

0067

## **One Size Fits All, Or Does It? Students' Perceptions and Attitudes to Contributing To e-Learning Activities**

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### **Background**

Virtual learning environments are fast becoming an expected medium of interaction within educational settings. The growth of computer-aided learning (CAL) or e-learning has had a significant impact on teaching and learning in recent years within educational settings and the fast pace with which it has been adopted has significantly impacted on the teacher's ability to evaluate its use effectively.

The impact of virtual learning has created a 'gold rush' for educators to develop technology that satisfies the perceived expectations of learners. Educators are indefatigable in their efforts to achieve educational excellence, proffering a 'flexible learning' environment for all. But is this rush for the gold pans an illusory one, are they just chasing 'fool's gold'? There is much research exploring teacher's perceptions on strategies as to what they view the student wants on the online learning platform. But what do the learners, those nuggets of gold, feel about virtual learning environments? Are educators listening what they actually need?

### **Research Questions**

This paper outlines the key findings from a predominantly qualitative pilot study exploring the perceptions of students in their final year of a BA programme in a Higher Education establishment. The study explores the perceptions of students to ICT and online learning generally. Further attitudes towards contributing and learning in an e-learning environment are examined in order to inform future practice

### **Methods**

Data was collected from 54 students attending the final year of a BA programme in a HE establishment in the South East of England. Students were aged between 22 and 57. A total of 43 responses to questionnaires were received and 54 students responded further to in depth questionnaires in this pilot study. Students were employed within the early year's sector. They were released from full time employment for one day a week to attend the study at the HE establishment.

Data was collected, exploring students' perceptions and attitudes to their experiences of e-learning environments, motivations and inhibitors to accessing e-learning as a medium for learning. A thematic approach was adopted for questionnaires and interviews and analysed using discourse analysis.

### **Frame**

A predominantly qualitative case study approach forms the methodological framework for this study. Questions and interviews were analysed using a predominantly thematic approach. Framing an understanding of student perceptions and attitudes to e learning environments is presented in light of the data. A deductive approach was adopted, linking ideas presented with theoretical ideas which added substance to this study.

### **Research findings**

This study reports on student views of contributing to online discussion boards on the University's virtual learning platform (Blackboard). It sought to establish the factors that affected participants contributing onto such discussion areas. From responses elicited and tracking of online discussion boards, findings were mixed with some participants finding the experience "cold and clinical" and participation encouraging a "faceless society". Yet others embraced online learning experiences, recognising them as an essential tool in the learning package. Further qualitative aspects of this study illustrated that many participants, although finding e-learning a valuable tool with which to enhance and elaborate learning, considered it was one that should be used in conjunction with other mediums of instruction, particularly face to face instruction. This study also intended to explore whether there was any correlation between age of participant and their perceived ability using a virtual learning platform. The majority of participants perceived themselves as experts. Those that did consider themselves to be 'novice' fell into age brackets 35 and above. This study provided valuable information to aid further development of e-learning packages and highlights the importance of understanding the individual needs of students in order to design mediums under which they will thrive and be motivated to learn.