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Foreword

The new issue the National Journal Education Development is another platform for national scholars and researchers to share their ideas and findings in the broad aspect of education. Guided strongly by liberalism in education philosophy, we have covered a wide range of topics or areas and research reports in this first issue. Ranging from distance learners to program planning, and from learning strategies to students behavior. We welcome scholars from all kinds of organization to share their views and work with the journal as well as with a wider community of critical readers, educators, program planners and practitioners in these areas.

In line with the new concepts, developments and challenges in education, an educator is no longer relevant with obsolete ideas but they are required to update their ideas, methods and technologies to warrant meaningful learning outcome. This journal published latest ideas and findings in helping the educators to update their knowledge and skill in this area.

Besides discussing purely about education, we have also included two articles on methods of effective interviews and online shopping behaviors among adult learners. These topics made this journal a unique issue that is believed to attract more scholars and readers to access this journal.

Institute of Education Development (InED)

Universiti Teknologi

MARA (UiTM) takes pride in its academic centres and numerous branch campuses in the various states in the country. The Institute of Education Development (InED) is one of the academic centres in UiTM that provides opportunities for those who wish to pursue their academic objectives.

The Institute of Education Development (InED) was formed in September 2001. InED now manages three types of programmes concurrently: the Distance Education Programmes, Collaborative Education Programmes and Continuing Education Programmes.

DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The objective of these programmes is to offer continuing education to upgrade the knowledge and career of Bumiputras. They also help to increase productivity and contribute to national development.

COLLABORATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The main aim of these programmes is to provide opportunities for qualified Bumiputera students who do not have the opportunity to enter public universities to further their education in private colleges.

CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The Centre for continuing Education (CCE), established in 2002, emphasizes the utilization of Universiti Teknologi MARA's (UiTM's) human and structural capital for enhancement of knowledge. These programmes are offered to the public.

Learning Strategies Applied By Online Learners of The Open University of Malaysia

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Abstract

Online courses and distance learning programs are now offered at most of our universities. One of the factors that will lead to successful student learning in these two modes is the ability to use appropriate learning strategies. Awareness towards the understanding and the use of appropriate strategies is important for the students' survival in the program.

Using a qualitative approach this study examined the strategies of the undergraduate students of the Open University of Malaysia. The data analysis revealed that the adult online learners used strategies, which were categorized into five themes - Use of Memory Tools, Planning and Awareness, Visual Organizers, Re-enforcement strategies and Seeking Assistance. From the information obtained the study concludes with suggestions for the e-learning provider.

Introduction

One of the factors that determines successful student learning is the ability to use appropriate learning strategies. Although a great deal of knowledge about students' learning strategies has been accumulated in recent years, very little is known about their use in the new environment of online learning. Because of the nature of this new mode, it is likely that students need to be highly self-regulated and responsible for organizing and reflecting on their learning.

However, studies suggest that many students even at tertiary level have limited understanding and experience of deep learning strategies (Radloff, 1997). There could be a number of reasons why learners may not use appropriate learning strategies apart from not knowing what strategies to use or how to use them. One reason particularly relevant to online learning is that limited knowledge of technical procedures involved in learning may mean students have to concentrate their efforts on developing such knowledge rather than on high-level learning strategies. It is therefore especially important that students develop an understanding of the appropriate use of effective learning strategies when learning online. It is also important that educators are aware of how students perceive and use online learning so they may provide adequate assistance to students in developing the capability to use deep learning strategies online.

To reach a wider market of the population the Open University of Malaysia (OUM) offers a hybrid or blended model of instruction instead of one totally online or totally face-to-face. Hybrid instruction is a term for the delivery of instruction based on the integration of face-based instruction and computer-based instruction. Hybrid courses are courses in which, significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online and time traditionally spent in classroom is reduced but not eliminated. OUM conducts tutorial classes twice a month and the rest of the time the students are left on their own to work online. In the beginning they use the WEBCT as the learning management system (LMS) to communicate with their tutors and with their peers and now they are using their own LMS. The goal of the hybrid courses is to join the best features of in class teaching with the best features of online learning to promote active independent learning and reduce class seat time. Using computer based technologies, the tutors can use the hybrid model to redesign some lectures or lab content into new online learning activities, such as case studies, tutorials, self testing exercises, simulations and online group collaborations.

The internet or web delivery technologies have a powerful potential to support the adult learners by providing access to a nearly infinite range of information sources. However before the adult learners can "make sense" of this vast store of information, they have to develop certain skills. The skills of knowing how to access, select, review and integrate the content into personal knowledge are the essential foundation on which others will be built on. Thus, it is important to develop the ability to guide one's own learning and strengthen

the metaskills in order to be an autonomous learner. With this ability the students will in turn have the ability to organize his/her learning program, which in turn could also be applied to their work environment.

In short, the issues addressed in this report are as follows. The working adult learners are faced with this new technology which is supposed to complement their twice a month tutorials. With the constraint of time, they have to digest and assimilate the information given by the tutors in the form of printed notes or the web and they are expected to apply and answer the problems given to them. In the process, they have to sit for exams to enable them to pass to another stage. Thus, they need strategies to help them get through this process within the constraints. They need to be self-regulated and be able to manage themselves. But how have they managed up to this point? This study therefore explores the strategies students employ in online learning. It also explores the learners' perceptions of the support they need in terms of helping them to learn.

Methodology

This study is an interpretative inquiry into the selected students' experience in studying through the hybrid mode and particularly looking at the strategies employed in learning. The informants were chosen based on a convenient sampling where a few students from each semester of the Information Technology and Engineering students were called and those who were willing to be interviewed.

An appointment was made to interview each selected informant. All interviews were done at the regional centers, which in this case were the Polytechnic Shah Alam and Universiti Malaya. A major question posed in each interview was "What do you do in order to understand and remember the materials that you study online?"

An audio-tape recorder was used in each interview, which lasted 45 minutes to one hour. A transcription was done soon after a few interviews before the rest of the interviews were run. The purpose was to get a rough idea of a few informants' experiences. On the basis of the above procedures, a total of 15 students were interviewed as this number was considered to have reached the data saturation point. The general description of the informants is as in table 1. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. After all the transcriptions have been completed, the constant comparative method was used by the researcher for the formation of data categories pertaining to the strategies employed by the students. The transcripts were then analyzed using codes to divide them into categories and sub-categories. The researchers looked out for strategies they employed while going through the process of learning. Besides the strategies the researchers also noted down other emerging factors such as the learners feelings towards this system of learning and the barriers they faced. A typology of the categories was developed to understand better the way the learners approached this new type of learning.

To ensure validity and reliability, member check was carried out. This was done by asking similar questions to other groups of students to check whether they have similar responses to each other.

Findings

From the analysis of the informants' transcripts, five major themes were related to the types of learning strategies employed by the students. The themes are:

1. Planning and awareness
2. Use of memory tools
3. Use of visual organizers
4. Use of re-enforcement strategies
5. Seeking assistance

The following table summarises the details of the informants:

Table 1 Description of the informants

No	Informant (Pseudonames)	Program	Semester	Nature of Work	Work experience
1.	Aa	IT	5	Teacher	10 years
2.	Lis	Engineering	4	Teacher	5 years
3.	Aza	Engineering	4	Teacher	6 years
4.	Ron	Engineering	5	Teacher	5 years
5.	Mos	Engineering	6	Teacher	14 years
6.	Ama	IT	4	Teacher	25 years
7.	Mahab	IT	2	Teacher	8 years
8.	Rin	IT	5	Teacher	7 years
9.	Zi	IT	4	Businessman	17 years
10.	Kaam	Engineering	6	Teacher	5 years
11.	Ati	Engineering	6	Teacher	7 years
12.	Nuri	IT	2	Teacher	8 years
13.	Tom	IT	3	Businessman	7 years
14.	Sima	Engineering	4	Teacher	8 years
15.	Lilo	IT	5	Technician	7 years

Discussion

The following section discusses in greater depth the themes that were obtained

(i) Planning and Awareness

In each of the interview, the informants somehow mentioned planning as part of their learning process. Some mentioned planning in the initial stage that is, before even the program started.

On informant, Aa, described "At the beginning of the semester I already make a plan.....I fixed for each day a number of hours say 1 to 2 hours to look at the modules and also open up [log on] the computer. This way I will be mentally prepared when I go to the class."

Another informant, Aza explained " We have to do planning like what to do today and what to do the next day like sort of make a timetable because time is very limited."

Lin also said the same thing as to Aa, "At the beginning of the semester I made up a timetable according to the syllabus given. Luckily being a teacher I am used to make up a plan. But of course not all the time I can follow the schedule sometimes when I 'm too busy I have to make up other times. But I feel to succeed we have to plan and try very hard to follow it or else we could easily find there is not enough time to study."

Another common feature mentioned by the informants is forming study groups. Before attending the study group they still have to plan. Kaam, a technical and vocational teacher said:

"We usually form group discussion but before we meet we have to plan out first. If we don't plan then when we meet we will waste our time to decide what to do. It is not easy to meet. So before we meet we already set the topics to discuss and the problems that we face. So before we meet we have to read first so that we know which ones we don't understand. If we don't read then we won't know what we want to discuss or what we don't know. Also we usually elect a penghulu (leader) to lead the discussion and also somebody to take down points we cannot solve so that we can ask the tutor during the next tutorial. If we don't take down the points we might forget. I feel I learn a lot through this way."

Lilo a technician said " You definitely have to make plans and preparations. The notes given by the tutor is very brief for students to understand. We need to read up extra materials before we go to the class otherwise we won't know what the tutor is talking about."

Ron, an engineering student said “I like to plan early ...at the beginning then I will be more confident. Usually for the subjects that I make proper planning I can score better grades.”

From the above excerpts we can see that planning is a very important strategy for the students to continue and succeed in their studies.

(ii) Use of Memory Tools

Some students mentioned that they use certain strategies, which we termed as mnemonics to recall or remember important facts. A student, Aza said “ I sometimes make up a song to remember important information. With the song I can easily remember.” But she mentioned that now it is a bit difficult to make up songs because her subject now is mathematics and she finds it more difficult to write up a song from mathematics.

Tom added “ I summarise the notes by drawing out diagrams and see the relationship between each other.....that way I can see the relationship better and I can remember better.”

Sima mentioned that “ I try to remember by taking out the first letter of the words to remember and form new words which I am familiar. But I have to be careful because sometimes I forget what the letters represent. The easiest way is find words that are funny or amusing because these words we can remember or recall better”

The above strategy is termed as acronym. Although it helps the students to recall, they must remember what each letter in the acronym stands for.

(iii) Visual Organizers

Certain students will learn better if they are showed visual representations like pictures, diagrams, figures or concept maps. As Aza explained “ I usually carry with me a small notebook which I note down short notes and diagrams. I carry it with me everywhere and every time I opened and look at it I can visualize in my head what it means and that helps me to remember.”

Kaam, a vocational school teacher said “ In my area I have to learn a lot about machines. So I usually download pictures of machines from the internet and that really helps me understand the process and makes me remember.”

Lis said “ I prefer to print out if there are notes because I find it easier to read through I can easily refer to them. If there are important points that I need to remember I usually highlight them. And if there are formulas that I need to remember I usually copy it out and put it on sheets of paper which I will paste them everywhere like on the fridge, next to my bed.....sometimes the formulas even appears in my dreams!”

Tom an Information Technology student said “ I usually copy out formulas on pieces of paper like the ones that can be pasted to walls. I usually paste them at strategic places where I can see them often you know like in the kitchen on the fridge and also beside my bed. Then before I go to bed I can see them and when I wake up also I can see them. That way, it can stick in my head and make me remember.”

Sometimes students use diagrams, mind maps or clusters to summarise information from a lecture or reading materials or even to prepare a writing assignment. This is mentioned by Rin.

She said “ Those with a lot of words I draw out a mind map to make them clearer to me. It will also help me to remember. If there are too many words and facts I cannot remember and usually by the time I finish reading I tend to forget the first few lines and cannot see the connections. By drawing out it helps me to see clearer and makes me remember better.”

It seems from the informants that mind mapping or concept mapping is a powerful tool to aid them to remember.

(iv) Re-Enforcement Strategies

To help and retain information longer most of the informants practice re-enforcement strategies. This strategy is further divided into sub-categories. The sub-categories are: copy out and writing out notes, rereading, highlighting and practicing past year questions.

Nori, a teacher explained “ I usually read my notes and then to help me remember I copy out the important points and rewrite them. When I do that I can remember better.” But for Ati, she said “ I read through my notes and highlight the important points. When I read them again the next time I will know which are the important points.”

Ama an experienced teacher of 25 years said “ To aid my memory retention I first read through the notes the tutor give and then I find from other references that are similar to the notes and I rewrite those notes. I find that by doing so I can remember longer.” Sima said “ I just read, read and read until I can remember. It is sort of like memorizing but some subjects cannot do that. Some I have to do questions to make me remember.”

Another sub-category mentioned by most informants are practicing past year exam questions. Mahab mentioned “ For mathematics I have to do a lot of practice. I sometimes borrow my cousin’s SPM maths book and practice those questions. I believe like what people said *Practice makes Perfect.*”

Many mentioned that they open up the web to get the past year questions. Tom explained “ For maths the only way is to practice after trying out the past year questions I will know whether I really can do or not. Sometimes when I listen to the tutor I think I understand but after trying out the questions then only I can really understand. If I cannot solve then can ask other friends or the tutor.”

(v) Seeking Assistance

This is the most common strategy applied by the informants. This strategy is subcategorized into the following: tutor, peers and other resources. This strategy is mainly used by the informants to obtain answers to assignments and sometimes if they do not understand certain concepts.

Sima said, “If I don’t know something after reading still I cannot understand I will ask somebodyusually I ask my friend sometimes she also cannot solve then we e-mail our tutor. You know I also go for private tuition especially for Maths subject; that way I can understand better”

As for Lilo, “ I like to go to the e-library. I find it very interesting. What I did when I find a very interesting article I copy it and paste it in words.”

A few of the informants mentioned on forming their own e-group, that is on their own initiative. Lilo said “ We have our own e-group based on the topics that we have.”

Ama mentioned “ I download the past year questions and then try to answer them. But I usually do them with friends. You know when there are more heads it is easier to solve the questions. We sort of discuss the ways to go about doing them. But sometimes after discussion still cannot solve then we contact the tutor. If the tutor does not respond then we bring them to the next tutorial class. Actually this way I can remember the solution once we get it solved because we have tried many ways and it sort of stick to my head ”

They also mentioned that sometimes the server is down and they could not access and that initiate them to form groups, which they could meet on agreed dates and time.

Ati a semester 6 student said “ From semester one itself we have log on to the web. Initially it was quite difficult to getthe server down, cannot open. But now it is better. I use the web mainly for interaction with the tutor and with my friends. You know we get 5% when we log on to the web. I learn faster by asking questions. Also sometimes the tutor gives some solution to assignments on the web. That is very helpful to me.”

Ati also mentioned “ We have a student in our class who is good in science. So usually we get together we will discuss certain topics, which we find difficulty and he will discuss and he likes us to brainstorm our ideas. What I find very helpful when we discuss in a group we get a lot of ideas rather than working alone.”

Generally the students seem to prefer obtaining help from their close friends or their peers.

Discussion and conclusion

Learning strategies are an important part of one's learning experience. It can positively help students, especially the adult learners, have very little time to cope with their work. They provide students with an efficient way to acquire, store, and process information and skills. This research shows that these strategies have to be taught to the students formally or informally. This means that students must not only know the types of strategies available, but also when and how to use them. More importantly, they must be provided opportunities to practice these strategies. As a result learners who are highly dependent on teacher support can now employ these learning strategies in order to become more independent learners, as distance learners should be.

The findings of the study indicate that the students did employ certain strategies in their learning. Faced with a new mode of learning, most were apprehensive but willing to try. Although they were not used to studying independently they resorted to using strategies, which would help them get through. Initially the students found online learning troublesome due to problems of accessibility. As time progresses many of the senior students commented that the situations have improved and now they are using the online medium more, especially for interaction with their peers and tutors. Most of the students also commented that a lot of materials for their studies are now obtained from printed materials given to them and not from the web.

The study also found that the strategies applied by the students were mainly basic rehearsal and elaboration strategies like copying out and rereading notes; some basic organization strategies like concept mapping and mainly adaptive strategies like help seeking. Help-seeking seems to be the dominant strategy used especially for new students. The students seem to know where and how to get help. The use of this strategy would at least develop them towards being more independent and self-directed learners.

Malaysian online providers need to take into account the pedagogical aspects of learning online seriously. Giving students printed materials, placing some notes on the web, and providing the technology and then leaving them to grapple with all these on their own is inadequate and unfair. Students need to be taught the ingredients to be self-directed and self-regulated learners. Students need to be provided with explicit instruction in both learning strategies. The most important point is that, through self-regulation practice,

students can develop voluntary control over their own learning. Lecturers can enhance students' awareness and control over learning by teaching them to reflect on how they think, learn, remember and perform academic tasks at all stages before, during and after task execution. Most importantly, students need to be reminded that they are responsible for their own learning outcomes.

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