

# PERSONALITY AND ONLINE LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comparative evaluation of two pilot online courses with their traditionally taught counterparts in a University of Hong Kong with the purpose of identifying particular characteristics of effective online learning. Students enrolled on two online courses were compared with their peers who were enrolled on the equivalent classroom based courses. Student satisfaction measures were taken from participants in both modes of delivery and compared with student learning style measured using the Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire. We find in this study that Extraversion/Introversion shows potential as a predictive measure of student satisfaction in online/blended learning modes of delivery, and Reflector learning style is correlated with high reported student satisfaction. This study suggests that the traditional classroom-based learning experience might not be as satisfying for Asian Reflectors as an online blended mode of delivery, and Western universities would be well-advised to consider this when planning programmes with an internationally diverse student population in mind.

## KEYWORDS

Online learning and blended learning, Personality, Learning styles, Student satisfaction

## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, online learning is perceived as an effective method of instruction. Much recent educational research has focused on examining the purposes and situations for which online education is best suited. Typically, this research has concentrated on five main areas:

- What are the particular characteristics of effective online students and teachers?
- Is online learning and teaching as effective as traditional face-to-face teaching?
- What factors determine the most appropriate use of technology in an online teaching situation?
- How important is teacher-student and student-student interaction in the online learning process?
- What cost factors should be considered when planning or implementing distance education programs and how are those costs offset by benefits to the learner?

This paper is largely concerned with the first of these areas and provides a comparative evaluation of two pilot online courses with their traditionally taught counterparts. Students enrolled on two online courses were compared with their peers who were enrolled on the equivalent classroom based courses. Student satisfaction measures were taken from participants in both modes of delivery and compared with student learning style measured using the Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire (2000).

## LEARNING STYLE AND ONLINE LEARNING

Terrell & Dringus (2000) investigated the effect of learning style on student success in an online learning environment and concluded that institutions offering online education programs should give consideration to the different learning styles of their students because these could impact significantly on academic achievement. The effect of learning style on student success in online learning has been extensively researched and so will not form the focus of this study (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Souder, 1994; Ridley & Sammour, 1996; Diaz, 2000a). In this study, the relationship between learning style and student satisfaction in the two online applied psychology courses will be investigated because research into the link between learning styles and student satisfaction, in Asia in particular, remains rare.

Diaz & Cartnal (1999) demonstrated that local health education students enrolled in an online class are likely to have different learning styles than equivalent on-campus students. They concluded that online students were more independent and on-campus students were more dependent. In this study, the learning styles of the online students and traditional students will be further investigated and correlated with their reported satisfaction with the learning experience.

In acknowledging their debt to Kolb's (1984) work on learning and the identification of learning styles, Honey & Mumford (1986) identify a different four stage process from Kolb's Converger, Diverger, Assimilator and Accommodator. They identify four styles which they call Activists, Reflectors, Theorists and Pragmatists. The characteristics of each style, as described by Honey and Mumford (1986), are attached in the Appendix. These learning style preferences appear particularly appropriate for a comparative study of this type because they are based on the idea that students pick up habits in relation to learning which they regularly utilize. According to the theory, the authors would expect the characteristics of Reflectors and Theorists to be most suited to online learning, and therefore to produce the highest satisfaction levels. Activists and Pragmatists might be expected to produce the highest satisfaction levels in the traditional mode of learning. Therefore, these are the correlations being primarily tested in this research.

## SOME OTHER KEY FACTORS

A summary of key research studies in this area yields some conflicting findings relevant to the current research. Egan *et al.* (1991) concluded that conventional instruction is generally perceived to be better organized and more clearly presented than online education. However, Martin and Rainey (1993) found no significant difference in positive attitudes towards course material between online and traditional education. In addition, research by Souder (1994) indicates that achievement on various tests administered by course instructors tends to be higher for 'distant' as opposed to 'traditional' students.

Perhaps one key factor inherent in all of these seemingly contradictory findings is the design of the instructional material, irrespective of whether it is delivered online or through more traditional means. Many teachers and researchers (E.g. Wood, 1997; Littlejohn *et al.* 1999) point out that the organization and reflection necessary to effectively teach online often improves an instructor's traditional teaching. This is a theme continued by Downing (2001) who identifies the eventual success or failure of online teaching as largely due to the same factors that have always been central to the provision of a quality learning experience. These factors include the energy,