Facilitating and Dealing with Learner Differences in the Online Classroom

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This paper explores the challenges faced by teachers and educators in the online classroom, especially in light of existing learner differences among students stemming from intelligence, socioeconomic status (SES), culture, gender, among other factors. The author examines the characteristics of the online classroom and looks at learner differences as significant factors impacting teacher responsibilities in the online setting. Several challenges common to facilitated online learning (FOL) and independent online learning (IOL) in the online classroom are examined and brought into perspective as the author applies social science theories such as self-efficacy, multiple intelligences theory, social distance theory and comparative homogeneity, pedagogy and classroom management theories in analyzing and addressing these challenges. The author makes several recommendations for online teachers and educators to address the problems and challenges that are present in the online classroom and then explores the implications for teaching and learning. Finally, the author espouses a need for research into the major issue under discussion.

Key words: Facilitated online learning (fol), independent online learning (iol), online classroom, presence, school climate, school culture, pedagogy, computer mediated learning (cml), socioeconomic status (ses), efficacy.

Effective teachers are also effective facilitators who are capable of adapting their lessons to match the environment and learner needs. Similar to business strategists who must understand the environment in which they operate as they craft and design strategies, effective teachers must understand both the broader environment that encompasses school culture and school climate and the classroom as these affect teacher effectiveness and student achievement or performance (McFarlane, 2010a; Rowland 2008; Liu & Meyer, 2005; Houchard, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Hunter-Boykin & Evans, 1995; Wentworth, 1990; Araki, 1982). School climate reflects the physical and psychological aspects of the school that are more susceptible to change and that provide the preconditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place (University Outreach & Engagement of Michigan State University, 2004). School climate characterizes the organization at the school building and classroom level. It refers to the "feel" of a school and can vary from school to school within the same district (University Outreach & Engagement of Michigan State University, 2004). According to the University Outreach & Engagement of Michigan State University (2004), "School culture reflects the shared ideas, assumptions, values, and beliefs that give an organization its identity and standard for expected behaviors" (p. 1). Thus, online educators and teachers will behave consistent with expectations from school leaders or administrators and community stakeholders. The prevailing school culture and school climate will affect the degree of technology adaption and how pedagogical approaches and methods are developed and fostered in the online classroom.

In order to be effective in the classroom, whether in the traditional or online classroom teachers and other educators should have strong foundation knowledge and understanding of pedagogy or the basic principles of teaching and learning (Entz, 2006). The challenges posed by today's learners, the need to apply concurrent and emerging technology in teaching, and the demand for higher standards from graduates add to the traditional roles and functions of teachers, especially those who must swiftly

adapt their philosophy of teaching, methods, and ideas, while maintaining discipline in a new environment called the "online classroom" which makes teaching more challenging than ever before. The proverb, "It now costs more to amuse a child than it once did to educate his father" (attributed to Vaughn Monroe) is now the reality of today's teachers. Educating a generation of techno-savvy students with multiple distractions online is more than a challenge, especially when social distance or lack of "presence" detracts from the already deteriorated discipline existing in schools and society.

Teachers in the 21st century are not only challenged by the changing attitudes and values they must deal with in the classroom, but by increasing demands for greater accountability being placed at their classroom doors from school district leaders, policymakers, and various community stakeholders who are increasingly directing the blame for students' underachievement or lack of achievement toward teachers (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Rowland, 2008). The need to integrate and apply technology to the teaching and learning process poses an additional challenge, and is especially time-consuming and can be a heavy responsibility for teachers lacking technology training, and who are perhaps technology aversive because of their previous training and conservatism. In addition, those who are technology experts find themselves torn between emphasizing the technology and subject content, especially where students are more interested in learning to use and become preoccupied with the technology rather than the actual subject they must learn. Whether teachers or educators are teaching in the online or traditional brick mortar classroom, Eggen and Kauchak (2003) believe that four areas of knowledge define effective teachers: knowledge of content, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of learners and learning.

Effective teachers have a deep understanding of the topics they teach (knowledge of content), are able to represent the topics in ways that are understandable to learners (pedagogical content knowledge), are able to organize and maintain productive learning environments (general pedagogical knowledge), and understand learning and the characteristics of the students they teach (knowledge of learners and learning) [Eggen & Kauchak, 2003]. Effective online teachers like their brick-mortar counterparts must draw from all their knowledge contents in dealing with the problems and challenges of facilitating learning in the online classroom where multiple differences prevail from several factors or characteristics of both the learners and the nature of online teaching and learning. They must develop effective classroom management in the online setting in order to respond to students' needs and deal with challenges stemming from learner differences, technology usage, and other factors. Classroom management focuses on creating and maintaining an orderly learning environment, and discipline involves teacher responses to student misbehavior (Eggen & Kauchak, 2003). Effective teachers are high in efficacy; they believe they are responsible for student learning and can increase it. They are caring and enthusiastic, are good role models, and have high expectations for their students (Eggen & Kauchak, 2003).

Characteristics of the Online Classroom

What is unique about the online classroom that makes facilitating learner differences such a challenge is the lack of face-to-face or in-person contact where teachers and students can foster a more readily and germane understanding through the factor of presence. Presence as used here refers to physical presence and proximity which affects the social distance between persons in communication or interaction with the criterion that those engaged in social communication are face-to-face in real time and real world where they can readily observe and respond to gestures, total body language, and natural observable and implied communication cues in a personable and caring way. Social distance is the extent to which individuals share beliefs, customs, practices, appearances, and other characteristics that define their identity (Akerlof 1997; Leeson, 2008). There is a relationship between physical proximity and social distance and socially distant individuals share few beliefs, customs, practices, appearances,

and other characteristics that define their identity (Leeson, 2008). Individuals become close through proximity or presence and overtime share many characteristics in terms of agreement and social values. Leeson (2008) describes this as being comparatively homogenous. The online classroom depends highly on technology and the Internet, and the agreement by teacher and student or educator and learner to agree on time factor, since the factor of location has already been eliminated as a challenge to the teaching-learning process.

Online classrooms use Computer Mediated Learning (CML) to facilitate the teaching and learning processes (McFarlane, 2011a; McFarlane, 2011b). According to The Journal of Educators Online [JEO] (2010), "Computer Mediated Learning (CML) "occurs when an individual interactively learns (formally or informally, synchronously or asynchronously) about material via computer means where the learning materials and pedagogy are developed to take advantage of the available technologies" (p. 1) Computer Mediated Learning (CML) includes distance, online, electronic, virtual, distributed, blended and mobile learning. Many online classrooms use a variety of technological tools and strategies (McFarlane, 2011a). One of the most popular technological inventions used in online classrooms is the virtual learning environment (VLE), "a virtual learning environment (VLE) is a set of teaching and learning tools designed to enhance a student's learning experience by including computers and the Internet in the learning process" (TechTarget.com, 2008, p. 1). Dillenbourg (2000) defines a VLE as "a designed information space" (p. 3). Thus, this designed information space is the most salient and basic requirement of the online classroom as it allows teachers and students or educators and learners to retrieve, download, upload, and store information. Examples of VLEs that facilitate teaching and learning in the online classroom of the 21st century include Blackboard, WebCT, Lotus LearningSpace, Moodle, and COSE. More and better technologies are being developed every day to promote effective teaching and learning online (McFarlane, 2011a; McFarlane, 2011b).

The online classroom lacks physical space and that physical barrier which has been used for centuries to act as both a protective shield providing security, shelter, and peace from the outside world and its many interruptions. The online classroom is anyplace and anywhere and sometimes learners make bad choices as to where and when to complete assignments, take examinations, and complete other activities; sometimes in environments that are not absolutely conducive to the learning process. For example, sometimes students using laptops or other mobile devices will go to the mall or other environments where potential distractions can affect their attention. It is the responsibility of the online teacher or educator to provide students with tips and ideas on how to best maximize time and effort in course or lesson completion online, and tips offering information on such items should be included in course content.

Learner Differences and Teacher Responsibilities

One of the greatest differences in the online classroom for teachers, educators and instructors is dealing with learner differences. Students have differences in technology skills, technology appreciation, appreciation for the online learning environment, comprehension levels and skills, discipline which is essential for motivation and focus, and learning readiness skills. These differences stem mainly from intelligence, which is affected by both natural and devised factors including culture and environments. According to Eggen and Kauchak (2003) students differ in intelligence, socioeconomic status (SES), culture, and gender, each of which influences learning. Certain combinations of these factors place students at risk of not being able to take full advantage of their educational experience.

Eggen and Kauchak (2003) define Intelligence as the ability to think and reason abstractly, to solve problems, and to acquire new knowledge. Some theorists and experts disagree about the contributions of heredity and environment on the development of intelligence. Those who are in favor of the nature perspective argue that intelligence is genetically determined; while those in favor of the

nurture perspective contend that it is influenced primarily by children's cumulative experiences. However, the majority of experts today believe that intelligence is determined by a combination of the two factors. Some theories suggest that intelligence is a single entity; others describe intelligence as existing in several forms. Goleman (2001) believes that emotional intelligence is a unique form of intelligence which impact students' overall intelligence and creates differences in not only the affective faculty, but the cognitive as well as the psychomotor skills. Gardner (1983) proposes a theory of "multiple intelligences" consisting of eight different intelligences to account for a broader range of human potential in children and adults. These eight different intelligences are: (i) linguistic intelligence (word smart); (ii) logical-mathematical intelligence (number/reasoning smart); (iii) spatial intelligence (picture smart); (iv) bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence (body smart); (v) musical intelligence (music smart); (vi) interpersonal intelligence (people smart); (vii) intrapersonal intelligence (self smart); and (viii) naturalist intelligence (nature smart). With Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, the possibility for more types is even greater.

According to Gardner (1993) schools and culture focus most of their attention on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. However, Gardner (2000) continuing to build upon his theory of multiple intelligences argues that we should also place equal attention on individuals who show gifts in the other intelligences. Armstrong (2009) agrees with Gardner and argues that the theory of multiple intelligences proposes a major transformation in the way our schools are run. It suggests that teachers should be trained to present their lessons in a wide variety of ways using music, cooperative learning, art activities, role play, multimedia, field trips, inner reflection, and much more. Armstrong (2010) also believes that the theory of multiple intelligences has gained the attention of many educators around the country, and that hundreds of schools are currently using its philosophy to redesign the way they educate children.

The most common response to differences in ability has been to group students according to those differences. Within- and-between class ability grouping is common in elementary schools while tracking is prevalent in middle and secondary schools (Eggen & Kauchak, 2003). However, ability grouping can lower performance and stigmatize students in low-ability classes. Online teachers and educators have less challenge with this issue because their relationship with students tend to be more superficial and tend in many cases to have less potential for long-term mentorship and care.

Socioeconomic status (SES) includes parents' income, occupation, and level of education (Eggen & Kauchak, 2003). SES can strongly influence student attitudes, values, background experiences, and school success. Online teachers and educators should bear this in mind, understanding that online learners do have their share of social and economic problems in obtaining resources for learning, affording time for learning and are sometimes hampered by social obligations. In fact, some students are online learners simply because their socioeconomic circumstances are best managed by eliminating the need for travel and other traditional schooling requirements. Thus, online educators and teachers must be particularly sensitive and able to read into students' implicit communication.

Cultural factors affect students' opportunities, learning abilities, motivation, perceptions, behaviors and other factors that can affect learning and reception to teaching. Eggen and Kauchak (2003) believe that culture helps to determine the attitudes, values, customs, and behavior patterns a child brings to school or the classroom. Furthermore, they argue that the match between a child's culture and the school has a powerful influence on school success. Culturally responsive teaching creates links between a student's culture and classroom instruction. Thus, the effective online teacher or educator is not only culturally educated and sensitive, but must understand that regulating the effects of culture is a difficult challenge which must be faced as a learning obstacle to overcome in many cases. Language differences can be a cultural barrier in the online classroom, and as Eggen & Kauchak (2003) note, language barriers can pose special challenges for teachers.

Gender has always been a major source of controversy and problems and challenges because there are gender differences always prevail to foster and shape perspectives in every culture (Grey-Bowen & McFarlane, 2010). Eggen and Kauchak (2003) believe that gender differences in aptitude or intelligence are minor, and gender-related achievement differences are caused primarily by different treatment of boys and girls. Teachers can minimize achievement differences by treating boys and girls equally and by actively combating gender stereotypes in their teaching. The online teacher must bear this in mind and be careful in using stereotypes, especially those of technology gender bias where perceptions of males being better than females at using technology affect attention paid to unique learners.

Online teachers and educators must be responsible for their teaching and responsible to a great degree for students' achievements by using effective instructional strategies and approach teaching with motivation and care. Recognizing that students have different appreciation of technology and its usage and application, comprehension levels when it comes to content knowledge and synthesis, as well as sometimes differing goals in the learning process, online teachers must strive to be pervasive facilitators who value diversity and challenge students to be creative and cooperative, functional participants in the online classroom.

Challenges in the Online Classroom

Teachers have a role to play in all learning settings, both online and on ground. Whether it is facilitated online learning (FOL) or independent online learning (IOL), teachers must perform even the very rudimentary roles of assessment and feedback at some point or another. The above challenges in the form of identified learning differences among students which create challenges for online teachers and educators pose certain problems because of their nature and origins. For example, how exactly does a teacher or instructor address issues of socioeconomic status (SES) in the online classroom? Issues such as these can pose great challenge especially because of limited social contact and lack of face-to-face-in-person modality. Learning differences stemming from intelligence are extremely difficult to address when the teacher must assume that all students in the online classroom have even the basic technological knowledge needed to carry out the most fundamental functions. The theory of multiple intelligences has strong implications for adult learning and development (Armstrong, 2010) and online educators must especially be aware of this in developing and maintaining standards. Students have different capacities for learning and learn in different ways and facilitating learner differences becomes a challenge in the online classroom.

Eggen & Kauchak (2003) suggest that teachers can use three major types of decision making when dealing with the challenges of online classrooms, especially where learner differences make addressing problems of teaching and learning more challenging. These three decision making types are: critical decision making which focuses on the functional role of the classroom context in the teaching and learning process; practical decision making which emphasizes the need for efficiency in the use of resources in the teaching and learning process; and artistic decision making which deals with the teacher's ability to develop and apply creativity in teaching (Eggen & Kauchak, 2003).

Eggen & Kauchak (2003) argue that assessment and learning can be a unique challenge for teachers and educators in the online classroom. This may stem from the fact that teachers are not able to "see" directly the attitudes and behaviors of learners and how this affects their ability to think and learn or accomplish their academic goals. One great challenge in the online classroom is for the educator to focus on personal, social, and emotional development of learners or students. Eggen & Kauchak (2003) believe that personal development is influenced by heredity, parents and other adults, and peers. Parents can positively influence development by providing a structured environment that is both demanding and responsive to children's individual needs. Peers affect development by providing opportunities for social skill development and by influencing the formation of values and attitudes. According to Eggen

& Kauchak (2003) social development influences children's ability to make and interact with friends and their ability to learn cooperatively in school. Perspective taking allows students to consider problems and issues from others' points of view. Social problem solving includes the ability to read social cues, generate strategies, and implement and evaluate these strategies.

Education and the teaching and learning process which attempts to educate individuals must be able to foster and develop morality, social responsibility and self-control in the individual. This is difficult for online teachers and educators who have such a physical distance from students. According to Eggen & Kauchak (2003) character education advocates emphasize the study, practice, and reinforcement of moral values. In contrast, moral education proponents emphasize the development of moral reasoning and students' thinking about moral issues. Teachers can promote moral development in their classrooms by emphasizing personal responsibility and the functional nature of rules designed to protect the rights of others. Students should be encouraged to think about topics such as honesty, respect for others, and basic principles of human conduct. As teachers interact with students, they should recognize the powerful influence they have in influencing the moral development of their students (Eggen & Kauchak, 2003). For the online teacher, a tough question to answer is "how do you use technology or the Internet to promote and assess development in social, moral, and emotional development and to solve your students' social and personal problems?" This can be difficult and many online teachers simply ignore these aspects of their learners, leaving them to those disciplinarians and role models in the students' physical environments.

Recommendations

Teachers should promote a learning-focused environment rather than a performance-focused environment. According to Eggen & Kauchak (2003) learning-focused environment emphasizes learning goals, those goals that emphasize increased understanding and mastery of tasks, while performance-focused environments focus on performance goals that deal with demonstrating high ability, and particularly, ability compared to others. Eggen & Kauchak (2003) argue that learning-focused environments increase student motivation, whereas performance-focused environments can detract from motivation for all but the highest achievers. However, a particular challenge of online schools and educational leaders and educators in the 21st century is to prove that online learning has value and quality. Thus, the performance-focused environment becomes the most dominant way of challenging critiques that are bent on damaging the credibility of online teachers and educators, their classrooms, instructions, and graduates' abilities and achievements.

Online teachers and educators must develop high standards for students' responsibility in the online environment by building ideals of self-determination. According to Eggen & Kauchak (2003) self-regulation describes students' ability and inclination to accept responsibility for and control their learning. It includes setting and monitoring goals, metacognition and the use of learning strategies. Eggen & Kauchak (2003) argue that self-regulation is developmental, and learners may initially set and monitor goals to receive rewards and avoid punishers. The online educator or teacher must therefore provide and clarify standards from the onset and ensure that students understand these and make it clear that they will be enforced. Self-regulation working as self-determination for success in the online classroom can significantly impact learner achievement because as Eggen & Kauchak (2003) note, as students' self-determination increases, they gradually demonstrate self-regulated behaviors because of utility value or because doing so is consistent with their self-schemas. Ideally, learners will eventually set and monitor goals for their own sake, which is intrinsically motivated behavior. According to Eggen & Kauchak (2003) well-planned rules and procedures help establish and maintain orderly classrooms. Online teachers can create an effective list of rules that is short, clear, and positive. Furthermore, they

must promote understanding of the reasons for rules and allow students' inputs that give the students a sense of control, and contributes to self-regulation.

Effective online teachers and educators should see themselves as, and understand that they are leaders in the classroom who must be exemplary, inspiring students to learn and behave themselves, challenging students to do their best, motivating and encouraging students to be a part of the virtual team, and enabling students to express themselves and participate in heir own learning (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). This requires online teachers and educators to first believe in themselves by having high personal efficacy, which research based on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and efficacy impacts has shown significantly impact teachers' perceptions and students' learning outcomes (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2004; Rowland, 2008; Bentley and Rempel, 1980; Wentworth, 1990; Cook, 1979; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Hardy 1999; Liu & Meyer, 2005; Lester, 1990; Evans & Johnson, 1990; Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005; Butt, Lance, Fielding, Gunter, Rayner, & Thomas, 2005; Rhodes, Neville, & Allan, 2004; Evans, 1997; Eagley & Jones, 2005; Schultz & Teddlie, 1989; Hipp, 1997; Thomas 1997; Nguni, Sleegers, & Denessen, 2006; Andrew, Parks, & Nelson, 1985; Hunter-Boykin & Evans, 1995). As such, effective online teachers and educators will model the way by displaying exemplary leadership in the online classroom through teacher characteristics. According to Eggen & Kauchak (2003) personal teaching efficacy, modeling, caring, and having high expectations are personal characteristics that can increase student motivation. Teachers who are high in personal teaching efficacy believe they are able to help students learn, regardless of student background knowledge or other factors. Self-Efficacy is a cognitive theory of motivation which deals with one's core beliefs about being able to successfully perform a given task; positive self-efficacy relates to confidence in the power to create desired effects, while negative self-efficacy relates to self-debilitating beliefs (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2009).

Despite being physically distant from students, online educators and teachers should still model courtesy and respect as these are essential for motivation, and they should also demonstrate genuine interest in the topics they teach as part of teacher enthusiasm (Eggen & Kauchak, 2003). Just as in the regular, traditional, brick-mortar classroom, teachers and educators in the online classroom can still show that they care about their students by being willing to spend more of their non-class personal time to assist students with difficulties, using telephone or email communications where possible and permissible to demonstrate care and respect for each individual's learning needs and concerns. Eggen & Kauchak (2003) argue that one of the most effective ways to demonstrate respect is to hold students to high standards. Some online teachers and educators will feel a need to hold students to lower standards, sometimes decreasing demands on quality and quantity of work due to the perceived and real distances existing between them and their pupils. However, this should not be the case as Eggen & Kauchak (2003) argue that holding students to high standards also communicates that teachers expect all students to be successful. As part of the dedication to effective leadership online teachers and educators should be challenging and set challenges because students are successful on tasks when they perceive such tasks as challenging. According to Eggen & Kauchak (2003) as students meet these challenges, they get evidence that their competence is increasing and they feel an increased sense of control and this will increase intrinsic motivation, which is needed as part of the high level of dedication needed by students to take online courses or programs.

Online teachers and educators can deal with learning differences more effectively by providing for and creating variety in instructional strategies, assignments, and student activities by using Gardner's theory and philosophy of multiple intelligences to shape and develop lessons and learning outcomes and expectations. Armstrong (2010) provides us with a good example:

> …if you're teaching or learning about the law of supply and demand in economics, you might read about it (linguistic), study mathematical formulas that express it (logical-mathematical), examine a graphic chart that illustrates the principle (spatial), observe the law in the natural

world (naturalist) or in the human world of commerce (interpersonal); examine the law in terms of your own body [e.g. when you supply your body with lots of food, the hunger demand goes down; when there's very little supply, your stomach's demand for food goes way up and you get hungry] (bodily-kinesthetic and intrapersonal); and/or write a song (or find an existing song) that demonstrates the law (perhaps Dylan's "Too Much of Nothing?") [p. 1].

Here we see how the online teacher or educator can cater to learner differences stemming from the factor of intelligence by exploring a topic from various perspectives or by breaking its elements or components according to multiple intelligences. In this way, each and every student in the online classroom will find something interesting and something up their alley. Armstrong (2009) believes that the theory of multiple intelligences is very intriguing because it expands the horizon of available teaching or learning tools beyond the conventional linguistic and logical methods used in most schools (e.g. lecture, textbooks, writing assignments, formulas, etc.), and in so doing, provides teachers with opportunities to be creative. Online teachers and educators must take advantage of this theory in planning their lessons. Armstrong (2010) provides us with a most basic method for starting the process. This method can be conceived of in the following steps: *Step 1*: get a blank sheet of paper and write the topic of whatever you are teaching in the center of a blank sheet of paper; *Step 2*: draw eight straight lines or "spokes" radiating out from this topic; *Step 3*: label each line with a different intelligence; *Step 4*: start brainstorming ideas for teaching or learning that topic and write down ideas next to each intelligence; this is a spatial-linguistic approach of brainstorming and can be done using groups as well, including your online students.

Online educators and teachers must strive to create a safe and secure online classroom environment by setting regulations and standards for communication and conduct among students, contents to be uploaded as well as demarcation on social and other controversial issues that can and cannot be discussed. Thus, there is an ethical responsibility which must be exercised in the online classroom by both students and teachers, especially by teachers as they apply ethical paradigms such as the ethic of care, ethic of critique, ethic of justice, and most fundamentally, ethic of profession to make decisions on issues that arise in the online classroom (McFarlane, 2008). Creating a safe and secure environment in the online classroom is a difficult challenge because just as in the brick-mortar classroom, teachers and educators cannot control all the behaviors and attitudes of students. This is even worse in the online classroom where the all-powerful Internet and cyberspace acting as barriers can give students a sense of control and "negative courage" where they say or do things they would not otherwise say or do in person.

Online teachers and educators must fine-tune their lessons and instructional strategies to respond to students' learning needs and learner differences, and most importantly to suit the online classroom; its strengths and weaknesses in the teaching and learning process. Instructional strategies should firstly seek to motivate students to want to learn in this uncontrolled environment. Eggen & Kauchak (2003) believe that online teachers and educators can accomplish this by increasing motivation by beginning lessons with examples, activities, or questions that attract students' attention and provide frameworks for the information that follows. In addition, online teachers and educators must make content personally relevant to students and keep them highly involved in learning activities. There can sometimes be tendency for online teachers and educators to be lax in providing feedback to students because of an inclination toward leisurely care that online teaching can foster in some individuals. Eggen & Kauchak (2003) believe that feedback about learning progress is essential for both learning and motivation and that feedback indicates that competence is increasing, and then self-efficacy and self-determination both improve, and intrinsic motivation increases for both teacher and

students, and we have seen that numerous researchers agree that self-efficacy affects both teacher and students in their roles, performance, and outcomes.

Limitations

This paper applies an exploratory approach in synthesizing pertinent and available literature related to learner differences in the online classroom. Based on analysis and synthesis of this pertinent literature, the author limits exploration of the issue to applied social science theories such as self-efficacy, multiple intelligences theory, social distance theory, comparative homogeneity, pedagogy, and classroom management theories; which are the bases for espousing a variety of principles and practices regarding the phenomenon under study. Based on these limitations and established need for more studies and understanding of this issue, the author develops and recommends strategies and ideas for facilitating learning differences in this environment. Further limitations stem from lack of prior research upon which a sounder conceptual framework can be asserted as wholly representing the extant literature on the phenomenon. Additionally, the lack of available data on learner differences as related to pedagogical constructs in the online environment indicates need for research focusing attention on this phenomenon in an age where this approach to education has become prominent. Thus, it is highly recommended that further research be carried out to explore learner differences in the online classroom as part of pedagogical improvements and development of further online teaching-learning modalities.

Conclusion and Implications

Effective classroom management is as essential in the online classroom as it is in the brick-mortar or on-ground-on campus classroom. Effective teachers and educators in the online classroom keep management interventions brief, preserve student dignity, and follow through consistently (Eggen & Kauchak, 2003). They are conscious of time factor and know that there must be a high level of self-control, self-regulation and discipline for students to be successful online. Most of all, students must be motivated and must be able to effectively and efficiently use and apply technology tools to complete online class activities and assignments. Learning, value, and quality must never be sacrificed in the online classroom regardless of learner differences.

Exploration of the literature and the foregone discussion indicate strongly that there is need for research on teaching and learning effectiveness, the challenges and problems, and methods of facilitating learning and social adjustments in the online classroom environment. There is also a need for deliberation and development of best practices for online teaching and learning to assist teachers and students in achieving greater results through this medium. Developing and promoting best practices for online teaching and learning will help educators and learners who are struggling in this environment to become more confident in their ability to make a difference in the lives of students.

Online teaching and learning are very popular today, but the results they are producing for teachers and learners in terms of satisfaction and outcomes are not quite clear and in fact, are underexplored, under-researched, and under-documented. There needs to be more efforts directed at examining the contexts and role of online teachers and educators in the school economy and its growth and trends emerging in this global society (McFarlane, 2010b). Furthermore, issues of standards and quality stemming from accountability debates and accreditation requirements need to be examined in relation to online teaching and learning, and planning for online classroom effectiveness and success must become part of the strategic academic enrichment and improvement processes of schools and colleges. The online classroom is a vital learning ground in 21st century educational progress and the management of change.

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