

Project title: On-Line Learning Communities and Higher Education: A Proposal to Identify Factors Supporting Collaborative Knowledge-Building.

Investigators: David Stein and Joseph Wheaton, The Ohio State University

Study Overview: The purpose of the study was to identify factors that influenced student satisfaction with their learning in these courses. Specifically, the study examined the following research questions:

- Do structure, interaction, degree of distance, or characteristics of the learner affect learning in a distance environment?
- Is learning orientation related to degrees of distance?
- Is learning orientation related to educational philosophy?
- How do learners create, maintain and use a learning community to foster individual and collective learning?

Findings:

Research Question 1: Do structure, interaction, degree of distance, characteristics of the learner, or the expectations of instructors affect learning in a distance environment?

Using logistic regression and stepwise entry, we found that structure was highly related to satisfaction with knowledge gained and that interaction was also related, although less so than structure. None of the other variables were statistically significant. Focus group and interview comments from the learners support the quantitative findings with the exception of distance. Where learners did not feel the social presence of the instructor or other learners, learning was negatively impacted.

Research Question 2: Does the learning orientation of learners vary across degrees of distance?

Correlations between learning orientation and the level of distance were not statistically significant (Cramer's $V = .15$). The qualitative data collected again supported this finding. Learners chose the level of distance for reasons that had nothing to do with their learning orientation.

Research Question 3: Is learning orientation related to educational philosophy?

Again, the correlations for this question were not statistically significant (Cramer's $V = .18$). Qualitative data was not collected for this question.

Research Question 4: How do learners create, maintain and use a learning community to foster individual and collective learning?

Learners in general defined learning communities as involving learners with shared learning goals, exchanging ideas, assisting each other, and having an element of trust among the learners within the community. Again, structure of the course played an important role; if the course required learners to work together, community often developed. Learners indicated that courses requiring learners to interact on a personal level early in the course were more likely to develop into learning communities. The degree of distance within the course did not make a difference in how and whether these learning communities developed. Rather, a sense of trust and of shared hardship as they

worked through the course assignments was seen as more important by these learners. In situations where communications were considered inappropriate, developing communities were derailed or never began development.

The results of this study offer important considerations to those who develop and teach courses at all degrees of distance. Courses must provide sufficient structure for all learners, and interactions must be appropriate for the course content. Learners enroll in distance courses for many reasons, often having nothing to do with their learning orientation, and the needs of these learners must be considered when structuring courses. In addition, learners will develop and use learning communities to aid their learning when first given opportunities to develop personal relationships and trust with their fellow learners. Guidelines on communication among learners, and monitoring of ongoing communication within the course is crucial to developing communities.

