Why Do Students Engage in e-Learning: A Chinese Perspective

Zhenhong Zhang, Ronghuai Huang
Knowledge Science and Engineering Institute, School of Educational Technology, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, P. R. China
zhenhong.zhang@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper presents a study on how Chinese students understand e-learning. Twenty university students who took part in a course “Introduction to e-learning” were interviewed and data were analyzed using the method of phenomenography. The findings can be presented as four qualitatively different conceptions of e-learning: e-learning as (1) supplement to face-to-face learning or the metaphor of after-meal dessert; (2) informal resource-based learning or the metaphor of a mobile library; (3) activity-based learning or the metaphor of a ladder to knowledge; (4) community-based learning or the metaphor of a food sharing banquet. The aim of the study is to shed light on Chinese students’ conceptions of e-learning, which are of significance to e-tutors in offering e-learning services.

Keywords: e-learning, conception, phenomenography

Introduction

E-learning is an umbrella term that is used to describe learning involving the application of new multimedia technologies and the Internet. In China e-learning has enjoyed fast development and become indispensable in the educational system. China began practicing e-learning in 1998 and there are 68 institutes of higher education offering e-learning services at present. Statistics indicate that, by the end of 2004, over 10% of college students have their higher education through e-learning [1].

Literature review shows that much research is about what the teacher could do or has done online, while the student experience of those activities goes largely undocumented [2]. Yet research into students’ conceptions of e-learning is the starting point for a system approach to e-learning development. This study aims to explore the variation of ways e-learners understand e-learning and make recommendations to e-tutors who plan to offer e-learning services.

1. Method

1.1 Phenomenography

A phenomenographic approach was used for this study. Phenomenography is a field of descriptive research concerned with the different ways of experiencing and understanding people have of various phenomena, developed in Sweden in the 1970s in the field of education [3, 4]. It has been repeatedly found that phenomena, aspects of reality, are experienced and understood in a relatively limited number of qualitatively different ways [3]. In phenomenography, in-depth interview transcripts were handled as a whole to find out the whole variation in the conceptions articulated. The outcome of a phenomenographic analysis is a system of categories of description which covers the total variation in the conceptions expressed in the research population [5].
1.2 Procedures and data analysis

The study was carried out during March-April 2006 in Beijing Normal University, P. R. China. Twenty students enrolled in a one-semester course “Introduction to e-learning”, including 18 graduates and 2 undergraduates. The course had seven modules and each module lasted about 2 weeks. The students were asked to read certain materials, communicate using an asynchronous web-based tool, and complete a set of assignments. The lead author served as the teaching assistant and tutor throughout the course.

The 20 students were interviewed in the middle of the semester by the author using phenomenographic interview technique that allowed openness and variation in responses. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. As to ethical considerations, participants were provided verbal explanation of the purpose of the study prior to the interview. Assurance of maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity was given.

Phenomenographic techniques [6] were employed to elicit a description of categories of the 20 students’ conceptions of e-learning. Each transcript was read and re-read many times for the researcher to become familiar with the data [3, 4]. Key elements that characterize the students’ experiences of e-learning were recognized, including learning resources, learning activities, e-tutor’s support, collaboration learning, emotional presence, and difficulties in learning. Variation of conceptions of e-learning was derived from the analysis of the relations between these key elements.

Rigor in the analysis was established by following the tenets of phenomenographic approach [6]. In phenomenographic research, replication of categories of description as findings is not considered necessary, but that another researcher can recognize the categories of description once they have been identified.

2. Findings

The findings can be presented as four qualitatively different aspects on the students’ conceptions of e-learning. The analysis of each understanding is described using the key elements as a conceptual framework collectively forming four categories of description. The categories are illustrated with characteristic quotations translated from Chinese and provided with metaphors (figure 1, 2, 3, and 4) for a communicative purpose.

Figure 1       Figure 2       Figure 3         Figure 4

2.1 Supplement to face-to-face learning or the metaphor of after-meal dissert (Figure 1)

E-learning is perceived as defective in nature and cannot match face-to-face teaching and learning in that there is a lack of communication and guidance. Thus e-learning is merely an alternative for those who cannot obtain face-to-face learning, but for those who can and are willing to commute, e-learning is a supplement. One student stated in the interview, “I feel isolated and a lack of sense of belonging in pure e-learning style. And it is so hard for me to always find time for the totally self-controlled e-learning because there is not someone to supervise me as a teacher in the classroom.”

Students can have additional learning resources and complete other course components in e-learning, yet teacher’s lectures in the classroom are the best and indispensable form of learning. There is a degree of resistance to e-learning among some
students, in particular inexperienced ones. For example, one student said, “I feel comfortable and close to the teacher in face-to-face learning style. I am often affected by the teacher’s passion, which is lacking in e-learning. After a lecture I feel certain that I’ve learned something, but that’s not the case with e-learning.” Another student said, “I like the feeling of sitting in a classroom and learning under the guidance of the teacher together with peers. In e-learning what I see and work with is a “cold” computer. I expect to know the people who prepare the learning materials or to find someone to talk with and work with.”

In the metaphor of after-meal dissert, face-to-face learning is compared to the indispensable meal and e-learning to dissert—a supplement after the meal.

2.2 Informal resource-based learning or the metaphor of a mobile library (Figure 2)

E-learning stems from the demand for the ability to adjust quickly to and assimilate an ever increasing amount of information. The learning environment for today’s learners is no longer set within the walls of a school, but rather is everywhere, especially the Web and email [7]. The greatest charm of e-learning is that it is self-paced, self-regulated and self-controlled. It provides access to various forms of resources and materials which may otherwise be not available. Cognitive or emotional support from teachers and peers may not be necessary as there is no pre-defined learning goal.

For example, one student said, “I could find what I need on the Internet and learn on my own, so there is really no need to go into a classroom to listen to the teacher’s lectures. I like e-learning because I have the right to decide what to learn, when to learn, where to learn, and how to learn.” Another student stated, “E-learning suits me well as I don’t need to commute 3 hours a day from home to the university. I like the feeling of managing my own time and I can learn on my own the kind of stuff that is dumped on me in the classroom.”

In this sense, e-learning is like reading books in a mobile library: the library can be accessed at any time and place, and people can pick up whatever they feel like reading.

2.3 Activity-based learning or the metaphor of a ladder to knowledge (Figure 3)

E-learning is not only the presentation of resources, but also participation in activities that support knowledge construction. Most e-learning activities involve a series of tasks which lead the students to achieving learning goals. In the traditional class teachers serve as scaffold and guide whereas in e-learning activities take the teachers’ place. One student said in the interview, “Reading online materials on my own is so boring that I may easily be lost in the mass of information. E-learning activities are just like teachers who tell me what to do next and can lead me to an in-depth understanding of the materials. They also remind me of the learning goals and assist me to achieve them.”

Effective and interesting learning activities guided by e-tutors could support interactivity, which is proved to be an essential part of e-learning. Content is supposed to be delivered online with high degree of interaction with tutor, dialogue with other students through individual or collaborative activities. A student said, “I experienced and enjoyed the learning process in which I took part in activities on my own or with group members. A course with only materials but without activities cannot facilitate learning.”

In the metaphor of a ladder to knowledge activities are compared to a ladder on which students rely in the learning process to build knowledge and negotiate meaning.

2.4 Community-based learning or the metaphor of a food sharing banquet (Figure 4)

E-learning resources, activities, e-tutor’s support, collaboration, emotional presence are all included in the concept of community. Community is a general sense of connection,
belonging, and comfort that develops over time among members of a group who share purpose or commitment to a common goal [8]. Consisting of such elements as collaboration, common goals, friendship, familiarity, it is a team experience in which people are influencing others and at the same time influenced by others. A student said, “I think exchange of ideas with peers and e-tutors is more important than learning knowledge. I value the opportunity to share information with them and bright ideas just come out from our communications. I believe most people in the community have the same opinion.”

Community enhances a sense of belonging and reduces the learners’ feeling of isolation. Learning together in a community, students have the opportunity to extend and deepen their learning experience, test out new ideas by sharing them with a supportive group, and receive critical and constructive feedback [9]. A student said, “I like meeting people in e-learning who have similar experiences, feelings, and interests. Working with them makes me feel less isolated and I like sharing and discussing asynchronously with peers. In this kind of e-learning, each learner’s ideas are valuable, appreciated and contribute to the whole class, which greatly increases my motivation in learning.”

In the metaphor of a banquet, e-learning is compared to the banquet while every member’s background, previous knowledge and experiences, etc. to the food people take.

3. Conclusions

Understanding of e-learning is so diverse that various needs should be catered for. Our study shows that there are four categories of conceptions of e-learning among Chinese students: supplement to face-to-face learning; informal resource-based learning; activity-based learning; community-based learning. Findings imply that resources are key to e-learners who consider e-learning informal or supplemental. To others, tutor’s design and guidance and peers’ support are what make e-learning rewarding.

This study has only been conducted in China and within one course and findings may not be representative of students in other countries or other courses. Yet we still hope the findings could contribute to an intercultural understanding of e-learning and cross-cultural communication of e-learning pedagogies.

Acknowledgments

We thank the Ministry of Education in China and Higher Education Funding Council for England for supporting the eChina~UK eLearning Programme, of which the course is a part.

References