solely* with practical matters (most commonly, finishing their degrees as quickly as possible), they all placed heavy emphasis on their own desires to make the degree practical. This theme is manifest in five forms: first, a pleasure and satisfaction found in the freedom to control one's education; second, a desire to study only what seems personally relevant; third, an aspiration to put the degree to use after graduation; fourth, a frustration with the insufficient application of liberal arts courses to the "real world"; and fifth, a belief that liberal arts education offers practical benefit. Their words follow:

I have control over what I learn. . . . I'm saying, OK, I've got the control to take the classes – well, you know, you look at a lot of the curriculum, and you kind of think, well, that's a dumb class; I'd rather substitute this class for that class. . . . I have the control to change; I have – *I* have the control to learn what I want to learn. (Betsy)

[The course] "Writing in the Social Sciences:" how does that relate to [my field]? It doesn't, really. . . . So I try to pick something in there that [I] can really get into. So, yeah..., for all the courses I take I try to do that; I try to find that niche so that I can get the most out of it. (Fred)

I also think that I do want to at some point go on to get a master's degree in something. You know, I'm not quite sure what that is yet – and in that case I have to have a bachelor's degree. So there's kind of both a personal satisfaction along with a sort of pragmatic use for [the degree]. (Janet)

I think that people [on the faculty] need to mingle more with people who actually are working in [the field]. And vice versa. I would like there to be more education—you know, stuff from school in [the workplace]. But then when I'm in school . . . I hear, "Well, this is how they do things [in the field]," without them having any practical experience. I just want to say, well, wait a minute, you know, it's not quite that . . . . (Melanie)

> Communication, business, networking . . . you have to have a good liberal-arts background, and be educated at different things. Because there's so many different people you meet in different areas [when you're working]. (Paul)

Theme 6: I've Grown And Changed

With some variation, all of the participants emphasized the changes they had undergone since returning to college. Some of these changes affected personal characteristics or feelings about oneself; others lay in the realm of cognitive or intellectual abilities. Theme 6 appears in six forms: first, having gained self-confidence; second, having become a better, more serious student; third, having learned to see interconnections among diverse ideas; fourth, having developed a broader perspective from which to view the world; fifth, having experienced significant changes in personal relationships; and sixth, feeling that having waited or taken one's time to finish the degree has brought advantages. Examples of each follow:

> Oh, I think to have actually accomplished the degree after [this many] years of life . . . will be a very — I'll have a very satisfied feeling. I can actually do this. (Luke)

> As I started getting . . . mostly A's . . . I was like, whoa, hey! . . . And it just – I really surprised myself. And it really helped my confidence. (Melanie)

> And it was always exciting for me as I was reading something in a book, and there would be something connected to something I had before, and it helped put it all together. I just loved doing that, taking what I had and making a whole of it in some way. It was very satisfying for me. (June)

> [This experience has] just allowed me to see and grow personally, and just [feel] more accepting and understanding of what other people are interested in. . . . Taking my time in exploring a lot of different things, going down a lot of different roads, and turning back, and trying something else has broadened my horizons, and I think that allows me to empathize with a lot of different areas that people might be in or experiences they might have. (Paul)

> We have a lot of friends yet in [our home town] that we've known for years and years, and we love them dearly, but it's like we really don't have anything in common anymore. We had a common history with our children, . . . with what was going on in town, but [my new friends] on the whole are extremely interested in what I've done [in school] . . . and it's been fun, because they're so accepting and interested . . . most of them have had a decent education of some sort, and ah, it's just different. (June)

> I had a chance to experience things, and to travel, and think about things as I went along . . . and when you're doing it really fast, you don't have time to reflect. And I know some people who do it in four years just want to get it done with; they just want to go in there, finish it up, be done with it, get a job. I think I got a much richer degree than I would have had I just done it in four years. 'Cause I didn't know anything when I was 22, you know? I mean, what *can* you know? (Melanie)

Discussion

In the stories each of the participants tells throughout the six themes, two overarching themes emerge. One of these becomes apparent in the comparisons participants make between their old and new selves: their abilities, relationships, ways of thinking and seeing the world, and perceptions of themselves have all changed since they began their studies, often in dramatic ways. They tell stories of having experienced change both in their personal qualities and in the ways in which they understand their own experiences. These are stories of transformation: the participants see themselves as having developed into something better than what they once were.

The other overarching theme appears not in the individual assertions the participants make, but rather in the contrasts among various assertions: there is a tension present in the feelings of these ten people about the experience of earning the degree. In particular, the participants reveal contradictory feelings between their love for academics and desire to be pragmatic as well as between their acceptance of the social value of the degree and their skepticism about its real value.

That transformation and tension appear as part of the return-to-school experience is not surprising given that all of these ten people view the return as a significant life change, an experience tightly connected to formative educational and family experiences, to social relationships, to work experiences, to self-esteem — plainly, to the ways in which they understand and define themselves.

Transformation

In examining the stories each of these ten people tells about his or her experience, what becomes clear is that *change* has been an important part of the participants' understanding of the experience. For some, the change is more radical than it is for others, but for all it involves a reinterpretation of past events in light of present circumstances.

Transformative learning has been described as "an activity that is both deconstructive and reintegrative of past, present and future realities allowing [individuals] to become as T.S. Eliot *(Little Gidding)* has phrased it 'renewed, transfigured in another pattern'" (Hobson & Welbourne, 1998, p. 73). Most closely associated with transformative learning is Mezirow (1991), who holds that adults habitually take particular and unexamined perspectives on world based on their own past experiences, and that transformative learning can occur when one encounters new ideas, critically reflects on the tension between these ideas and one's own system of thought, concludes that previously held assumptions are in some way limiting, and explores new potential avenues. "These two elements," writes Nelson (1994), "questioning 'what doesn't fit' and seeing new possibilities for one's life, appear to be regular aspects of autobiographical accounts of adult transformation" (p 396).

Taken together, the ten stories offered by the study participants suggest a single generic narrative of transformation (see Figure 1): in essence, the skeleton for each of the individual narratives. Narratives of transformation have often been described — originally in religious hermeneutic studies and later in literary studies and psychotherapy — as "conversion narrative,"

that is, a story one tells of becoming something fundamentally different from what one was before. Stromberg (1993) describes conversion narrative as the ritualistic resolution of conflict through application of a new system of meaning (religious or otherwise) to old experiences, with narrators using the story as a tool for making sense of the changes they have undergone.

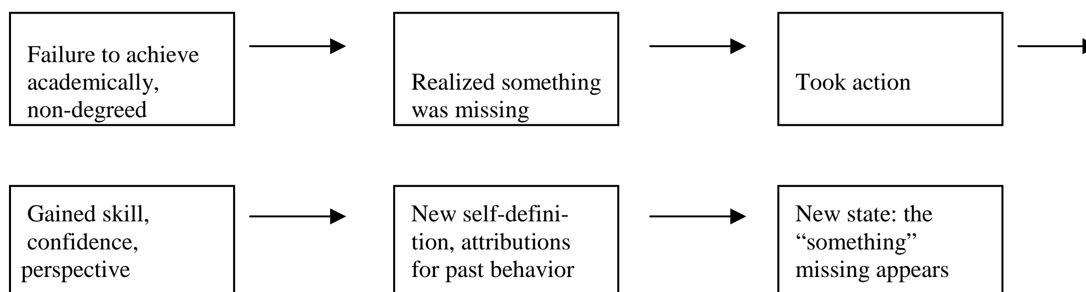

Figure 1: The skeletal narrative

In the skeletal narrative here, the conversion is one that transports the individual from a state of deficiency to one of abundance; the story is that of a person beginning with a lack of and ending with a healthy supply of confidence, knowledge, self-understanding, perspective, or social approval. It is a story of personal agency, of noticing a deficiency and taking steps to remedy it. And it is a story of self-forgiveness, of applying new attributions — emerging from a new system of meaning — to old acts, interpreting them no longer as the results of personal deficiency but now as understandable, or even inevitable, given the circumstances.

As demonstrated in Theme 1, these learners described themselves as having faced academic obstacles of some sort earlier in life, whether related to academic self-confidence, focus, support from others, or, simply, difficulty with the material.

At a certain point, they became aware not just that something — job credentials, knowledge, perspective, confidence — was missing, but also that they were capable of gaining whatever that “something” was. This is a critical point in the story, for it is here that the motivation to return to school is created. It is variously an instrumental (e.g., wanting better professional credentials to get a better job) and an expressive (e.g., wanting to feel more confident) motivation — often both for a single individual, and sometimes combined (e.g., wanting better job credentials in order to feel more confident).

This turning point can be viewed as a crisis of sorts: the individual becomes aware of a problem (“something is missing in my life”) and is now faced with the question of how to remedy the problem. Rossiter (1999) writes of the crisis in personal narrative as “the disorienting dilemma or the cognitive dissonance that triggers learning; the inclination to step outside of one’s habitual meanings . . . stimulated by a breach of coherence in the life narrative” (p. 68). In other words, as Nelson (1994) puts it, “in the story, the instrument of transformation is some kind of trouble which leads to crisis” (p. 392). For these ten people, the crisis is indeed an instrument of transformation: it leads them to take action in an effort to gain the “something missing,” to play active roles in changing their own lives. They considered the benefits and

drawbacks of approaches they had taken in the past (for instance, vocational school, other college programs, or simply doing nothing) and decided on the best path toward success in this endeavor (for instance, gathering information about various programs, seeking advice from career counselors, or taking stock of their interests and goals). Ultimately, each took the step that made the difference: beginning the process of applying to a four-year liberal arts degree program.

As a result of this step of taking action — although not an immediate one, by any means — the narrators continued to change. They gained skills, became better students, learned more about their worlds, gained new perspective, and felt more confident. They sensed they were different, and the reflections they saw of themselves in other people — their changed relationships — underscored and verified these differences.

As the story continues, the changes the narrators have undergone allow them to better understand themselves and their own histories. By realizing that they had changed, they became able to give these events shape, to recast them in the light of their new and developing self-understanding.

At the end of this process — this story — the narrators emerge having gained, or anticipating that they will gain, something they once felt lacking. Betsy, for instance, now knows she isn't "dumb," and Luke says he'll "have a very satisfied feeling" when he completes his degree. In some cases, what was gained was something desired ahead of time (such as confidence or job credentials); in others the "something gained" was unanticipated but welcome nevertheless. June, for example, happily reports that she now feels more open to other ideas and more content with herself, although in the beginning, she explains, she didn't know precisely what she wanted out of her school experience. For each person, this success opens up new possibilities, whether for further study, a more interesting or higher-paying job, or, more generally, more fulfilling encounters with others and one's environment. As Kirkwood (1992) writes, stories liberate their narrators when they "evoke possibilities that exist beyond the context in which they first arise" and "convince people that these possibilities are within their grasp" (p. 33). Here, the narrators saw possibilities in the future that they would not have imagined before; they were thus liberated from the constraints of their old self-definitions.

Tension

While the structure of these ten stories suggests transformation, much of the content suggests tension. Throughout the texts, the narrators revealed contradictions in their own expressed — and apparently heartfelt — beliefs. In many cases, this tension seems to exist as a simultaneous adherence to old and embracing of new beliefs, and it appears either as an espoused contradiction (that is, the person acknowledged that she or he sensed a contradiction or felt conflicted) or as a tacit contradiction (with the person making conflicting statements over the course of the interview). These contradictions are not disturbing enough to cause the participants to consider abandoning either old or new beliefs; rather, what seems to be occurring is a gradual effort to integrate the two.

Academics vs. pragmatics. There was among the participants a simultaneous reverence for scholarly learning and a skepticism about its applicability to the "real world." They quite plainly loved learning for its own sake, as evidenced in Themes 3 (I am a smart and talented person) and 6 (I've grown and changed), but they also sought usefulness from their learning, as demonstrated in Theme 5 (I want to be practical).

Many of the participants revealed a great appreciation for academic study in their interviews. At the same time, however, they exhibited a keen sense of incongruity between their academic and pragmatic worlds and a suspicion of the taken-for-granted value of the scholarly approach to learning. In some cases, this incongruity was manifest in the inability of formal education to prepare one for real-life decision-making; in other cases, participants criticized the naiveté that emerges from over-theorization of real-world phenomena. Some also stressed the value of lessons learned outside of a formal educational setting, suggesting that academic work doesn't have a monopoly on education. Others expressed frustration in finding that while their technical-education programs had lacked depth, their liberal-arts programs lacked practicality, reflecting Dewey's (1916/1966) distinction between the encouragement of "machine-like skill" (p. 310) in vocational education and the disregard for "present-day concerns" (p. 359) in liberal education.

This academic–pragmatic tension also reveals something about the way these adults think — or perhaps more precisely, the way they *believe* they should think. Labouvie-Vief (1980) writes that in adulthood, "[p]layful exercise of cognitive schemes, endless generating of 'ifs' and 'whens,' no longer may be adaptive; the task becomes instead to attempt to utilize best one's knowledge towards the management of concrete life situations. Cognition becomes constrained by pragmatic necessities . . . ." (p. 153). That is, unlike children, adults cannot easily afford to mull over abstract questions of theory if they are also to apply knowledge and reason to practical problems. The academic questions they are encouraged to "play with" in their liberal arts courses take their attention away from practical questions, and because they clearly understand what is expected of them in the adult working world, such academic exercise may feel maladaptive to them.

Can this tension be resolved? Perhaps it does not need to be. Implicit in the students' comments is a sense of balance: they know what is expected and required in the academic and work worlds, and they feel confident that they can operate successfully in both. Several of the participants, in fact, mentioned having made use of their new theoretical knowledge in practical situations, suggesting that they were not only balancing theory and practice but were also integrating them in ways that are far from maladaptive.

Degree as accomplishment vs. degree as social symbol. It is clear that these ten participants enjoyed a great deal of pride in their academic accomplishments, both the act of simply having finished, or having made a good deal of progress in, the degree program and the success they've enjoyed in what they view as a difficult, academically rigorous program of study. What is also clear, however, is that the participants hesitated to praise the value of the degree, that they viewed it as a status symbol perhaps unworthy of the high social value ascribed to it.

The tension between degree-as-accomplishment and degree-as-social symbol reveals as much about the participants' earlier feelings and experiences as it does about their return-to-school experiences. That is, these returnees defended the value of the non-degreed — a group to which they once belonged — while at the same time expressing great pride not just in being successful students but also in participating in what they considered to be a demanding academic experience. There is simultaneously a resistance to the socially validated notion that degrees necessarily imply intelligence (and vice versa) and a celebration of the degree and the accomplishment it represents. These contradictory feelings make sense given the way in which the participants understand their histories: these are people who believed that they had always been smart, who saw their failure to have earned a degree earlier in life as a product not of lack of ability but of circumstance. They ought to have earned the degree, they felt, and would have had their situations been different. Thus the problem lay with the degree and its social value, and not with them. They had always been intelligent and capable; it was the commonly held belief that the degree equals intelligence that prevented them from gaining opportunity. At the same time, they at some point became engaged in an intensive program of study, and they had made significant investment (personal as well as financial) in this program; they were naturally proud of their participation. Herein lies the tension.

Another factor at play may be the participants' simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the importance placed on intelligence in the liberal-arts enterprise. Because a program of liberal learning would be more likely to emphasize the value of abstract reasoning and theoretical knowledge — "being smart" — than to emphasize practical intelligence, the students in this study — who presumably had embraced much of the value system of the liberal arts enterprise — might place especially high expectations on themselves to demonstrate a sort of innate abstract intelligence. At the same time, however, they objected to the notion that abstract intelligence is somehow intelligence of a higher order than that of practical intelligence — a rejection that surfaced in their complaints about the limitations of the liberal-education curriculum — and as a result might feel some resentment toward the wide acceptance, at least in academic circles, of this view. It seems that the students' sense of the degree as accomplishment is linked to their acceptance of liberal-arts values and that their sense of the degree as little more than a social symbol is linked to their contradictory, but simultaneous, rejection of them.

The Study's Relevance to the Vocational–Liberal Debate

Snedden's (1933/1999) remark that liberal-education proponents duped students into believing that liberal study would lead to gainful employment mirrors today's commonly held view that liberal education fails to prepare students for the world of work and, perhaps, distracts them from practical concerns by encouraging them to invest energy in theory and abstraction. Adult students, particularly those who have experienced both the practical orientation of the world of work and the often-mechanical technical training of vocational school — as many of these participants have — might be particularly sensitive to the lack of pragmatic applicability of a liberal-education curriculum because they know what is missing. At the same time, it is precisely because these students have experienced the world of work and, in many cases, education with a technical slant that they so appreciate the liberal-arts approach: one which encourages a critical examination of the technical, an everyday search for meaning from varied perspectives, and a drawing together of diverse lines of inquiry to arrive at a more holistic understanding of one's environment. It seems, then, that there is a quality of contradiction

inherent to adult liberal study: adults interested in liberal learning — particularly those who have experienced frustration with the technical, vocational approach to learning — may appreciate the value of the liberal-education approach, but they also see quite clearly what it lacks.

The lack of practicality in liberal education was indeed felt by those participants who complained of a detachment from the "real world" in their courses. But their sense of the liberal arts as impractical seems to be outweighed by a feeling that they were able transcend this impracticality, to combine the knowledge and experience they had gained through their jobs and other life experiences with their academic experience to create something greater than either alone. Moreover, they all spoke of having come to better understand their own interests and talents. Adult students, who often have the knowledge and experience to know both what is required of them in the practical world and what sort of activity appeals to them, may be in an ideal position to integrate liberal study with "real-world" demands — an ideal position to use their vocations in the way Dewey (1916/1966) advocated, as "both magnet to attract and as glue to hold" (p. 310) abstract ideas.

Marks (1999) has identified a prevalent belief that adult liberal education is more "consumption" than "investment" (p. 162). This study suggests that it is both. The participants came to the experience, and remained with it, for enjoyment and personal growth as well as for practical economic gain and greater fulfillment in their work lives. For these ten people, House's (1991) question of why adults choose to engage in a program of liberal education might be answered this way: to better their lives, both economically — by earning a degree applicable to activity important to them — and personally, by enjoying studying the things that interest them and, whether they anticipate it or not, developing greater satisfaction with their accomplishments and overall confidence.

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N E W H O R I Z O N S I N A D U L T E D U C A T I O N
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AN EXAMINATION OF THE LEARNING STYLES OF ONLINE MBA STUDENTS AND THEIR PREFERRED COURSE DELIVERY METHODS

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Abstract

This study asked students of non-traditional age enrolled in an online MBA program to complete a questionnaire for assessing their learning styles, using the well-known Kolb Learning-Style Inventory. In addition to the questions about learning style, students were asked to evaluate eight electronic course delivery methods used by their professors. Students were asked to assess those methods using a 6-point Likert-type scale. They were also asked how the method could be qualitatively improved, but this research paper does not address those written comments. The following research questions were posed: What are the different learning styles of online MBA students?, What, if any, differences are there in the learning styles of students enrolled in online MBA courses?, and Do online students prefer certain electronic course delivery methods over others? Differences were identified in the learning styles of the students. Students reported preferences in certain course delivery methods over others. There were also significant relationships reported between learning styles and preferred course delivery methods. Implications for instructors are discussed.

Introduction

With the introduction of online learning, the debate over learning effectiveness has taken on a huge new dimension. Until the dawn of electronic learning, instructional methods were continually analyzed to determine what worked best with various types of student populations. While such discussion and research will continue, there arises a need to assess a different set of teaching/learning methods once a decision is made to deliver an MBA electronically. These are the methods used in the electronic classroom. While some of them are very much like those used in a traditional classroom, electronic delivery makes the methods different enough to create new opportunities for evaluation. Consideration of this issue is founded, of course, on the perspective that students ought to be taught using methods that maximize learning effectiveness. This present research examines which methods are preferred in an online environment, as well as the impact of students' preferred learning style in a given population.

Purpose of the Research

An analysis of students' learning styles can enhance learning and expand the knowledge base of on-line learning. This is particularly important as the very nature of electronic learning has the instructors physically separated from the students. In fact, an understanding of students' learning styles may become even more important to on-line learning than on-ground learning. An analysis of online students' preferred course delivery methods can also add to the information base about learners.

While such variables as age, gender, and national origin are important, teaching methods and learning style are essential for effective teaching and learning. This knowledge can lead an instructor to better fulfill the most important responsibility of presenting information through a variety of instructional methods (Dunn and Dunn, 1993). Thus, this present research hopes to aid instructors in making better decisions about which course delivery methods to employ in their electronic classrooms.

Literature Review

By now it should be abundantly clear that online education is not only here to stay, but is continuing to increase its presence. Carrell and Menzel (2001) suggest distance education is apparently diffused throughout higher education in the United States. An article in *Resource* magazine (2000) tells us that distance learning represents a $3 billion business and Web-based training could grow to $5.5 billion by 2002. Mottl (2000) reports Internet or Web-based instruction is expected to increase its share of the training and education market from 17 percent in 1998 to 46 percent in 2003. Further, the online delivery of college and university courses is growing as well. As Robin Peek puts it, "distance learning is the Holy Grail of education" (2000, p. 30) and Natalie Berger (1999) says the Internet will be a primary vehicle for MBA education in the future. A 1998 Department of Education study (Carnevale, 2000) also showed 54,000 online education courses offered in the US with 1.6 million enrolled students. This growth is apparently being driven by brick and mortar costs and space limitations (Fornaciari, Forte & Mathews, 1999), an aging population of students demanding flexible schedules and greater value for their education dollar, and increasing competition from for-profit organizations (Harris, 1999). Although not everyone agrees with Peter Drucker's statement (as cited in Lenzner & Johnson, 1997) that "Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics," few would argue that online education is a force to be reckoned with.

While the presence of online college and university instruction grows, there is a continuing debate on its effectiveness. Bloom (1998) says that a number of studies have indicated that computer-based instruction decreases performances levels. Many other educators are concerned about the consequences of no face-to-face student-instructor interaction in online courses. Farrington (1999) notes that he has trouble imagining that distant education can be the equivalent of the classroom. On the other hand, some research shows anecdotal evidence that suggests that students feel closer to their faculty and fellow students in online courses. Many other sources

have reported no significant difference between classroom-based or online education (Trinkle, 1999; Navarro and Shoemaker, 1999; Schulman and Sims, 1999; Wade, 1999).

Even if there are no differences, additional research is called for into the effectiveness of online instruction. Thomas Russell, director emeritus of instructional technology at North Carolina State University, tracks studies of distance education methods and has found 400 studies examining such differences (as cited in Young, 2000). Although Russell concludes no significant difference exists between online courses and classroom courses, he encourages additional research for determining what kinds of students are best suited for the online format (Young, 2000b). Such research could be most enlightening.

Learning style is one aspect of learning effectiveness research for both classroom and online education that may shed some light on Russell's recommendation. According to Saba (1999) distance learning requires students to take greater responsibility for their learning, which can be enhanced by helping them be aware of their learning style. Markel (1999) believes online education needs to be student-centered rather than teacher- centered. Prensky (1998) suggests learning styles change from generation to generation requiring faster speed, a more visual approach, and greater active engagement for Generation X students. Khan and Vega (1997) identified the need to accommodate different learning styles as one of seven criteria for effectiveness of online courses. Thus, we see a need to consider student learning style in order to maximize online course effectiveness or learning results.

Learning Styles

Several classifications of learning style and related concepts have been developed through the years. These classifications include Solomon's Inventory of Learning Styles, the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator, Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, McCarthy's 4-Mat system, and Honey and Mumford's (1986) social approach to learning. Perhaps the most widely known approach to assessing learning style, however, is that of David Kolb (1984).

According to Kolb (1984) individuals learn in four stages or modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. However, in different learning situations individuals often use different combinations of learning modes; hence no one mode clearly identifies an individual's learning style. The combination of learning modes form four quadrants reflecting four learning styles: Accommodator, Diverger, Assimilator, and Converger.

As indicated above, there is a need to accommodate different learning styles and modes. This accommodation requires more than recognizing the students' learning styles, however. Not only does learning style and mode vary by individual, but teaching style varies as well. Ebeling (2000) suggests that there is evidence most instructors use a teaching style that is comfortable to them and this is often the way they themselves learn best. According to Taylor (1998) all instructors need to be able to address a variety of learning styles and Kay (1998) proposes communication is improved by understanding how people learn. There is research to support varying teaching style to match learning style. Roach et al. (1993) examined alternative teaching styles in marketing classes. Filbeck and Smith (1996) looked at both teaching and learning styles

along with age and gender. Borg and Shapiro (1996) studied teaching styles in economics classes. Hayes and Allinson (1996) analyzed 19 studies, which examined matching learning style to learning method and found support in 12 for improved learning performance. Dunn et al. (1995) discuss research showing higher grade point averages resulting from closer matches between teaching and learning styles. Finally, Tomlinson (1996) emphasizes the need for instructors to be aware of and adapt to student learning styles.

It is also important to recognize that teaching style often determines course delivery methods. According to Mumford (1995) many activities fail to achieve their potential because they concentrate only on one stage of the learning cycle. For example, lectures or books focus on delivering information while ignoring time to act practically on the information. Thus, we see that course delivery methods may impact course effectiveness as well as the differences in student learning styles.

Research Questions

This current study was undertaken as a first step in examining the relationship between student learning styles and course delivery methods in the online MBA program at the Wayne Huizenga Graduate School of Business and Entrepreneurship at Nova Southeastern University. The following research questions were posed:

1. What are the different learning styles of online MBA students?
2. What, if any, differences are there in the learning styles of students enrolled in online MBA courses?
3. Do online students prefer certain electronic course delivery methods over others?

Methodology

All 124 students pursuing an on-line MBA at the Huizenga School were asked to complete the well known Kolb Learning-Style Inventory (LSI) (1993) to determine their particular learning styles. The students were also asked to complete an online learning methods questionnaire to evaluate the eight course delivery methods used by their professors. Of the 124 questionnaires mailed, 48 students returned the questionnaires. Questionnaires from 4 students were unusable, hence the sample size was reduced to 44 yielding a usable response rate of 35.5%.

To answer the first two research questions and determine the student learning styles, the LSI assessed the following four learning modes: (a) Concrete Experience (CE), (b) Reflective Observation (RO), (c) Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and (d) Active Experimentation (AE).

A 4 point Likert-type scale 1–4 was used with 1 being “least likely” and 4 being “most likely.” The Learning Style Grid was determined as follows: AC scores less CE scores = AC-CE ; AE scores less RO scores = AE-RO. To determine the learning styles, the results of AC-CE and AE-RO scores were plotted to form the four quadrants of the learning styles: Accommodator, Diverger, Converger, and Assimilator.

To answer the third research question, students were asked about the eight course delivery methods used by their online professors: (a) bulletin board (text-based forum for discussion and questions; asynchronous); (b) case studies (written assignments submitted via email); (c) chat room (text-based real-time discussions with students and professor); (d) exams submitted on line; (e) lecture (text-based lecture notes posted on bulletin boards); (f) PowerPoint presentations (available online or for downloading); (g) web site links; and (h) written research papers/projects (submitted via email).

To assess student preferences of these delivery methods, a six point Likert-like scale 1-6 was used with 1 being the least preferred and 6 the most preferred method. A one-way ANOVA with a 0.05 level of significance was used to test the hypothesis:

Ho: There are no significant differences in students' preferences for available online course delivery methods.

Ha: There are significant differences in students' preferences for available online course delivery methods.

Findings

Figure 1 presents the Dominant Learning Modes for the students studied. As seen in Figure 1, the learning mode used by most students in the sample was Reflective Observation representing 45% of the population. In this stage of the learning cycle, students learn by watching and listening. Thirty percent of the sample used the Abstract Conceptualization mode. In this stage of the learning cycle, students learn by using logic and ideas. Eighteen percent of the sample used the Concrete Experience mode where learning relies on feeling rather than on a systematic approach to problems and situations. The remaining seven percent of the sample used a combination of Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation; or a combination of Abstract Conceptualization and Concrete Experience; and Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization. It is interesting to note that none of the students in the sample used Active Experimentation as a dominant learning mode. In this stage, learning would be achieved by experimenting, taking risks, and learning by doing.

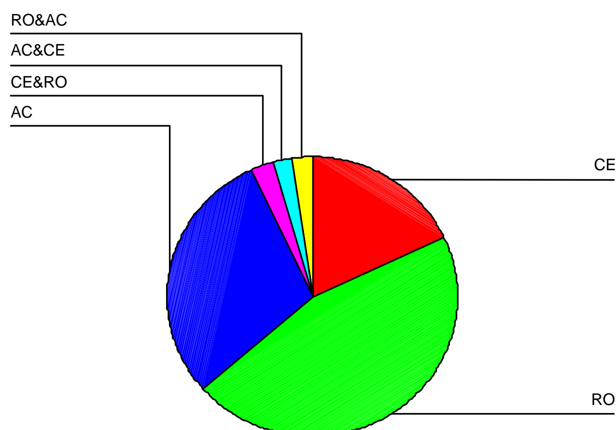

Figure 1. Dominant Learning Modes

Within the various learning mode groups, the following learning styles emerged and are outlined below in the descriptive statistics Table 1.

Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics – Learning Styles

STYLES

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Diverger	28	63.6	63.6	63.6
Assimilator	14	31.8	31.8	95.5
Accommodator or converger	1	2.3	2.3	97.7
Combination of all styles	1	2.3	2.3	100.0
Total	44	100.0	100.0	

Figure 2 shows the learning styles for the students studied. Approximately 64% of the sample exhibited the Diverger learning style. According to Kolb (1984), persons with this learning style like to generate a wide range of ideas and like to gather information. They also have imaginative abilities which enhance creativity. Divergers also view situations from different points of view.

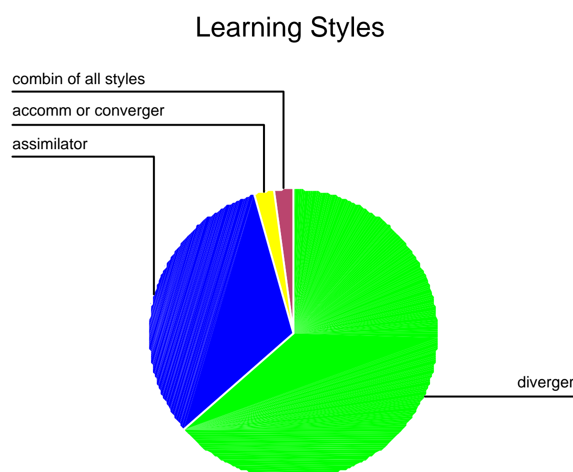

Figure 2. Learning Styles

Thirty-two percent of the sample exhibited the Assimilator learning style. Kolb (1984) says Assimilators are able to understand and formulate information into a logical and concise form. They are more focused on abstract ideas and concepts, hence they are very good at creating models and defining problems. They are also very good planners.

It should also be noted that one student could be classified as either an Accommodator or a Converger, and another student used a combination of all four learning styles. Combining learning styles tends to provide more flexibility in learning (Kolb, 1984). Figure 3 depicts the different combinations of the four learning styles.

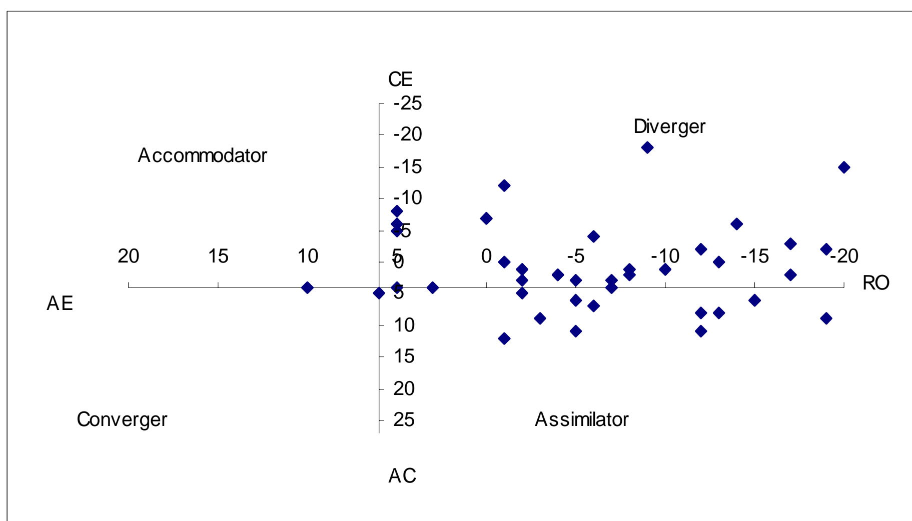

Figure 3. Learning Style Grid

Table 2 presents the mean scores for each of the learning methods based on the learning styles of the students studied. The table indicates that students who are Divergers choose cases as their first choice of course delivery method with their second choice being on-line exams. It is not surprising that their preferred course delivery method is cases as Divergers enjoy situations that encourage idea generation and brainstorming.

As seen in Table 2, Assimilators preferred on-line exams as their first choice of course delivery method followed by website navigation. Assimilators tend to be more focused on abstract ideas and concepts and are less focused on people.

The one student in the sample who could be classified as either an Accommodator or Converger preferred the chatroom course delivery method but had no interest in website navigation. This preference for the chatroom could be explained by the fact that both Accomodators and Convergers have elements of active experimentation, which according to Kolb (1994), takes an active form of learning. Accommodators also rely heavily on people for information when solving problems and like to take risks. The chatroom is conducive to all these elements since it is active and involves other people. Risk-taking may be facilitated in because of the somewhat anonymous nature of the electronic chatrooms.

Report

STYLES		BULLETIN	CASES	CHATROOM	ONLINEEX	LECTURE	POWERPT	WEBSITE	WRPAPER
Diverger	Mean	4.7857	5.3333	4.7407	5.2593	4.6964	4.0357	5.0179	4.9074
	N	28	27	27	27	28	28	28	27
	Std. Deviation	1.0752	.7206	1.3328	.8811	1.1000	1.4589	.8219	1.2863
Assimilator	Mean	4.7500	4.4167	4.5357	5.3929	4.5357	3.8929	5.0000	4.7857
	N	14	12	14	14	14	14	12	28
	Std. Deviation	1.2365	1.0836	1.6695	.8128	1.4069	1.4302	1.0445	1.0752
Accommodator or converger	Mean	4.5000	5.0000	6.0000	5.0000	4.5000	3.5000		4.7500
	N	1	1	1	1	1	1		14
	Std. Deviation	.	.	.	.	.	.		1.2365
Combination of all styles	Mean	5.5000	6.0000	5.5000	6.0000	6.0000	6.0000	6.0000	4.5000
	N	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Std. Deviation	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Total	Mean	4.7841	5.0732	4.7209	5.3140	4.6705	4.0227	5.0366	5.5000
	N	44	41	43	43	44	44	41	1
	Std. Deviation	1.0965	.9257	1.4239	.8382	1.1859	1.4344	.8831	.

Table 2 – Mean Scores of Learning Methods and the corresponding Learning Styles

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ONLINEEX	43	2.00	6.00	5.3140	.8382
CASES	41	2.50	6.00	5.0732	.9257
WEBSITE	41	3.00	6.00	5.0366	.8831
WRPAPER	43	1.00	6.00	4.8837	1.2240
BULLETIN	44	2.00	6.00	4.7841	1.0965
CHATROOM	43	1.50	6.00	4.7209	1.4239
LECTURE	44	2.00	6.00	4.6705	1.1859
POWERPT	44	1.00	6.00	4.0227	1.4344
Valid N (listwise)	36				

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics – Course Delivery Method

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the online course delivery methods. Exams submitted on line was the most preferred course delivery method, with PowerPoint presentations being the least preferred. The results of the ANOVA give $F= 4.810$ and $p = .000$ for our hypothesis, which suggests there are differences in students' preferences for the different online course delivery methods. We, therefore, reject the null hypothesis.

A multiple comparison analysis using the Tukey (HSD) test was done to determine the actual differences between the online course delivery methods. There were significant differences in students' preferences among the following: (a) bulletin board and PowerPoint; (b) case studies and PowerPoint; (c) web site links and PowerPoint; and (d) written paper and PowerPoint. The Cronbach alpha reliability was 0.913.

These results suggest students had a preference toward exams submitted on line while PowerPoint presentations were preferred the least. The online lecture and chatroom were also among the least preferred course delivery methods, suggesting there could be improvement in the actual administration or management of these methods or even the instructor's delivery or approach in using these methods. Activities within the direct control of the professors could, therefore, be examined to determine whether there are established standards and procedures in place. Sixty four percent of the participants were Divergers, and their most preferred learning method was on-line exams. This suits their propensity for using their imagination in responding to essay questions. Thirty-three percent were Assimilators and the second most preferred learning method was cases. This may be explained by Assimilators' desire to put information into concise and logical form, which is consistent with case studies. A strength of Assimilators is their propensity to define problems. This is also relevant to the case study method.

Conclusions

The findings of this research suggests there are differences in the learning styles of students pursuing online education and that students use combinations of Kolb's (1984) four learning modes which determine their learning style. However, it is interesting to note that nearly two-thirds of the students studied exhibited one learning style: Diverger, and two other learning styles were nearly absent: Accomodator and Converger.

The findings of this research also suggest that students do indeed prefer certain online course delivery methods over others. This can present a challenge for educators if the comments of Ebeling (2000), Taylor (1998), and Hayes and Allison (1996) regarding teaching style and course effectiveness (and mentioned above) are to be accepted. If teaching style and learning style are to be matched, online instructors will now have to develop ways of accommodating the different learning styles in their course design and delivery to ensure that learners benefit from a comfortable and rewarding learning experience. Because of the sample size of this study, however, generalizations are not prudent. In addition, the course delivery methods examined in this particular study may also be a limitation as new, more interactive technologies are already replacing some of them.

Future research could go in a number of directions. First, additional research could determine if the findings of this study are replicable, particularly the dominance of one or two learning styles. If this is confirmed in future studies, it could indicate that online students are self selecting for an online environment due to their learning style. Another avenue of future research would be to expand the study of online course delivery methods. Creating course delivery methods to match and expand instructors' teaching styles could improve course effectiveness. Future research could also include qualitative research data in the form of direct comments by students to provide a better understanding of the quantitative statistical analysis. In other words, greater insight could be gained by knowing why students prefer a particular course delivery method. A final area of future research could be to examine any differences between quantitative vs. qualitative courses. While the students sampled in this study were taking a variety of online courses, no data was collected to examine the specific type of courses being taught. Perhaps online course delivery is better suited to particular types of courses.

In conclusion, further research into student learning styles, online course delivery methods, and online teaching styles is clearly needed if we are to maximize the effectiveness of online learning. As noted by Killion (2001, p. 51) "Until more research is available about what works and what doesn't in online content and instruction, many of the design issues are trial and error." Hopefully, this present research has reduced some of that trial and error.

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N E W H O R I Z O N S I N A D U L T E D U C A T I O N
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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL ONLINE STUDENTS

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Abstract

With the rapid growth of computer-based distance education throughout colleges and universities today, understanding the characteristics of successful online learners has become especially important. This article explores the different aspects of the online learning environment, as well as several different areas impacting student success: technical factors, environmental factors, personal characteristics, and learning characteristics.

Introduction

Computer technology and the Internet have led to a dramatic change in the way many colleges and universities deliver educational programs to their students. Today nearly one-third of all colleges and universities offer some sort of computer-based distance education and another 25% are planning to do so in the near future (Howard, 2000). Seeing the possibility of a new student market, many schools have launched online programs and have become enamored by with the new technology and the new revenue streams, which it produces (Rose, 1999). While a great deal has been written about the growth of technology in higher education and how best to use that technology in the teaching-learning process, relatively little research has been done on the students who take these courses.

The necessity for discussion on the nature of the online student is indicated by the higher than average attrition rates in most online distance education courses. In one study conducted on fifteen different graduate business courses at Texas A & M University, researchers found that while online courses enrolled more students, those courses lost more students to attrition as well (Terry, 2001). Researchers concluded that while the Internet holds great promise for the delivery of education to previously untapped student groups, the attrition problem was a concern. Other schools have likewise documented that their distance education students have higher attrition rates than traditional, classroom students, but there is no consensus as to the reasons why this is so. As a result, all agree that there is a need for more research into this problem (Henke & Russum, 2000).

One possible reason for the higher attrition rates among distance education students is that there may be only certain kinds of students under certain conditions who can successfully learn via the online format. Several institutions that offer online courses offer prospective students a self-assessment tool. Some examples can be found on the following web sites: Justice Institute

of British Columbia www.jibc.bc.ca/virtualJIBC/online/default.htm), Capella University (www.capella.edu/reborn/html/aboutcapella/ElearningCapella/index.aspx), and Online Learning.net (www.onlinelearning.net). Other institutions, such as the University of Idaho (www. uidaho.edu/eo/dist9.html), Athabasca University (www.athabascau.ca/main/DE.htm), and Howard Community College (www.howardcc.edu/distance) offer a description of what they deem to be the characteristics of a successful online student. These self-assessment tools and student descriptions further suggest that only certain kinds of students can successfully learn in the online environment

The purpose of this article is to describe the characteristics of students who are most successful in the online environment as identified in current literature. Attention will be paid to external factors such as appropriate course design, technology, and environment, as well as the personal traits of those students who tend to learn most successfully in online courses. From this review of both literature and research, a profile of the successful online student will be developed, a profile that indicates that online learning is an ideal learning medium for many adult students.

Distance Learning and Online Education

To a certain extent online courses share characteristics similar to all other forms of distance learning, which can include correspondence courses, video instruction, videoconferencing, and Internet-based courses. These common characteristics include the separation of teacher and student in space and time, a student controlled learning paradigm, and noncontiguous communication between teacher and student (Sherry, 1996). Increasingly, the term distance education has become synonymous with instruction provided via Internet technologies, such as email and the World Wide Web (Eastmond, 1998).

However, it must be recognized that not all online courses are the same. Eastmond (1998) describes three different types of Internet-based courses, each of which require students to learn in a different manner. First, there is the traditional distance learning course, such as a correspondence or video course, which is supplemented by use of the Internet. This type of course may include email communication, online research, online chat rooms, and asynchronous online discussion groups. The Internet is a support, rather than primary medium of delivery. Second, there is the computer conferencing course where the Internet is the primary means of course delivery. While there may be supportive print materials, the main emphasis is on a text-based communication via the computer utilizing asynchronous threaded discussions and email. This type of course is characterized by greater interactivity between students, a need for more reflection, and collaboration with other learners. Third, there is the virtual course from the virtual institution, in which all or most aspects of the course are delivered online: the course guide, electronic discussions, student support, and the submission of assignments. This type of course has many of the same characteristics as the computer conference course, but tends to utilize higher level technological tools such as colorful graphics, audio and video streams, and hypertext links. Such a course requires the highest levels of computer hardware, and sophisticated user skills for students, instructors, and support staff. This article will focus on those students found in the last two types of course, the computer conference and the virtual course.

Not only is the delivery system a significant factor in learner success, but so is the theoretical basis of instruction. Within distance education the predominant approach to instruction has been the symbol-processing approach, which is characterized by the instructor transmitting a fixed body of information via a print or electronic medium. Essentially, in this model the instructor becomes the source of knowledge, and the role of the learners is to receive and decode that knowledge in their own context. Recently distance education has moved to a more constructivist understanding of the teaching-learning process, where students are expected to actively construct knowledge for themselves by interacting with the instructor and the material to be learned. In this model the instructor serves as a facilitator of the teaching-learning process, rather than the primary transmitter of knowledge (Sherry, 1996). Increasingly, online courses are utilizing the constructivist approach, thus requiring a higher degree of interactivity between teacher and student (Eastmond, 1998).

Factors Contributing to Success Online

When considering the type of student who is most suited for the online learning environment, there are four sets of factors that must be considered. First, there are the technical factors, which pertain to the student's access to the technology through which an online course is delivered. Second, there are the environmental factors, which have to do with the student's personal learning environment. Third, there are the personal factors, which have to do with the character traits of the students themselves. Finally, there are various learning characteristics, which successful online students tend to exhibit and possess. Each set of factors will be considered in more detail.

Technical Factors

First, while it may seem obvious that students must possess a computer system sophisticated enough to operate in the online environment, this cannot be taken for granted. For instance, both Minot State University and Howard Community College, require minimum technical requirements for their online students including Windows 95 or above, a modem, an Internet Service Provider, and an email account (MSU Online, 2001; Howard Community College, 2001). But in addition to having the hardware, students must also have the basic computer and Internet skills to effectively navigate the online environment. Basic computer skills include the ability to use a keyboard and a mouse, as well as the perceptual ability to identify images and events on the computer screen with particular motor actions. Basic Internet skills include the ability to send and reply to email, search and find information online, download and install software, and knowing how to participate in web-based discussions. While in theory these skills are a prerequisite to taking an online course, in fact many students develop them while taking the course because it requires them to use the computer extensively. Their learning is driven by educational necessity (Cahoon, 1998a, pp. 5-13). While these skills are becoming increasingly prevalent throughout the general population, one study found that students encountered a number of technical problems in their online courses, and that some students overestimated their computer skills (White, 2000).

Environmental Factors

The environmental factors impacting a student's success in an online course primarily have to do with time, place, and support from significant others. It is often assumed that students taking an online course are geographically distant from the institution at which the course is offered. Career and family responsibilities keep such students from the site of a classroom (Neely, Niemi & Ehrhard, 1998). However, Richards and Ridley (1997) found in their study that distance from the classroom was not a major factor in determining which students enrolled in online courses. The key factors were time and scheduling barriers.

The time factor is "a double-edged sword" (Neely et al.,1998). Students often choose an online course because they perceive that it will be more convenient and flexible around other schedule demands. A great advantage of online courses is that students can attend class at whatever time of day or night that is most available and productive for them (Dewar, 1996). However, the same work and family responsibilities that keep one from attending a traditional classroom, may also interfere with accomplishing the work that needs to be done (Neely et al, 1998). In reality online courses generally take more total time than traditional classes, a fact that is often not considered (Capella, 2001).

Not only is the amount of time required a factor, but also important is how that time is distributed throughout a week. Students in a classroom-based course may have to attend class once or twice a week, and then study at an appointed time in that week. However, online students are often required to log on to an asynchronous discussion several times a week, as well do the homework required. They must plan to attend class throughout the week rather than at single set time (MSU Online, 2001). Thus, it is vital that students possess good time management skills and that they set personal study and classroom times in their calendars just like any appointment. Furthermore, they must make sure that during those set times they are free from the distractions of work and family (Learning and Information Technologies, 2000).

Another environmental factor has to do with the student's physical workspace. While there is a high degree of interaction between students and teacher in an online course, students still must be willing to learn in isolation from one's classmates (Mannix, 2000). Thus, it is important that a student have a comfortable and well-organized workspace including a computer, a desk, and a place for course materials. Because a student will be spending both class and study time in this space, it must include adequate lighting, a comfortable chair, freedom from distractions, and a general efficiency of use (Learning and Information Technologies, 2000).

A final environmental factor is the support of one's family, significant others, and employer. Because online students require time and a place apart from others, it is important that they have the understanding of those who will be most affected by their absence and change in lifestyle. Without that support the significant people in a student's life become simply another barrier to achieving their educational goals (Criscito, 1999).

Personal Characteristics

The third category of factors influencing the possibility of students successfully learning online are the personal characteristics of the students themselves. Tait (2000) has written that some online learners prefer the virtual classroom precisely because they feel more confident and competent to participate in class discussions from a distance rather than in the conventional classroom dominated by the teacher and a few outspoken students. In the online environment such students feel they are on an equal footing with others.

By the same token successful online students do not use their physical isolation as an excuse to refrain from interaction. Henke and Russum (2000) found in a study of corporate distance education training programs, that the most successful students exhibited an ability and willingness to meet with other students online. Effective online students realize that they cannot hide and not participate as they might in a traditional classroom. Instead they show initiative and assertiveness by seeking help from instructors (Engineering Outreach, 2001), asking questions, creating studying teams, sending emails, and when necessary, picking up a phone and calling a classmate. The more interaction a student has, the more effective that student will be (Mannix, 2000).

Successful online students are also highly self-motivated and self-disciplined (Engineering Outreach, 2001). Because online learning puts a greater responsibility on the learner, learners must know how to pace themselves, complete assignments on time, and follow through with all the requirements of the course (Capella University, 2001). A key motivational factor is to have clear educational goals and a clear understanding as to why one is taking a particular course or program (Athabasca University, 2001). Another important motivating factor is the desire for more control over one's learning environment (Roblyer, 1999). In short, successful online students are highly motivated by their goals and their ability to shape their learning experience.

Finally, successful online students exhibit qualities of honesty, integrity, and authenticity. The standards of ethical behavior require that all students, regardless of learning medium, avoid such activities as cheating and plagiarism (MSU Online, 2000). However, the online environment presents additional challenges to one's integrity because it makes it possible for persons to take on false personalities and thereby develop fraudulent relationships via the Internet. Furthermore, there are no safeguards against a student registered for an online course actually paying to have someone else submit their work (Tait, 2000). The ease with which a fictitious persona can be created was unintentionally demonstrated in one study where an instructor permitted a student to create a character who took controversial positions for the purpose of spurring discussion. A false biography was produced and an email account established in the student's name. While the fictitious class member succeeded in generating lively online discussions, several students felt betrayed and offended when the ruse was revealed. The honesty and trust so important to any discussion-oriented teaching format was undermined in this case (Poole, 2000).

Learning Characteristics

The fourth category of factors affecting the success of an online student lies in the area of

learning characteristics, such as learning styles, reading and writing skills, and self-direction. One intriguing area has to do with students' learning styles. To date only a few studies have been conducted on the relationship of learning styles to success in a distance learning environment (Diaz & Cartnal, 1999, pp. 130-35). One study using Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI) found that students who needed less concrete experience in learning and who preferred to look for abstract concepts performed better in community college telecourses than students exhibiting other tendencies on the LSI (Dille & Mezack, 1991). Another study using the Grasha-Reichmann Student Learning Style Scales found that successful online students preferred independent, self-paced instruction, as compared to students in traditional classroom settings. At the same time it was found that online students responded well to collaborative activities when the instructor provided sufficient structure and guidance. Researchers concluded that instructors should expect to find students with different learning styles taking online courses as compared to those taking classroom based courses (Diaz & Cartnal, 1999). This is an area with rich possibilities for continued research in two directions. First, there is ongoing need for research on the relationship of various learning styles and effective online learning. But second, there is need for research in how to make the online learning environment accessible to individuals of all different learning styles.

A second important academic skill area is the area of reading and writing. Because so much of the content of even the most sophisticated online course is conveyed in a text-based medium, students must be comfortable receiving information via a computer screen. Students must also be familiar with the non-verbal online emoticons and acronymns so frequently used in email and online chatrooms (MSU Online, 2001). By the same token students must have well-developed writing skills including spelling, grammar, and a good grasp of basic English. Such skills are particularly important in an online environment since a student's writing is the main avenue of communication with classmates and the instructor (Learning and Information Technologies, 2000). Finally, successful online students tend to exhibit the characteristics associated with self-directed learning, including a high level of motivation, quickly moving through activities, and comfort directing one's own learning (Cahoon, 1998b). Often associated with the field of adult education, the concept of self-directed learning (SDL) has interested educators since it was described in the 1970's (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In theory the chief characteristic of SDL is the learner's control of the entire learning process. However, few learners are either totally self-directed or other-directed in their approach to learning, but rather a mixture of both (Kerka, 1994). Online courses tend to give students sufficient freedom, which requires that students take control of the learning process to a greater degree (Cahoon, 1998b).

Conclusion

The profile of a successful online student suggests there are several essential factors that must be considered. First, a successful online student must possess appropriate technology and the skills to use that technology effectively. Second, that student must have an environment that includes an appropriate management of time and space, as well support from significant others. Third, that student must possess certain personal characteristics, including a healthy balance between autonomy and interactivity, self-motivation and self-discipline, and a high level of integrity. Finally, that student must possess a more independent learning style that tends toward

a more self-directed learning orientation, as well as better-than-average reading and writing skills.

Taken together these characteristics suggest that online distance education is ideally suited for many adult learners. Rossman (2000) has pointed that there is a natural affinity between the concepts of andragogy prevalent in adult education and the necessary self-direction, self-motivation, and learner interactivity required of students in online distance education. Furthermore, online courses often meet adult needs for flexibility and convenience (Neely et al, 1998). In fact studies have shown that while increasingly younger learners are utilizing the online option, the majority of distance learners continue to be working adults (Roblyer, 1999).

In conclusion, it is important for educators to consider the nature of the students who are taking online courses. The literature suggests that there may be some students who are better suited than others for the online learning environment. This article has identified some of the important factors that must be considered in determining who should and who should not be encouraged to participate in online distance education. Additional research needs to be done in the areas of learning styles, self-directed learning, as well as the impact of gender (Care & Udod, 2000), culture, and socio-economic status (Roblyer, 1999). While online learning may not be appropriate for every student, it is well-suited for some students. The more clearly educators can identify who those successful students are, the more productive and effective online distance education will become.

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