WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT?

A continuing theme of this publication has been the need to create learning environments that enable greater choice for students, a buffet of learning opportunities if you will. Rather than maintaining a fixed view of what all students want or what all students need, we need to recognize that students bring different interests, abilities and goals to each learning experience they encounter.

Distance educators know from their own experience that students differ in the amount of interaction that they require with faculty, with staff and with one another. At the British Open University, for example, approximately one-third of their students never interact with other people but rather pursue their studies independently. New York's Excelsior College reports that 20 percent of their students take up 80 percent of faculty and staff time, indicating a strong need for human contact, in contrast to the 80 percent of students who require very little interaction.

Recognizing that we need to treat students as individuals rather than as homogenous groups is a good start. In order to design more effective online learning environments, however, we must know more about how students differ and what kinds of pedagogical strategies will be most advantageous in responding to those differences. In this regard, an understanding of the research that has been conducted on learning styles can be a big help.

At the University of Central Florida (UCF), researchers Chuck Dziuban and Patsy Moskal are investigating the learning style patterns of students taking Web-based courses. They base their studies on the theory of William A. Long of the University of Mississippi Medical School. Long theorizes that students most accurately exhibit their preferences for knowledge acquisition and concept formation when they encounter ambivalence—the pull from dependence to independence that reflects counterpoised feelings toward a set of stimuli (e.g., interaction with parents and teachers, leaving home for college, the expectations of academic and social life on campus, or taking an online course for the first time).

According to Long, individuals have an affinity for one behavior type. The intersection of energy level and the need for approval yields four basic Long types defined by two dimensions (aggressive versus passive and independent versus dependent). Aggressiveness denotes the energy level students bring to the learning environment. Aggressive types are high-energy students, while passive types denote students low in energy. Dependency identifies the level of approval students need from others with dependent types thriving on approval and independent types having little need for such approval.

Long argues that the teacher's major role is to remove (or at least be aware of) obstacles that impair students' normal progression. His work has important implications for higher education because his four behavioral types provide predictable reactions to learning materials and instructors' presentation styles.

Here is a brief overview of the Long types:

Aggressive Independent (AI). These students possess high energy levels, are action-oriented, and have little need for peer or teacher approval. They lack judgment, express their thoughts and feelings impulsively, and tend to be disorganized and nonlinear, preferring to work independently. They resolve conflict through confrontation. They are challenging students, preventing teacher complacency. Often in leadership positions, AI students can develop into fresh and direct individuals who deal with situations as they encounter them.

Teaching strategies for working with AIs include offering choices, having clearly defined behavioral expectations, using independent activities and assigning them leadership roles.

Aggressive Dependent (AD) Like AI students, AD students possess high energy levels and are action-oriented, but they need peer and/or teacher approval. They are non-confrontational and easier to please, rarely expressing negative feelings like anger or disapproval. They participate in class, often seek out the instructor outside of class, and maintain harmony within group situations. They perform at or above their ability. AD students are high achievers found in honors courses, student government, service organizations, and athletic programs. Teaching strategies for working with ADs include providing ample opportunities for instructor approval, providing guidelines so that they do not take on more than they can handle and creating opportunities for them to mentor other students.
Passive Independent (Pi) Passive Independent students can be stubborn, non-communicative, non-participatory, or withdrawn, presenting formidable challenges to both parents and teachers. They resist pressure from authority and are not concerned with approval. They are at great risk in academic settings because they resist the ‘systemic’ continuously (e.g., they don’t meet deadlines). Pi's prefer to work alone. They are particularly baffling when manifesting superior ability yet behaving in ways contrary to their own best interests. They may present a poor academic self-concept from long-term underachievement patterns. Teaching strategies for working with Pi's include establishing short-term goals and offering as much flexibility as possible.

Passive Dependent (PD) These students are affectionate, gentle, sensitive, non-confrontational, and extremely compliant. The PD's need for approval dominates parental, peer, and teacher relationships. They are highly sensitive to the feelings of others, and they perceive disagreement and criticism as personal rejection. They are always at risk (e.g., if you tell them to tie the right shoe, they will not tie the left shoe because you didn't tell them to). As PDs mature, their excessive need for approval becomes the mark of a gentle, caring human being. Teaching strategies for working with PDs include establishing clear and complete directions for accomplishing tasks and providing a great deal of encouragement.

In studying the relationship between Long types and students taking Web-based courses at UCF, Dziuban and Moskal have found a number of interesting things:

- Most UCF students who go online exhibit a style that profiles high achievers. ADs emerged as the majority of online students. These students fit the superior academic profile and usually excel in almost any environment.
- All Long types are evenly represented in face-to-face general education courses but not in comparable Web-based classes.
- Passive learners, both independent and dependent, are underrepresented in UCF's online courses.
- Independent students may not be attracted to online learning because consistent and continued engagement is required.
- Those students who are underrepresented by learning style in UCF's online courses are the students that might best benefit from this teaching modality.
- Satisfaction with online courses is minimally related to learning styles.

Although UCF found variability in satisfaction levels and willingness to enroll in additional online courses across reactive behavior patterns, most respondents posted an overall positive assessment of their Web-based experience. Most students felt that online instruction was superior to traditional classes.

- 58% of ADs and 65% of PDs indicated that they missed the traditional classroom's face-to-face interaction.
- AIs and Pi's indicated less need for face-to-face interaction than their dependent counterparts: only 16% of AIs and 10% of Pi's indicated lack of face-to-face interaction as a negative.

Dziuban and Moskal offer one framework to understand differences in learning styles and there are many others. In each case, researchers encourage us to think creatively about how to design course structures and activities that work well with diverse types of students. Information technology offers us the capability of developing individualized strategies to address student differences. Taking this approach, however, requires significant effort and real change. It requires us to both understand and identify the learning styles of all students and to offer many more options within our courses (both in-class and online) that are compatible with those styles. The effort is worth it, it seems to us, if the result will be greater learning successes for our students.

[For more information about UCF's research, please contact Chuck Dziuban or Patsy Moskal.]

—CAT

WHAT WOULD JUSTICE BRANDEIS SAY?

Identity theft appears to be the fastest growing crime in America. Armed with little more than a name, a mildly enterprising amateur can find a corresponding Social Security number and from there unlock a world of information about an individual, information that the individual might have thought was private and known only to his or her physician, accountant or academic institution. Your bank, your credit card company, even your State Motor Vehicle Department may be selling your name and possibly your Social Security number to anyone willing to ante up a few cents per name.

We have come a long way from Justice Brandeis’ right to be left alone. The Supreme Court recently seemed to extend Justice Brandeis to the 21st century in an Oregon case where a man, suspected of growing marijuana in his house, had his house surreptitiously scanned by thermal imaging in an attempt to detect the presence of high-intensity lamps. In that case, by a bare margin, the Court ruled the scanning unconstitutional. In his opinion, Justice Antonin Scalia asked, “The question we confront today is, what limits there are upon this power of technology to shrink the realm of guaranteed privacy?”

Indeed, does any one using the Internet have any expectation of privacy? And, does any organization that facilitates exchanges on the Internet have any obligation to meet its transaction partner’s expectations?

A recent seminar I attended broached this and a host of similar questions in the security/privacy domain. I was mildly surprised by the sanguine attitude of my educational community colleagues who unanimously were of the
opinion that there could be no expectation of privacy when making a transaction over the Internet—not e-mail, not for business, not even medical transactions. This is not to say that many didn’t feel that some expectation of privacy might be appropriate or desirable, only to say that such expectation would be futile.

The issue is not encryption—where the transaction partners do have an expectation of privacy. A ‘insecure’ web site to which one entrusts a credit card number for instance, does have an obligation to protect the specific data with which it has been entrusted. However, one should not expect that transmission security effort to extend to the realm of customer privacy. That same organization may well be selling your name and other personal information to anyone prepared to buy its customer list.

The recent spate of “disclosure” statements by financial institutions is instructive. Changes in the federal banking laws require all financial institutions to alert their customers to their privacy policies and provide an opportunity for them to “opt out” so as to protect their privacy. It appears that a very small minority of folks (less than five percent) have sufficiently disentangled the prose of these statements to realize that some overt action is required to protect their privacy.

Equally dismaying is the track record of bankrupt firms offering their customer profiles for sale. Information given voluntarily to a specific business partner suddenly becomes available to other businesses with which you may have pointedly chosen not to do business. In some cases, this is not just information overtly collected from customers, but information covertly gathered through the use of "cookies."

Institutions of higher learning have been slow, if not reluctant, entrants to the domain of e-commerce. However, we do have significant numbers of potential students meeting their application requirements over the Internet. An increasing number of institutions have Web portals linked to back office systems containing copious amounts of personal information about students. The burgeoning business of on-line coursework is yet another salient point through which personal information about individuals is potentially available.

As increasing numbers of students pass, or have collected, personal information to their academic institutions, we might ask, in the spirit of Justice Scalia, has technology shrunk their expectation that such personal information will be kept private? Do institutions of higher learning have an obligation to provide protection of private information that extends beyond that we currently observe in the commercial sector?

With the projected increase in for-profit educational ventures, many historic institutions of higher education will be seeking differentiators of those products, services and business methods that will distinguish themselves from their commercial competitors. A paramount concern for the privacy of its students would appear to be one area in which our historic institutions could distinguish themselves.

The difficulty in doing so is the antipathy toward secure systems on the part of educational institutions that view themselves as champions of free, open and unfettered access. Like so many of our defining issues, two strongly held values come in conflict—access and privacy. The problem can be likened to finding a guard dog that is mean enough to scare of burglars but sufficiently docile so as to not bite the postman.

Institutions of higher education could do themselves and their publics a big favor by helping to define Justice Scalia’s limits of technology to avoid further shrinking the realm of privacy so important to people in an open society. As institutions of higher learning are constrained by federal law as to what they can reveal about their students, the problem is not so much overt as inadvertent disclosure of personal information. To avoid the inadvertent or unplanned disclosure will require a major commitment to encryption and the assumption of the costs that go with the overhead required. Finding the right balance of openness and privacy protection is a difficult, but extraordinarily useful, endeavor.

—RCH

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UPCOMING LEADERSHIP FORUM EVENTS

STATE-OF-THE-ART LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: LESSONS FROM THE PEW GRANT PROGRAM IN COURSE REDESIGN

December 3, 2001, Orlando, Florida
February 25, 2002, Dallas, Texas

Co-sponsored by the Executive Forum in Information Technology at Virginia Tech

This seminar will present results from the second of three rounds of the Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign. Learn from faculty project leaders how to increase quality and reduce costs using information technology. Faculty from four institutions will talk about their models of course redesign, including their decisions regarding student learning objectives, course content, learning resources, course staffing and task analysis, and student and project evaluation. These models provide varied approaches that demonstrate multiple routes to success, tailored to the needs and context of each institution.

These seminars provide a unique opportunity for you to:

- Learn firsthand how to increase quality and reduce costs using information technology from successful faculty project leaders.
Find out how to design learning environments for the future by tapping the expertise of those who have done it.
Talk with experienced faculty from multiple institutions about how and why they made their redesign decisions.
Move beyond "today" and learn where on-line learning is going . . . find a model that will work for your institution.

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