

Factors influencing student usage of an online learning community: the case of a rural South African university

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Abstract:

Technology adoption within higher education is becoming popular. This has often resulted in hubs of learning referred to as an online learning community. The success of such platforms is dependent on full system utilisation. The study draws on a quantitative empirical investigation into the factors that influence the adoption of an online learning community amongst 252 first year students at a rural university in South Africa. The results of the study show that a positive relationship exists between online course design and student ratings of perceived usefulness and perceived interaction (PI) concerning the utilisation and usage of an online learning community. Furthermore, the online learning community's interface design was found to be positively related to ratings of perceived ease of use but not with PI. Based on these findings, interventions are proposed, which have ramifications in working within online learning communities to benefit both the student and the lecturer.

1 Introduction

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has become popular in modern society (Yuan, Raubal and Liu, 2012), especially within higher education (Mohammadi, 2015). Within higher education, there is growing popularity in the use of online learning communities (Liu et al., 2010). An online learning community is a platform that allows for the use of technology to support and deliver learning amongst a group of people bound by the same identity features, values, beliefs, interests and goals (Hramiak, 2010; Ramage, 2010). Furthermore, within an online learning community, there is some sense of consensus amongst all members in learning needs being satisfied by pursuing a common learning goal (Rovai, 2002). Given this, a need exists to consider the needs and factors that influence how an online learning community functions especially when designing online learning courses (Dede, 1996).

This research focuses on understanding factors that influence student utilisation of an online learning community at a rural university in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The factors under investigation include (a) online course design (OCD), (b) user interface design (UID), (c) previous online learning experience (POE), (d) perceived usefulness (PU), (e) perceived ease of use (PEU), (f) perceived interaction (PI) (all independent variables) and (g) intention to use an online learning community (as a dependent

Appendix A. Measurement items used in this study (continued)

<i>Item statement reference</i>	<i>Source</i>
Perceived interaction (PI)	Liu et al. (2010)
PI1. I discuss relevant English learning topics with others on the discussion board	
PI2. I send e-mails to others as a way of communicating	
PI3. I engage in simultaneous learning interaction with others via Instant Messenger	
PI4. In general, I think this web-based learning environment provides good opportunities for interaction with other users	
Intention to use an online learning community (ITU)	Davis (1989, 1993), Venkatesh (2001)
ITU1. I intend to use this system for activities that involve my learning	
ITU2. I will reuse this system for relevant learning activities	