

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Student engagement with self- instructional course materials

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Education
in
Distance and On-line Learning

At Massey University, Extramural,
New Zealand

Peter Cowie
2010

Abstract

This study is concerned with understanding how students engage with self-instructional materials on campus and at a distance within the context of the hybrid course offered at ABC College. This study examines the interrelationship of (a) time engaged with course materials, (b) the perceived value of course materials, (c) student approaches to engagement and (d) the integration of the course materials into the student learning experience in order to construct an understanding of student engagement with course materials.

This study employed multiple case studies which formed a holistic collective case study. Data on student engagement with the course materials was collected using a questionnaire instrument. The resulting data was analysed using descriptive statistics to create a picture of how students engaged with the course materials. Correlation statistics were used to identify possible relationships between the items. Emerging themes were then explored in focus groups. Subsequent analysis of the focus group data explored the causation and interrelationships between themes resulting in an understanding of student engagement with the course materials.

The findings from this study suggests that student engagement with self-instructional course materials (readings, learning guide, multimedia, etc.) are the result of complex interactions between a student's preferred approach to engagement, their locus of control and the method of integration of the course materials. The majority of participants preferred to engage with the course materials using a deep approach. Participants with an external locus of control reflected the assumptions and approaches they perceived from the method of integration. Participants with an internal locus of control engaged with the course materials using their preferred approach unless they were convinced that another approach served their needs better. The majority of participants exhibited an external locus of control. When a presentation or supplemental method of integrating was used, participants were more likely to engage with the course materials using a surface approach to engagement. They were also more likely to spend less time engaging with the course materials and place a lower value on the course materials. When a discussion or springboard method of integration was used participants were more likely to engage the course materials using a deep approach to engagement. They were also more likely to spend more time engaging with the course materials and place a higher value on the course materials.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not be possible without the support, guidance and assistance of key individuals.

I am grateful to Dr Ben Kehrwald, my lead supervisor, for supporting me throughout the thesis. He has taught me the importance of methodology, challenged my thinking, required me to think critically about my data and justify my conclusions. For this I am truly thankful.

I would also like to thank Dr Panos Vlachopoulos and Dr Valerie Margrain, my supporting supervisors. They have both shared their insight and experience often shedding light on the issues I faced from a different perspective. I especially want to thank Dr Valerie Margrain for assisting in the completion of the thesis.

Above all, I would like to thank Carole, my wife, and Logan, my son, who have supported me throughout this journey. Their encouragement and understanding has made this thesis a reality.

Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Contents.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 The Rationale of the Study	1
1.2 Research Aim	3
1.3 Outline of the Method	3
1.4 Limitations of the Study	3
1.5 Overview of the Thesis	4
Chapter 2: Literature Review	6
2.1 The Definition of Student Engagement	6
2.2 Conceptual Framework for Studying Student Engagement.....	9
2.3 Internal Dimension of Student Engagement.....	10
2.4 External Dimension of Student Engagement.....	16
2.5 Foreshadowing the Research Questions.....	23
Chapter 3: Research Design.....	24
3.1 Context.....	24
3.2 Research Approach	25
3.3 Methodology	26
3.4 Overview of the Research Design	26
3.5 Ethical Considerations.....	27
3.6 Questionnaire	29
3.7 Focus Groups	32
Chapter 4: Questionnaire data and analysis.....	37
4.1 Description of Cases	37
4.2 Time Engaged with Course Materials	38
4.4 Perceived Value of Course Materials	39
4.5 Approach to Course Materials	42
4.6 Integration of Course Materials	44
4.7 Foreshadowing the Focus Groups.....	44
Chapter 5: Gisborne focus group data and analysis	46
5.1 Time Engaged with the Course Materials	46
5.2 The Perceived Value of the Course Materials	47
5.3 Approach to Engagement	53
5.4 Integrating the Course Materials	54
5.5 Summary.....	57
Chapter 6: Hamilton focus group data and analysis.....	59
6.1 Time Engaging with the Course Materials	59
6.2 The Perceived Value of the Course Materials	60
6.3 The Approach to Engagement	63
6.4 Integration of the Course Materials.....	63
6.6 Summary.....	65
Chapter 7: Distance focus group data and analysis.....	66
7.1 Time Engaged with the Course Materials	66

7.2	Perceived Value of the Course Materials	68
7.3	Approach to Engagement	72
7.4	Integration of the Course Materials.....	73
7.4	Summary.....	74
Chapter 8: Discussion and conclusion		75
8.1	Time Engaged with the Course Materials	75
8.2	Perceived Value of the Course Materials	79
8.3	Integration of the Course Materials.....	82
8.4	Approach to the Course Materials.....	87
8.5	Summary and Implications of the Discussion	91
8.6	Review of Limitations.....	94
8.7	Areas for Further Research	95
8.8	Conclusion.....	96
References		99
Appendices		107
	Appendix A: Email Invitation to Participate in the Questionnaire.....	108
	Appendix B: Questionnaire Information Sheet	109
	Appendix C: Online Questionnaire	111
	Appendix D: Email Invitation to Participate in the Focus Groups.....	117
	Appendix E: Campus Focus Group Information Sheet	118
	Appendix F: Distance Focus Group Information Sheet.....	120
	Appendix G: Focus Group Participant Consent Form	122
	Appendix H: Authority for the Release of Transcript.....	123
	Appendix I: Questionnaire Data	124
	Appendix J: Focus Group Discussion Guide.....	134

List of tables

Table 2.1: Indicators of student engagement.....	8
Table 2.2: Approaches to engagement.....	11
Table 2.3: Underlying assumptions that result in a student's approach to engagement.....	13
Table 2.4: Internal dimension of student engagement.....	14
Table 2.5: Distinctive features of self-instructional course materials.....	16
Table 2.6: Design features which encourage surface and deep approaches to engagement.	17
Table 2.7: Underlying assumptions in the model of learning.....	18
Table 3.1: Research timeline.....	27
Table 3.2: Sections within the questionnaire.....	30
Table 3.3: Strength of association – Cramer's V.....	31
Table 3.4: Strength of association – Spearman's Rho.....	32
Table 3.5: Distance focus group discussion schedule.....	34
Table 4.1: Response rate for the questionnaire.....	38
Table 4.2: Time spent engaging with the course materials per week compared to the approach scale.....	39
Table 4.3: Amount of the course materials engaged.....	40
Table 4.4: Value scale.....	41
Table 4.5: Correlation with value scale.....	41
Table 4.6: Approach scale.....	42
Table 8.1: Indicators of student engagement.....	75
Table 8.2: Methods of integration across the cases.....	83
Table 8.3: The relationship between approach to teaching and approach to engagement.....	87
Table 8.4: The effect of an internal locus of control on engagement.....	90
Table 8.5: The effect of an external locus of control on engagement.....	90

List of figures

Figure 2.1: Conceptual framework for studying student engagement.....	9
Figure 2.2: Associative perspective.....	19
Figure 2.3: Cognitive perspective.....	20
Figure 2.4: Situative perspective.....	21
Figure 8.1: Links between teacher's conception of knowledge and method of integrating the course materials.....	82
Figure 8.2: Presentation and supplemental methods of integration.....	83
Figure 8.3: A teacher's interaction in study and research.....	84
Figure 8.4: The course materials embody the teacher.....	84
Figure 8.5: Springboard and discussion methods of integration.....	85
Figure 8.6: The course materials are the foundation to construct understanding.....	86
Figure 8.7: Links between teacher's conception of teaching and student learning outcomes.....	87
Figure 8.8: Links between approach to teacher and student underlying assumptions and approach to engagement.....	89