

Assessing Web-Enhanced Courses and Student Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Though empirical and theoretical literatures in other disciplines suggest an important relationship between computerized education and learning styles, accounting education has yet to examine its importance. If optimal learning is dependent on learning style then faculty should be aware of these differences and alter instructional methods accordingly. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of learning styles and traits on academic performance and course satisfaction in a web-enhanced accounting academic setting. The Long-Dziuban Reactive Behavior Protocol is used to assess learning styles of students.

The results indicate that the learning styles and traits of students enrolled in web-enhanced courses do impact academic achievement as well as course satisfaction. Though no significant difference was noted in academic performance and course satisfaction between most learning styles, "passive dependent" students did not perform as well academically nor did they appear to experience as high a level of course satisfaction. In addition, students possessing the "hysteric" trait did not perform as well as expected while "compulsive" students performed better than expected.

Introduction

Though the use of the Internet in accounting pedagogy is growing, accounting educators are only beginning to examine its impact on student learning. Because more and more web-enhanced and online courses are being offered (Bigelow 1996; Bonne 1996; Brusilovsky 1996; Owston 1997), faculty and students must be provided with some assurance that web-enhanced education will meet expectations of a good education. Not only will students expect an education that is equal in quality to that provided by traditional offerings, they will expect a student centered learning environment, designed to meet their individual needs.

Empirical and theoretical literature suggests an important relationship between education distributed on the Internet and learning styles. This new technological environment provokes the need for a coherent theory of behavior patterns and learning styles associated with the delivery of this education. Understanding students' innate

behaviors helps us understand how they operate in the classroom, which will help us recognize and respond to diversity, thereby enhancing the teaching and learning process.

This paper examines the role of behavior patterns and learning styles in student performance in a web-enhanced classroom. Specifically, we examine the learning styles and traits of students found in the classroom and their success rates. In addition, we examine student reaction to the web-enhanced classes.

Literature Review

Though several studies have address the educational impact of learning styles on accounting students in the traditional classroom setting, (Walk and Cates 1994; Geiger and Boyle 1992; Geiger 1992; Ruble and Stout 1993; Geiger and Boyle 1994) no known studies have examined their impact on accounting students enrolled in computer enhanced courses. Other academic disciplines have begun to examine this impact. Boverie et al. (1997) found that only social preferences exist as a significant predictor of course satisfaction. Tyler and Baylen (1998) found that the majority of on-line students were extroverted and judging. Dille and Mezack (1991) found that students who were high on internal dimension of locus of control were more likely to succeed. Furthermore, they also noted that students who did not show a dominant learning style were more likely to excel at distance learning.

James and Gardner (1995) suggest that the instructional design components for distance education need to conform to student learning styles within a perceptual, cognitive, and affective framework. Verduin and Clark (1991) argue that instructors designing on-line/web-enhanced courses pay attention to the mode of learning preferred by students. Understanding students' learning styles helps us recognize and respond to diversity, thus enhancing the teaching and learning process and influencing the operation of the classroom.

The Long Learning Model

In 1985, Long developed a theory of reactive behavior that recognizes and responds to learning diversity in the classroom. The theory explains how young people react to their environments and the associated stresses. The foundation of his system, ambivalence, reflects counterpoised feelings toward a set of stimuli (i.e., interaction with parents and teachers, leaving home for college, the expectations of academic and social life on campus, or perhaps encountering an on-line course for the first time). His reactive behavior patterns constitute a trait theory of personality accounting for most learning styles encountered within the limits of normal behavior. Scrutiny of the Long model reveals that other factors, such as maturity and intelligence, mediate its interpretation. For example, an immature behavior in a student, say extreme stubbornness, is transformed by a more mature individual into a positive characteristic such as steadfastness.

According to Long, individuals have an affinity for one behavior *type* (See Table 1) that is associated with one to four ancillary *traits* (See Table 2). The types form at the intersection of two dimensions – aggressive versus passive and dependent versus

independent. According to Long, aggressiveness denotes the energy level students bring to the learning environment. Dependency, on the other hand, identifies students who have a high need for approval from their teachers and peers, while independent learners are not motivated by such approval. The confluence of the two dimensions for any individual gives an indication of their basic learning style.

The Types

Aggressive Independent (AI). Aggressive independent students possess high energy levels and have little need for approval from either their peers or teachers. AIs are more willing to express what they think or feel, often “blurting it out.” They can take or leave personal relationships and express no particular attachment to warm and supportive classroom environments. Aggressive independents are confrontational in class because confrontation is their preferred method for resolving ambiguity, stress, or indecision. AIs tend to be disorganized and non-linear, preferring to work independently. They are refreshing and challenging, preventing their teachers from slipping to complacency. Often they gravitate to leadership positions because they are able to proceed despite the consequences or the pressures put on them.

Often, aggressive independents lack structures that can help them organize their learning environment. Sometimes they struggle with required tasks. Their energy levels and superior ability, however, if coupled with other resources make them a real asset because of the dynamic and lively atmosphere they create. Their major struggle in learning is the “act now think later behavior” continually forcing them to make up for lack of judgment. As aggressive independents develop, they become fresh and direct individuals who deal with situations as they encounter them. Our job as teachers is to provide those external limits until they are able to formulate them for themselves.

Aggressive Dependent (AD): Aggressive dependents bring the same high energy levels to campus as aggressive independents but their need for approval channels that energy into productive tasks. AIs are high achievers found in honors courses, student government, service organizations, and athletic programs. They work by very mature standards often showing an amazing capacity for achievement. Aggressive dependents are non-confrontational, very eager to please, and in group situations spend most of their time maintaining harmony.

ADs are very participatory in class and seek out the instructor on a regular basis. They find real joy in their excellence because it brings them approval. However, their need for accomplishment can frustrate them, especially when they are unable to achieve their goals. These students can seem paradoxical because the high regard in which others hold them fails to satisfy them, often resulting in more pressure. As instructors, we must help them find a balance in their academic pursuits and mediate their need for approval by showing them that life goes on in spite of unobtainable perfection.

Passive Independent (PI). According to Long, the passive independent can present formidable challenges to both parents and teachers. Their passivity results in diminished activity in class, often showing itself through non-participation, poor attendance and missed deadlines. The independence becomes a passive resistance to authority that in

some cases baffles instructors. When confronted or stressed, the PI tends to shut down or withdraw, simply walking away. Often these characteristics are accompanied by the tendency to be non-communicative; presenting problems for the instructor who wishes to engage this student. Passive independents can be seen as loners almost never seeking out the teacher and many times expressing boredom with the course.

PIs face challenges on college campuses because it is in their nature to resist the expectations placed upon them. They are particularly baffling when they show superior ability and still behave in ways that are contrary to their own best interests. Often these students develop poor academic self concepts because they experience long range patterns of disappointment and underachievement. The challenge for instructors is two fold: first, recognizing that these students, who at first blush appear stubborn, lazy, and non-responsive are really PIs who may possess superior academic potential and second, developing strategies for engaging these students, while simultaneously giving them some latitude to exercise their independence.

Passive Dependent. Passive dependent students are pleasant, gentle, and extremely compliant. Their need for approval dominates relationships with peers and teachers so these young people are seen as extremely compliant. What one notices most about them is their sensitivity and willingness to please. Passive dependents will make tremendous efforts to do what is asked, but will go no further for fear of offending. Unlike aggressive independents, PDs almost never show anger or resentment and confronting the instructor is simply not an option for them. The passive dependent will rarely make a comment in class. If they do comment, however, and the instructor disagrees or criticizes, this student will almost certainly interpret this as personal rejection. Unfortunately, campus social life can present problems for passive dependents when the expectations of their peers conflict with those of other segments of society. On the positive side, as passive dependents mature, their excessive need for approval becomes the mark of a gentle and caring human being. PIs have potential for academic success. They simply require a bit more nurturing.

The Traits

The coloring traits associated with Long's theory interact with the types, sometimes serving to exaggerate tendencies and in others controlling or "dampening" them. One of the reactive behavior patterns may show any combination of traits or none of them.

Phobic. Phobic students develop focused fears regarding possible outcomes of their academic life, putting a "negative spin" on many events. They are very cautious when making decisions, carefully examining every possibility before reaching an outcome. In extreme cases, phobics agonize over decisions that other students would not give a second thought to – whether or not to take one of their required classes fully on-line, for example. On the other hand, phobics do not make rash decisions for which they must compensate later. They tend to be excellent at situations involving analysis because most relevant components are identified and carefully examined.

Impulsive. In some ways, impulsive students are the antithesis of phobics. They never run out of time on a multiple-choice examination because if they don't know the

answer, they pick any choice. Their primary tendency is to be erratic, acting before they think and making up for it later. In class, they will give an answer before you have finished the question. Unfortunately, they may take a fully on-line course without knowing why and without having the minimal technical prerequisites. Impulsives add energy and vitality to almost any classroom they encounter. Making a decision is not a problem. The consequence of the decision can be.

Obsessive-compulsive. Obsessive compulsive students are careful, thorough, and methodical in their work habits. Organization is their forte. Obsessive compulsives will stick to a task until it is successfully completed and in more extreme cases have a tenacious work ethic. Certainly, this trait is associated with academic excellence and achievement. When the obsessive compulsive trait is attached to the aggressive-dependent type in a student with superior academic ability, the result is a potentially successful candidate for our finest universities and professional schools. This trait, however, can have its down side when taken to extremes. Lack of spontaneity and the inability to refrain from continual achievement can exhaust and burn out these students.

Hysteric. Hysteric students are dramatic and drawn to a crisis. This tendency presents a very colorful learning style, creating a delightfully histrionic classroom environment. At some level, hysterics love to be unhappy so the fireworks begin when they fail tests, forget an assignment, or the system goes down. There is a genuine creativity associated with this trait so the chaos they produce is worth it because of the quality of the solution. Innately, hysteric students are compassionate, and willing to help at any time. As instructors, we must help them see that approaching every circumstance as a crisis can be costly in terms of time, energy, and productivity. On the plus side, hysterics add enthusiasm and energy to class, often creating a learning environment that is positive and contagious.

The Study

The study was conducted using five sections of web-enhanced undergraduate principles of accounting courses taught by the same instructor.ⁱ Students access Internet information for the course through the use of Web-CT (See Goldberg et al. 1996 for a detailed description). After accessing Web-CT, students could read and obtain course notes, take/review answers for quizzes, read/post questions and announcements to bulletin board, and view grades for exams and projects. In addition, the students had access to chat rooms and e-mail addresses for all students in the class.

At the end of the semester, students filled out a questionnaire (See Appendix A) for extra credit concerning the use of the Internet in the course. The students were also asked to complete the Long/Dziuban Reactive Behavior Protocol to determine Long Behavior Type and Traits. This instrument has been validated as providing an accurate assessment of a student's position in the Long typology (see Dziuban and Dziuban 1997). Additional

ⁱ The students were not aware that the course was web-enhanced when they enrolled in it.

information was collected on student characteristics that might affect performance, such as gender, work status, ethnicity, gender, and race.

Of the 260 students who received grades in the courses, 226 students completed the questionnaire. Forty-seven point eight percent of these students were male. In addition, 70.4% of the students were white and 75.5% of the students held full or part time jobs. The average age of the students was 22.9 years and 47.6% held a junior standing in college.

Table 3 includes the self-reported distributions of Long types and traits. The majority of the respondents were Aggressive Dependent (AD) learners (51.3%), with the next highest percentage, 24.7%, being Aggressive Independents (AI). Approximately sixteen percent were Passive Independent (PI) and 7.5% reported to be Passive Dependent (PD). Respondents' trait assessments resulted in 56.8% reporting to be compulsive, 30.9% reporting to be phobic, 30.0% reporting to be impulsive while 18.9% reporting to be hysteric.ⁱⁱ The representation of learning styles is similar to that found in Dziuban's et al. (forthcoming) analysis of students' learning styles taking fully on-line courses though our sample showed a higher portion of student exhibiting the trait of impulsive and smaller percentage exhibiting the trait of compulsive.

The results of students passing the courses with a C or better by Long type and trait appear in Table 5. Even though only 76.5% of the PD students passed the class compared to over 90% for all other types, the Fishers Exact probability of .14 associated with the contingency table indicated that the success of passing the class is independent of type. These results could be due to only 13 students considering themselves passive dependent. When examining the trait of students passing the class, the results indicate that for compulsive and hysteric traits, the results are not independent of type. For students with hysteric traits, fewer students successfully passed the course than what was expected at the $p = .02$ level. This may suggest that learning and using the Internet may add an additional element of crisis for these students and hinder their educational development. For students with compulsive traits, more students successfully passed the courses than what was expected at the $p = .06$ level. This may be a result of these students' tenacious worth ethic and their full utilization of the Internet to successfully pass the course.

Table 6 presents the students' actual grade received in the courses by Long type and trait. PI students received the highest grades in the class with an average of 2.83 with PD students receiving the lowest grades in the class with an average of 2.05. A one-way ANOVA of grades received in the course (Table 7) shows that type is significant at $p = .043$ level. The Bonferroni Post Hoc Test shows Passive Independent students' grades to be significantly higher than PD students at a $p = .033$ level. This result is somewhat surprising since PI students tend to be stubborn, non-communicative, non-participatory or withdrawn and underachieving. Perhaps the ability to view the material when they want to at a convenient place and time allows them to perform at a higher level. Dziuban et al.

ⁱⁱ Respondents were allowed to choose one or more traits.

(forthcoming) suggests the PI students' success chance may improve by taking on-line courses. Not at all surprising was the fact that PD students did not perform as well, perhaps due to the computers not meeting their needs for affection by obtaining peer and professor approval. The performance of ADs is as expected due to their learning style. The AD students fit the superior academic profile best and usually excel in almost any environment. (Dziuban et al. forthcoming). Through one-way ANOVAs, Table 6 also shows that students with compulsive traits outperformed all other students at a $p=.036$ and student with hysteric traits performed significantly worse than all other students at a $p=.032$ level. These results are consistent with Table 5 and Long's theory that compulsive students tend to be highly organized and motivated while hysterics tend to be reactionaries and are more social than academic.

Table 8 shows the results by gender of students successfully passing the course with a grade of C or higher by Long type and traits. At the $p=.08$ level, a higher percentage of PI males and PD females passed the course than what was expected. Though no significant differences were found between males and females by traits of phobic, impulsive and hysteric, a higher percentage of compulsive females passed the course more than compulsive males at $p=.04$.

Tables 9 and 10 look at student reactions by type and trait to taking a web-enhanced course. The Fishers Exact test results in no significant difference by type or trait when the student responded to a question about their willingness to take another web-enhanced course or to their level of course satisfaction. When looking at both type and trait, over 80% of the students in each category indicated that they definitely or probably would take another web-enhanced course. When examining course satisfaction by type, Table 10 shows that while only 70.5% of passive dependent students said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the course, over 80% of all other types said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the course. When examining course satisfaction by trait, being satisfied or very satisfied ran from a low of 77.3% for impulsive students to a high of 89.1% for compulsive students.

Conclusion

Results indicate that web-based learning may not be equally suited to all those who use the environment. We found that students possessing the "compulsive" trait performed better than expected, but students possessing the "hysteric" trait performed worse than expected. In addition, we found that compulsive females outperformed compulsive males. Furthermore, we found that PI students significantly outperformed PD students along with PI males and PD females out performing their counterparts. There was no significant difference in the performance of AIs and ADs in the courses. This finding is somewhat noteworthy because usually ADs with their strong work ethics outperform all other types. Possibly AIs find that their need for independence is better matched in classes with a web-based component. Furthermore, we found that all learning types indicated satisfaction with the course and a willingness to take another web-enhanced course.

As the Internet becomes an important medium for educational delivery, more and more courses will be offered in a media enhanced or online format. It is important for all educators to understand its impact on the various learning styles of all students. If Dziuban et al. (forthcoming) is correct in the suggestion that the autonomy of the web-based environment is better suited to the PI type student, we must address what can be done to ensure that all student types are given the same advantage. As a result, further investigation must address significant components of Internet delivery and how each of these benefits or hinders the various types and traits along with gender differences. In addition, broader and more complicated issues such as retention and withdrawal in the Internet environment needs to be addressed.

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Table 1: Description of Long Behavior Types

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggressive Independent - high energy - action-oriented - not concerned with approval - speaks out freely - gets into confrontational situations • Passive Independent - low energy - not concerned with approval - prefers to work alone - resist pressure from authority | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggressive Dependent - high energy - action-oriented - concerned with approval - rarely express negative feelings - performs at or above ability • Passive Dependent - low energy - concerned with approval - highly sensitive to the feelings of others - very compliant |
|---|---|

Table 2: Description of Long Behavior Traits

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phobic - exaggerated fears of things - often feels anxious - often sees negative side - doesn't take risks • Compulsive - highly organized - neat, methodical worker - perfectionists - strongly motivated to finish task | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impulsive - explosive - quick-tempered - acts without thinking - frank - short attention span • Hysteric - dramatic - more social than academic - artistic or creative - tends to overreact |
|--|---|

Table 3: Demographic Data

<u>Description</u>	<u>Mean</u>
Gender ^a	47.8%
Race ^b	70.4%
Work ^c	75.4%
Standing ^d	47.6%
Age	22.9 years

^a Proportion of males

^b Proportion of whites

^c Proportion work

^d Proportion who were juniors

Table 4: Self-reported Types and Traits

<u>Type</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Aggressive Independent	56	24.7
Passive Independent	37	16.3
Aggressive Dependent	117	51.3
Passive Dependent	17	7.5
Total	227	
<u>Traits¹</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Phobic	70	30.9
Compulsive	129	56.8
Impulsive	68	30.0
Hysterical	43	18.9

¹Multiple Responses Permitted

Table 5: Received a Grade of C or Better in Course by Long Type and Trait

<u>Type*</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Fishers Exact Probability P Value</u>
Aggressive Independent	52	94.5	
Passive Independent	33	91.7	
Aggressive Dependent	106	91.4	
Passive Dependent	13	76.5	
All Types			.14
<u>Traits</u>			
Phobic	65	94.2	.32
Compulsive	120	94.5	.06**
Impulsive	59	88.1	.32
Hysterical	34	81.6	.02*

*significant at the .05 level
**significant at the .1 level

Table 6: Grades Received in the Course by Type

<u>Type*</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>	<u>P Value</u>
Aggressive Independent	2.56	.81	
Passive Independent	2.83	.97	
Aggressive Dependent	2.65	.96	
Passive Dependent	2.05	1.08	
<u>Traits</u>			
Phobic	2.65	.89	.705
Compulsive	2.73	.89	.036**
Impulsive	2.48	.99	.154
Hysterical	2.33	1.14	.032**

*significant at the .05 level
**significant at the .1 level

Table 7: One Way ANOVA of Grades Received in the Course by Type

	<u>SS</u>	<u>DP</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>P</u>	<u>SIG</u>
<u>Between</u>	7.307	3	2.436	2.767	.043
<u>Within</u>	193.675	220	.880		
<u>Total</u>	200.982	223			

Table 8: Passing the Course with a Grade of C or Better Gender by Type and Trait

<u>Types</u>	<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>		<u>Fishers Exact Probability P Value</u>
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	
Aggressive Independent Passive	28	(50.9)	27	(49.1)	
Independent Aggressive Dependent Passive Dependent	26	(70.3)	11	(29.7)	
	49	(41.9)	68	(58.1)	
	5	(29.4)	12	(70.6)	
All Types					.008**
<u>Traits</u>					
Phobic	38	(54.3)	32	(45.7)	.19
Compulsive	54	(41.9)	75	(58.1)	.04*
Impulsive	37	(55.2)	30	(44.8)	.16
Hysteric	16	(37.2)	27	(62.8)	.12

*significant at the .05 level

**significant at the .1 level

Table 9: Students Willingness to Take Another Media Enhanced Course

<u>Type</u>	<u>Definitely</u>		<u>Probably</u>		<u>Not Sure</u>		<u>Probably Not</u>		<u>Fishers Exact Probability P Value</u>
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	
	Aggressive Independent	18	(33.3)	29	(53.7)	6	(11.1)	1	
Passive Independent	13	(35.1)	18	(48.6)	5	(13.5)	1	(2.7)	
Aggressive Dependent	47	(40.5)	51	(44.0)	16	(13.8)	2	(1.7)	
Passive Dependent	6	(35.3)	8	(47.1)	2	(11.8)	1	(5.9)	
All Types									.98
Trait									
Phobic	27	(36.6)	34	(48.6)	7	(10.0)	2	(2.9)	.83
Compulsive	51	(39.8)	59	(46.0)	16	(12.5)	2	(1.6)	.77
Impulsive	20	(30.8)	35	(53.8)	8	(12.3)	2	(3.1)	.56
Hysteric	18	(42.9)	18	(42.9)	4	(9.5)	2	(4.8)	.44

Table 10: Course Satisfaction

<u>Type</u>	<u>Very Satisfied</u>		<u>Satisfied</u>		<u>Neutral</u>		<u>Dissatisfied</u>		<u>Very Dissatisfied</u>		<u>P</u>
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	
	Aggressive Independent	16	(29.6)	30	(55.6)		(11.1)	1	(1.9)	1	
Passive Independent	12	(32.4)	19	(51.4)	6	(16.2)	0	(0)	0	(0)	
Aggressive Dependent	37	(31.6)	63	(53.8)	14	(12.0)	1	(.9)	2	(1.7)	
Passive Dependent	3	(17.6)	9	(52.9)	4	(23.5)	0	(0)	1	(5.9%)	
Entire Table											.92
Trait											
Phobic	21	(30.0)	36	(51.4)	11	(15.7)	1	(.40)	1	(.40)	.96
Compulsive	44	(34.1)	71	(55.0)	12	(9.3)	1	(.80)	1	(.80)	.12
Impulsive	14	(21.2)	37	(56.1)	13	(19.7)	0	(0)	2	(3.0)	.12
Hysteric	14	(33.3)	21	(50.0)	6	(14.3)	0	(0)	1	(2.4)	.96