Reflections on Seeking the 'Invisible' Online Learner

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ABSTRACT

While much has been written regarding the learning behaviors of students participating in online courses, little research has been conducted to ascertain whether or not students are still engaged and actually learning even when not visibly involved in online discourse with other students and faculty. This presentation summarizes a preliminary study of inactive students enrolled in an online graduate course, augmented by further reflections of the author based on expereince and observation of online student behaviors over the next five years following the initial study. These findings attempt to identify how much time is spent in course related activity, what the reasons are for "invisibility," and if preferred learning styles influence their online behavior. The data shows that these students do, in fact, spend a significant amount of time in learning related tasks, even when not visibly participating, and they feel they are still learning and benefiting from this low-profile approach to their online studies. Preliminary analyses of course grades indicate that the mean grade is better for high-visibility learners than for no-visibility learners. Subsequent reflections reinforce these findings, and suggest that further research on so-called invisible learner is a critical area of invesitgation to better understand the dynamics of asynchronous learning and teaching.

INTRODUCTION

In 1999, I was asked to evaluate a new course as a pilot to an online Master' s of Distance Education curriculum offered jointly by University of Maryland University College and Oldenburg University (Germany). The following year, I had the opportunity to log into this same course as a faculty observer. And, in the next year, I revised and mentored this same course (Foundations of Distance Education), which I have occasionally taught over the next three years.

In these various roles, I acquired a keen interest in the phenomenon that has been referred to by Helmut Fritz as "witness" learners (1997), and which I have subsequently referred to as "invisible" learners (2002a, 2002b, and 2003). This inquiry resulted in a study of learners defined as such, and to several publications and presentations on various aspects of that research.

Now, with the added benefit of five years experience designing and teaching a variety of online courses in three graduate programs for three institutions, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on my own experiences as a practitioner, and to augment my prior investigation with more anecdotal and reflective observation and analysis regarding the so-called 'invisible' student. It is my hope that this earlier work, coupled with more recent practice, will generate further interest and an exchange of ideas and opinions among colleagues who are also intrigued by e-pedagogy, especially as it applies to the teaching-learning dynamic with students who appear less actively engaged in online discourse.

As interactive modalities increasingly facilitate the connectivity between students and teacher and students with other students, attention to the phenomenon of online interaction has gained heightened interest among those seeking to enhance the teaching-learning process at a distance. In considering the learning process in this particular environment, we might assume that it correlates closely to what

is visible (i.e., students' written words that appear on the monitor), and conclude that if there is no visible online activity, then little or no learning is likely to occur. Assuming that some learning might indeed occur even when students in online courses are not posting comments, what could be contributing to this tendency to "lurk" on the periphery of course activity? Are they "auto-didactic learners who prefer to remain as anonymous and autonomous as possible? Do they forsake opportunities to participate because thinking about what to write is more formal and less spontaneous than oral, face-to-face dialogue typically is? Do they frequently have a thought in mind that they are mentally composing, but others often seem to express the same idea before they can do so? Or are they simply having technical difficulties mastering the intricacies of the particular online platform being used?

What we do not see in asynchronous environments, literally and figuratively, is what else is going on that contributes to participants' learning. And it is easy to assume that unless learners in online formats are actively participating by posting frequent and relevant contributions, they may be benefiting relatively little from this more passive experience. Further, we might assume that unless students are posting comments that are directly related to the designated topic in, for example, a so-called threaded discussion forum, their learning is likely to be further compromised. Thus, for those students who, even if they do regularly log-on, but who do not engage at all in a particular discussion or who seem to be offering irrelevant or, at best, tangential remarks, we might conclude that they just don't contribute to or benefit much from the experience. Some distance education theorists argue that the dialog between student and teacher is the essential defining element of distance education; Holmberg stated that it should consist of guided didactic conversation (1981). It is curious that, although an historical tenet of distance education is the notion of learners autonomously constructing their own knowledge, instructors facilitating the learning process for distant students often become alarmed when dialog with them wanes.

Helmut Fritsch, director of the Center for Research in Distance Education at FernUniversitaet (Germany), offers an insightful appraisal of the level of student participation as measured by the frequency of online entries at specific points in time as a seminar progresses. He developed the notion of "witness learners" (i.e., students who are not actively participating via written contributions at a particular point, but who nevertheless are still engaged in the process as observers (witnesses) of the written exchanges taking place online between other students. He argues that learning, even in this more passive and less visible mode, is still occurring (1997). This was the working assumption that this study intended to investigate.

METHODOLOGY

An online master's degree program offered by the University of Maryland and Oldenburg University enrolled two sections of the Foundation of Distance Education course in fall 2000. Mid-way through the semester, it was noticed that twenty-four (24) out of a total of 55 students in the two sections had not actively participated (i.e., they posted no online messages during one or both of the modules wherein two prominent guest faculty, who had authored the required textbooks, were each conducting a week-long online conference with each cohort. Since the course format requires online participation to successfully complete academic requirements, and because the articulation of ideas (whether presented on paper or transmitted electronically) is viewed as an inherently critical element of the learning process, and so is seen as an activity which becomes a key criterion for ascertaining academic success.

A questionnaire was designed and administered to these seemingly "inactive" students, with the intention of identifying the primary factors influencing their non-participation in this particular component of the course. This author designed the instrument, then transmitted it electronically to the

target population in Fall 2000, midway through the academic term. It should be noted that this study did not take into account gender, native language, and whether or not this was the respondents' first online course

FINDINGS

All twenty-four students responded within the prescribed deadline. The first set of nine questions asked for data regarding total hours spent during the two-week conference period on various course related activities. The activity that commanded the greatest amount of time was reading assignments-an average of 12 hours over the two-week conference period. An average of 7.6 hours was spent logging-on to the course site, and reading others' comments.

The second set of questions posed to these low-visibility students asked them to identify factors (checking all that apply from a list of ten provided) that deterred them from posting comments. Three-fourths of them responded that they simply preferred to read what others wrote, or that they had thoughts but others made similar comments before they could post anything themselves. Only four students indicated that time constraints limited the amount of time they could spend writing comments.

The last set of questions was intended to obtain data related to students' learning styles in an online environment, and asked them to respond with a Yes or No to ten items.   All but one of the 24 respondents indicated that they were often processing ideas gained from the course even when not visibly participating. Nineteen (19) said they felt they were learning just as much or more from reading others' comments than from writing their own. About half identified themselves as "autonomous" learners less inclined to be active in group learning, regardless of the medium Many emphasized that they spend many hours on the course, and that they have gained much from the course, however little it may appear that they participated; only two confided that online courses did not seem to be their preferred way to learn.

Summing up respondents' comments regarding the primary reasons given for non-participation, the factor cited most often is that online learning is a new experience, and students need time to become acclimated to using it. Three admitted that their limited interaction online is similar to how they would behave in a classroom setting.   Several expressed intentionality to write comments more frequently, but didn't because by the time they were ready to do so, several others had already posted similar ideas. It was also clear that many were reluctant to offer online comments just for the sake of being "present." Four students admitted to being self-conscious about writing in this forum, one due to being a non-native speaker, another to being shy, and the other two were just not sure how to express themselves. Interestingly, two stated that they frequently compose messages, but didn't post them; it may well be that this behavior is a more common phenomenon than we might have initially conjectured.

A preliminary analysis of final course grades offers intriguing evidence that performance cannot be easily correlated to participation, or that frequent participation necessarily leads to better performance on graded assignments conference. The statistics show that the mean grades are better for the high visibility students than the no visibility students, yet low visibility students seem to do a bit better than the visible (average) students. This suggests that fully engaged, highly participatory learners tend to perform strongly in graded assignments, but that minimal online participation does not compromise grades and, in fact, may reveal that these low visibility students are dedicating more time to reflection and processing of course material that translates to stronger assignments than those submitted by students participating at an average level.

DISCUSSION

What might we discover, at least preliminarily, from this data? Regarding how much time is spent on course related activity even though little of it is visible to the faculty or to other students, we can state that our intuitive assumption is correct that course related activity, though mostly invisible, is taking place. Indeed, if over a two week period in the lives of busy adult students, each spends an average total of 44.6 hours engaged in these various course-related tasks, it must be assumed that some learning, is taking place in an ongoing fashion. While it may be tempting to question if students really do, in fact, spend as much time as is claimed on these activities, we must nonetheless accept their self-perceptions, as we are not in a position to perceive what actually occurs outside the online environment. It is quite remarkable, given that this respondent group was identified on the basis of low participation, that such a significant amount of time (i.e., 22+ hours per week) is presumably devoted to academic activity in this one course.

It is evident from the responses regarding reasons for low participation that a significant factor affecting online activity is a certain level of discomfort with the electronic environment, causing some hesitancy to contribute, and then the moment is lost. Students want to "get it right" before they commit themselves to online dialogue because the written format seems so "public." It may be that online discourse feels more formal and premeditated, while classroom discussion lends itself to a more spontaneous, informal exchange that is not recorded and therefore is less likely to be retained. That three-fourths of the respondents in our study indicated they prefer to read rather than write may suggest a learning style preference, but it may also relate to a lack of familiarity and facility with the medium. And, although it might be suspected that time constraints would be used frequently as an "excuse" for low participation, the data revealed that lack of time was a relatively negligible factor.

It is important to recognize that students' inclination to interact can depend on a variety of factors, including age, personality, learning styles, professional training, etc. Indeed, as Kearsley (1995) and others have noted, it may be that the more autonomous, self-directed learner is also more reflective, and so requires less stimulation and reinforcement from interacting with more "other-directed" peers. And it may be that the perception that there are avenues for interaction are just as important as actually utilizing them. Fulford and Zhang (1993) found that a key factor in student satisfaction in an ITV course was not the extent to which students actively participated, but rather their perception that interaction was possible and was occurring. This suggests that if courses are designed to provide interactive features, and there is evidence that interaction is taking place or even that the potential for it exists, than knowing it is available may be as important as actually utilizing it.

It should be emphasized here that we are not endorsing low-visibility behavior in online courses as a desirable trait; the purpose of the study is to begin to better understand those factors contributing to low visibility participation at certain points as a course progresses, and to determine if learning--related activities might be occurring "behind the scenes." Also, it is noted that this study did not take into account such factors as gender, native language, nor did it record whether or not this was respondents' first online learning experience.

REFLECTIONS

As indicated earlier, with the benefit of mentoring a variety of online courses in the five years since the 2000 study, I attempt here to further examine, through experience and observation, these same dynamics regarding the invisible online student, in hopes of better understanding and effectively supporting these learners. I have posed the following suggested questions that relate directly or indirectly to the phenomenon under consideration here (i.e., the student who is typically less active in an online course, in the sense that s/he does not participate as frequently as others in online dialogue

via postings). The rationale/motivation for posing these particular questions is that virtually (sorry for the pun here) every online course I have mentored includes one or more such learners, and they can present a special challenge to the distance educator who wishes to honor differing learning styles, while not compromising the course effectiveness. If we can understand what is going on with this learner behavior, then we might better adopt instructional approaches that appropriately accommodate the situation.

Should the online instructor be lenient in assessing the invisible learner's minimal participation in online dialogue if other course requirements are satisfactorily met?

The value and importance of online participation in threaded discussions must be emphasized from the outset of any online course wherein the instructor intends to factor that activity into student assessment. To not do so early only exacerbates the situation when the instructor eventually notes minimal participation by some, and so must then become the enforcer, possibly creating an atmosphere of "forced" interaction. To allow minimal participation by some students, with the thought that they will simply have to suffer the consequences later when graded, is likely to incur the ire of more engaged students, some who will go so far as to admonish the instructor for not explicitly clarifying expectations in this regard.

Given that online course environments are generally enhanced by a community of scholars actively contributing to the course, especially via online discussions, can it be argued that the invisible learner's behavior is parasitic, in that s/he frequently takes from, but seldom contributes to, the course?

The online instructor should make his/her position quite clear at the outset as to the parameters of participation and performance, and also what the rationale is for such expected behaviors. Explaining the nature and purpose of learning communities or other desired collaborative activities may not ensure constant participation by all, but at least it provides a cue from the instructor that one type of involvement is preferred over the other. Of course, if the instructor does not him/herself exhibit the type of online behavior expected of students, the demand for interaction becomes problematic to enforce.

Is there evidence indicating that invisible learners, despite their minimal engagement in online interaction with instructor and peers, actually do learn and perform on graded assignments as well as, or even better than, the more visibly active students?

In five years of observing and assessing the work of online students, the pattern described in the preliminary study conducted in 2000 seems to be consistent- that the invisible student generally does as well as the moderately visible student, but not as well as the highly visible peers. This does suggest, as was noted in my earlier work, that the so-called 'lurkers' may often represent the more reticent student who feel they are quite engaged, learning and satisfying course requirements, even if only posting minimally. Still, it must be said that there are typically one or two of these students who are not only not visible, but are also largely disengaged from the course, hoping to marginally satisfy course criteria and extract a passing grade.

Does the more "public" aspect of the online environment hinder certain types of learners from actively participating, or might the absence of face-to-face interaction actually encourage more expression of ideas and opinions?

I am convinced that, in many courses I have mentored in the past five years, the richness of online discourse has been significantly greater than it would have been with the same student populations in

classroom-based courses. This is especially the case, I believe with diverse classes containing, for example, students of varying ages and experience. Consider the following: In an issues-oriented course (American Education) I have taught both face-to-face (f2f) and online, I have always emphasized the importance of full participation in discussions. Despite my efforts to establish a supportive and comfortable environment, in either milieu, for the frank expression of opinions and ideas, the younger traditional-age students in my f2f classes have always been reluctant to express themselves as much as the older adult students who are returning to school. Yet, when this same course was offered for the first time online, with the same demographic mix, the degree of candor and boldness of expression among the younger students was noticeably equal to that of their older counterparts from the very first week's threaded discussion. It does seem to me that the online setting allows for a sense of anonymity, and tends to equalize the legitimacy of anyone's thoughts, regardless of age and experience.

Might the low visibility of some students be a function of little or no prior experience with online studies?

Students new to the online course environment are generally able to adapt rather quickly, and there is little evidence that their lack of familiarity with a particular platform inhibits their participation. A recent example of this is a course I am currently mentoring which was developed just prior to being offered and, consequently, enrolled students were informed relatively late that it would be delivered online. Four students, in particular, expressed annoyance or apprehension upon becoming aware of this, explaining that they had no prior experience with online courses and wondered if this would compromise their ability to successfully complete their studies. Yet, barely three weeks into the course, these same four students have all contacted me to express their pleasure with the course, and all are at least as visible as their peers, most of whom have taken online courses before. In fact, it is interesting to speculate if perhaps it is the newness of the experience that makes them especially active, as they are eager to master the medium as effectively as others do.

CONCLUSION

These anecdotal reflections on the 'invisible' learner generally reinforce findings of my earlier study. What I would now propose to do is to pose essentially these same questions in a follow-up study that could serve as a "book-end" project, complementing the first preliminary study, and these more informal conclusions based on experience and observation. This would provide a series of three investigations, to determine if the invisible online behavior chronicled here would remain largely consistent in a third study. And it is hoped that this would provide a sufficient amount of data and discussion to prompt others to conduct their own research regarding the 'invisible' learner.

From these analyses, can we arrive at any preliminary insights about what transpires "below the surface" in an online context that either helps or hinders learning? We can probably conclude that essentially the same "witness learning" phenomenon occurs in both formats- classroom and online. Certainly, most students are actively engaged in learning activities, often in an auto-didactic fashion, even though there may be relatively little obvious manifestation of that activity. It could be suggested that the image of an iceberg serves as a useful analogy here, in that most of its mass is hidden beneath the surface, just as is the case with our invisible students' learning.

It is premature to declare that a certain level of interaction in online discourse is an essential ingredient to student success or course effectiveness. All online learners are invisible to the teacher; that some are less visible than others is not necessarily an indicator that the benefits of the learning experience are being compromised. Those who are involved in the instruction and assessment of online learning are reminded that although the medium is technology-based, the actual learning

remains an inherently auto-didactic and invisible process, just as it is in courses at fixed times and places. We are reminded here of Dewey's observation regarding a critical element of the teaching process: to create conditions for "productive inquiry" that takes place independent from the teacher. In the online learning environment, teachers must be attentive to process as well as content to ensure that this inquiry is indeed occurring, however invisible it may be to them.

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