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Learner Intent and Online Courses

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Abstract

As the Internet and the use of technology becomes more prevalent in education, promised educational benefits have not always materialized. And the advantage of using technology to enhance a learning experience does not always lead to learning. There are many factors that affect learning. Of these, a student's desire to learn may be among the most significant. Online learning offers many potential benefits but tends not to produce learning unless the participating students' main intention is to learn and not just to get the course done. When the design of online courses deliberately or inadvertently promotes course completion as a primary goal or when the content and activities required of the online learner are too easy, students often abandon any real intention of learning. Understanding learner intent is especially important in online learning situations. Yet instructional designers have typically avoided concepts like volition and intent. These more illusive components of learning may provide valuable insights leading to a better understanding of how we should teach and design online courses.

When students fail to achieve desired expectations, teachers often describe student performance in terms of "not working to potential" or "capable of better work." I myself have used these phrases when attempting to explain to parents why their child failed to learn. A common complaint is that many students attempt to get through school without exerting the necessary intellectual activity and effort (Sierpinska, 1994). A vital question for anyone attempting to facilitate learning is, "How can I help this person work to his or her full potential?" In fact, one might conclude that this is the central aim of the entire discipline of instructional psychology and technology.

The fundamental theory upon which the discipline of instructional design rests is based on the methodology associated with instructional systems design (ISD). In this methodology a student's failure to learn is usually considered to be either the result of a skill deficiency or an unsuitable learning condition (Mager & Pipe, 1984). The solution is either to train the students or to alter the learning situation. Typically an instructional designer is charged with developing quality instructional materials that when presented to students in an efficacious learning environment result in the desired learning (Richey et al., 2001). Still, despite the best efforts of educators to provide quality instruction within a beneficial learning environment, many capable students do not learn. On the other hand, students often learn in spite of severely inadequate instruction and less-than-perfect learning environments (Keller & Suzuki, 1988). One might logically conclude that much of the learning success attributed to instructional design may be caused by factors other than the quality of the stimulus materials presented to students.

Sivasailam Thiagarajan suggests that this is because traditional ISD learning models "cling to a wrong world view" (Gordon & Zemke, 2000). Thiagarajan's complaint is that current ISD learning models have adopted a fundamentally flawed view of the student. The ISD model places little emphasis on the fact that each learner approaches an educational opportunity with an assortment of abilities, interests, aspirations, expectations, habits, and preferences (Gibbs, 1992). Perhaps the goal of instructional psychology and technology—to facilitate learning by emphasizing the impact of instructional materials—is incomplete. Clearly there are many factors other than instruction and environment that affect learning. Key among these additional factors are the affective and conative characteristics of the learner (Anderson & Bourke, 2000). Perhaps the field needs to consider more thoroughly how the learner ultimately decides not just when he or she will attempt a learning activity, but also how much effort he or she will expend toward the complete capture of that learning.

In line with this thinking, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) believe that actual learning behavior is more accurately predicted by a learner's intent. While Brentano (1973) asserts that all willful behaviors are preceded by the formation of intent, learner intent is a student's intention for the learning expected of him or her in a specific learning situation; learner intent is an internal mental representation of a student's aim and commitment to fully achieving the desired learning. Intentionality, or one's ability to volitionally form intent and willfully act on their chosen intent (Rychlak, 1997), makes it possible for learning to become an intended goal rather than an incidental outcome (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993).

Yet while many researchers have examined ways to improve learning, few have studied the effect of learner intent on learning. Researchers and instructional designers have typically avoided the conative aspects of learning, considering them to be unimportant or too difficult to measure (Rychlak, 1997; Snow, Corno, & Jackson, 1996). However, these more illusive components of learning and teaching may provide valuable insights leading to a better understanding of how we should teach (Osguthorpe, 2000).

With the advent of Internet technology, understanding learner intent becomes even more important. The advantage of using technology to enhance a learning experience brings with it new challenges. A concern among educators who have considered online learning is the loss of personal contact between themselves and their students (Weiss, 2000). Often effective learning is the result of enthusiastic teachers who inspire exceptional learning efforts from their students (Pratt, 1998). When the teacher is removed as the director of learning and students are required to learn more independently, they are no longer able to rely on the regulated learning controls and motivations that the traditional classroom previously provided. Often the completion rate plummets. If we better understood what influenced a learner's intent in these situations we might be able to develop strategies that would promote more effective online learning. This paper summarizes research findings related to the concept of learner intent in online learning situations.

Method

This study explored the meaning and function of learner intent for students taking online university courses in a formal educational setting. Regarding students enrolled in online courses, the study addressed the following questions:

1. How do students in online courses describe their intentions toward the learning expected of them?

2. How does intent for the expected learning change, if at all, from the beginning of the course to the completion of the course?

3. How do students in online courses explain changes in their intentions towards the learning involved?

A total of 20 students participated in the study during an 8-week period while enrolled in online university courses. The online courses were electives taken in fulfillment of each student's undergraduate requirement. These students responded by e-mail to weekly questions about the course and their intent. At the end of their instructional experience, face-to-face interviews were conducted to verify the correctness of the transcripts and allow the participants to elaborate on their comments. The summative interview also allowed for focused inquiries into the students' experience.

The results of this study are based on the learning experiences of student participants as they experienced learning online. Yet, even when students take the same online course, no two will have exactly the same experience as the context and conditions for each student is unique in some way. Still, each of the stories inform our understanding of how learner intent develops and how this intent affects learning. Analyzing each case helps us better understand intentionality and the formation of learner intent.

Defining Learner Intent

Intent is a relatively common term that appears to be readily understood by most people (Zimmerman, 1984). Nevertheless, despite its familiarity, our ability to characterize the true essence of one's intentions has proven difficult and the question of how best to define intent has been the focus of much debate and disagreement among scholars (Pervin, 1983); most learning theories simply ignore the concept of learner intent altogether (Snow, Corno, & Jackson, 1996).

In this research, learner intent is understood as a conative construct, the result of a volitional decision making process. Constructs like intent are not considered to be behaviors; rather they are aspects of human nature (Snow, Corno, & Jackson, 1996). Learner intent is an internal representation of a person's beliefs, values, aims, as well as the reason and purpose for participating in the learning activity. One's intentions are formed naturally in the mind and are assumed to capture all the motivational factors that may have an impact on a behavior; nevertheless intent is separate from both motivation and action even though learner intent often determines how hard a person is willing to try in order to learn (Ajzen, 1988; Bandura, 2001; Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985). Still, while we can derive a definition from the literature, research into understanding how learner intent is formed, how it fluctuates, and what causes learner intent to change remains a largely unexplored area of importance.

How do students describe their intentions toward the learning expected of them?

Most students had no difficulty talking about learner intent. Participants in this study, however, described their learner intent in relation to their learning goals. Although learners mentioned several motivations, they had but two goals: course completion or learning. Course completion implied obtaining acceptable grades while learning meant mastering new knowledge or developing new skills. These goals were not mutually exclusive; often students declared both as reasons for initiating a learning activity. The learner intent associated with course completion,

however, often superceded any real commitment to learn when students were faced with deadlines and other conflicting intentions.

Academic achievement itself is not an indicator of learner intent. Grades do not reveal the mental striving involved, the commitment to learn, the knowledge mastered, nor the duration of the learning. When motivated primarily by grades, however, students talked about intending not to learn but just wanting to "get it done". The goal of seeking a grade seemed unable to produce the type of learner intent typically expected of students by instructional designers and educational practitioners. And while academic achievement is admired, I agree with Schiefele (1991) who claims that prevailing concepts of achievement motivation are insufficient. They assume that the most worthy motivation is academic achievement. This overlooks the content to be learned. It neglects the possibility that students come to like their subjects and learn because they value being engaged in the learning process. It neglects the intrinsic value of learning and the individual growth for the learner.

Students who seek academic achievement alone do so as a *problem action* (Nelson & Stolterman, 2003); they expend learning effort only to solve a perceived problem. Their willingness to engage in learning activities often stems from a need to succeed or from a fear of failure. Learner intent formed as a result of having task completion as the primary goal appears to consume more energy than it generates. This type of intent did not energize students; they rarely indicated a desire to do more than what was minimally necessary to pass the course. They preferred to get the course done, expending the minimum amount of effort in the least amount of time.

In contrast and without exception, all participants in this study regarded learning as a worthy endeavor. They saw intrinsic value in actually learning something. By nature intentional learning is a *design action* (Nelson & Stolterman, 2003) based on an intrinsic value associated with learning. Associated with the goal of learning, students talked about intending to honestly do the work or actually studying the material to understand it. This type of intent was energizing; it animated students, encouraging them to think about what they were learning, inspiring them to do more.

How does intent for learning change? and How do students explain changes in learner intent?

Often students reported differences in learner intent from course to course. They also indicated changes in learner intent during a course. For some, learner intent seemed not to be fully formed until after the course began. Students could only decide how committed they were to the learning involved once they more fully understood what was expected of them and what their other commitments would be. Until they fully understood what was expected of them, they often acted with habitual intent based on an imprecise understanding or perception of the course.

> If I don't like the teacher or the way the class is run then I forget that I wanted to learn what I am studying and try to just get through the course. (Transcript Student F3.1)

> My attitude towards the class has changed . . . because I feel differently about the material, the teacher, or the applicability of the material. (Transcript Student F3.2)

> My intent [for my other class] probably [formed] with that email [the instructor] sent out. He said please don't call me, this is an online course so lets do everything through email.

> And that's when I knew there was not going to be that support system. To tell you the truth I think that I will do OK in the course; I think I'll get a decent grade and I pulled some things out of it . . . but my attitude was not as good. (Transcript Student M1)

> My desire to learn decreased as I got into the course . . . It was about a month into the course . . . I got busy with other things and I got sick. I got distracted with another class and then I wasn't in the mood. I had other things to do and just kept putting this class off then justifying my actions thinking something else to be more important, and I guess it was, but not really . . . If something started to get boring I would kind of skim ahead and looking for where I needed to be and just read that part instead . . . I could always get 100 so that was nice. It was really easy . . . honestly, this class was not a high priority. This is a general elective (GE) course and everybody knows the stuff, or at least they think they know the stuff, and its no big deal . . . I started thinking it would be better just to get it over with. (Transcript Student F6)

Those who gave up the goal of learning did so as a tradeoff for academic achievement. This happened most often as the result of time deadlines or as a control for competing intentions, often towards the end of the course. Many students mentioned feeling overburdened with all that they were required to do. Still, when the intention of learning was abandoned, students spent a lot of time justifying their decision. The justification process for deciding not to learn all they could seemed to be an attempt to release themselves from an ethical self-betrayal (Albrecht, 1992; Warner, 2001).

Types of Learner Intent

As defined by Ajzen (1988), personality traits describe general response tendency over a wide range of situations. It is conceivable that if a person habitually chooses to learn with a specific type of intent, that strategy for learning might be considered to be their personality or their general learner intent. Yet this does not adequately address the issue of multiple intentions, the possibility that a student may concurrently form different learning strategies for a variety of learning situations. Likewise, identifying a general learner intent does not account for the possibility that students might decide to change their learner intent momentarily for a portion of a course or permanently for the duration of a course; data from this study suggest that students do just that.

Habitual Intent

It seems that at some point all students make a decision about their intent, either consciously or subconsciously. Many students, however, seem to have previously decided what they would do when faced with a particular type of learning situation. Brandtstadter (2000) suggests that, in fact, individuals do often forego extensive reflection about a situation allowing a particular class of stimuli to set off a particular habitual behavior. Several participants of this study seem to do just that. And having previously decided how they will handle a specific learning situation they acted with habitual intent. When faced with a learning situation that fits a preconceived model, they go into autopilot habitually. Consider the following conversation:

> Question: What would you say is the most worthy reason for taking a course?
> Answer: That would be for pure learning, someone that was just taking it to learn because they were interested in it and they had a desire to learn about it and they really wanted to understand it. You know they wanted to have a clear understanding of it whether or not they had to take it. I think someone that went in there and was really interested and wanted to go to all the classes and wanted to do the quizzes and that kind of thing. Learning it for yourself and not just for credits or because you have to take the class.
> Question: How often do you do that?
> Answer: Probably most the time.
> Question: But not this course?
> Answer: No, [this was a] general elective course.
>
> (Transcript Student F3)

Situational Intent

While situational intent may eventually become the foundation for a habitual intent, it differs in that it requires reflection. By this I mean that based on reflective reasoning after considering the situation, students choose to learn in a manner different to what they typically would. When speaking about his intent for a particular course, one student's confession that "this doesn't always happen" shows a situational intent. He apparently has a habit of learning differently given what he considers "completely irrelevant" required classes, but not this time.

Another kind of situational intent happens when students do not know about a class prior to taking it. When this happens they may be unable to fully form their intent. But as the course progresses and they get more information, an analysis of the situation allows them to finish the task.

> I didn't know anything about these classes and at the beginning I just said like I'm going to get an A out of this class. But as I start to read the material and think about what I'm studying I don't know, the grades aren't as important. (Transcript Student F33)

This would also help account for cases where students change their intent during the semester. Once students find out what is expected of them, after they start the course, often their intent varies either momentarily or permanently.

Attitude toward online learning

Although this study did not investigate the differences between online and face-to-face courses directly, the results indicate that students often approach online courses differently. For example, participants in this study did not feel their online courses were as important as the other face-to-face courses they were taking. When describing their online courses, comments like "not a priority" and "quite easy" were typical. In a study comparing online courses with classroom courses, students also indicated that a regular class provided them with a built-in time management tool (Davies & Mendenhall, 1998); they also seemed to feel more accountable in a regular classroom.

For many students it was far too easy for them to put off studying for their online courses. And when academic achievement is or becomes the student's primary goal, actually learning something often became an expendable objective. This becomes even more problematic when the student is operating with habitually poor intent, not taking the time to reflect on the situation and their learning. Several students indicated they completed their online course in a very short time, studying to complete assignments but not to really learn; in some cases, the design of the course seemed to encourage this. This is an aspect of online learning that institutions need to address. The administrative practices and the design of many online courses tend to promote unworthy learner intent by allowing such courses to be less intellectually challenging than their face-to-face counterparts and by focusing on completion. And while academic rigor is a problem that faces formal education in general, one of the conclusions of this study is that promoting efficacious learner intent is an important part of the solution.

Importance of Reflection in Improving Learner Intent

For some students, the process of forming intent is a continual struggle. They constantly debate over the worthiness of their intent for the learning in each learning situation. They seem to have a desire to learn but struggle with being able to accomplish that goal. They often acknowledge that taking a course for the grade alone is a less than worthy compromise, but end up doing just that. Still others seem not to spontaneously think about how their learning is progressing. They tend not to think about their persistence, striving, and the general worthiness of their learning efforts unless prompted to do so. And yet several comments from students in this study suggest that facilitating student reflection about their intent can positively influence learning. When asked about the experience of participating in the study, one student commented that

> I did a lot of thinking and then I'd read [the questions you were asking me to comment on] again; a few days later I'd answer so I'd have some time to think about them. And so it actually helped me get motivated with some of my other classes this semester, especially near the end because I started reevaluating my learning efforts. (Transcript Student F2)

Results like these lead us to believe that reflective reasoning, actually thinking about one's commitment to learning and the quality of that learning, can be a catalyst in the formation of efficacious learner intent; the more honest the reflection is, the more worthy the intent. It often determines whether or not learning occurs, and as Osguthorpe (2000) affirms, is a key determinant of whether the learning will last.

Conclusions

> Our examination of intelligence cannot take account of all [the] qualities, attention, will, regularity, continuity, docility, and courage which play so important a part in school work . . . for life is not so much a conflict of intelligence as a combat of character . . . . And now as a pedagogical conclusion, let us say that what . . . [pupils] should learn first is not the subjects ordinarily taught, however important they may be; they should be given lessons of will, of attention, of discipline. (Binet & Simon, 1916, p. 257)

In this statement, Binet, one of the principle architects of intelligence testing, acknowledges that there may be something more to learning than intelligence. I believe that that something is learner intent. Like Binet, Pervin (1983) noted that the closer we look at actual human behavior, the more we must be impressed with the complexity of factors influencing it. And so it is with learning online. In order to promote learning, it may not be enough to simply provide an interesting online course with good content. The results of this research suggest that when designing online courses, those involved should take into account learner intent and how it affects learning.

Online learning offers many potential benefits but tends not to produce learning unless the participating students' main intention is to learn and not just to get the course done. When the design of online courses deliberately or inadvertently promotes course completion as a primary goal or when the content and activities required of the online learner are too easy, students often abandon any real intention of learning.

The results of this study lead me to believe that reflective reasoning, thinking about one's commitment to learning and the quality of that learning, can be a catalyst in the formation of efficacious learner intent. What may be missing in many learning situations is learners reflecting on themselves as a learner, specifically, reflecting into their true intentions for learning.

How can educators help students learn to their full potential with online courses? I believe this question will be answered when we learn how to create and provide instruction that takes learner intent into account. And while I am sure that learner intent is important, it remains for instructional designers and educational practitioners to learn how best to promote efficacious learner intent in the students taking their courses. By addressing this question more directly, student learning will improve—not only as measured by traditional tests, but by long-term effects on the learner.

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