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**A Study of Students' Perceptions of the Online Component of a
Hybrid Postgraduate Course**

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Abstract

This study reports the perceptions of 26 students enrolled in the JCU Singapore (James Cook University Singapore) hybrid Master of Guidance and Counselling (MGC) course, 2011. These students were surveyed as part of a larger study to identify their perceptions of the online and to face-to-face components of this blended course. This paper reports their perceptions of the online delivery of the course – satisfaction, benefits and barriers. Results will inform the structure of future hybrid MGC programmes. Descriptive statistics were used to profile student demographics. Open-ended questions focusing on the online design complemented the descriptive statistics and were analysed according to Creswell's data analysis spiral. Whilst 3.8% of students were attracted to this course because of the online delivery, the majority of students did not factor online learning into their enrollment decision. Acknowledging this fact, students identified the flexibility, convenience and accessibility of the online environment as being beneficial for their learning, teaching and assessment. Social presence and teacher presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) influenced student engagement and satisfaction with the online delivery. The social constructivist pedagogy, with students building their knowledge of the subject through negotiating and making meaning from the curriculum with instructors and peers, positively influenced students' perceptions of the course. A barrier to navigating and using the e-learning platform was the orientation students had with the online learning platform. Suggestions for improving the online mode included student orientation sessions in navigating the platform, and standardizing the layout of the platform across all the core subjects in the course.

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1. Introduction

Learning institutions worldwide are being transformed due to the growth in recent years of online learning communities (OLC) (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Online education is enabling more students to access higher level learning, enjoying the convenience and flexibility of anytime, anywhere, self-paced instruction. Online learning in hybrid programs refers to the online component of the curriculum program. In this study, the online component of the hybrid program was scheduled across three, 13-week study periods. Within these study periods, students physically attended the campus for one mandatory face-to-face intensive week per three credit point subject.

Online delivery occurs in a virtual place and virtual space at the convenience of the student, within the guidelines of the teaching institution. Students actively construct knowledge and deep understanding through the social, cognitive and teacher processes of negotiating meanings with others in the OLC (So & Brush, 2008). Social

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constructivist pedagogy is the framework that guides this process, with students constructing knowledge by creating meaning with others within the OLC (Hamilton & Tee, 2010).

The results are mixed in terms of students' perceived satisfaction with and engaged in the OLC of hybrid programs. Students are enthusiastic about the flexibility and accessibility of e-learning, including the exposure to a variety of online learning resources, and the convenience of self-pacing and regulating their study. With this flexibility and accessibility comes the demand of self-regulation and autonomy as learners, to be motivated and self regulated and directed learners. According to research, OLC requires more persistence, involvement and application skill from the student compared with traditional modes of learning (Yudko, Hirokawa, & Chi, 2008).

Consistent with these findings, Jones, Laufgraben and Morris (2006) stress that students are simply going through the motions to fulfil online assessment requirements and are not focused on critical, higher-order thinking. This is in direct contrast to Heckman and Annabi's (2005) research findings that OLC scaffold students as they employ higher-order knowledge skills whilst engaging with sophisticated virtual learning and teaching tasks. According to the findings of Morris, Finnegan and Sz-Shyan (2005). And Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006), OLC drive better student learning outcomes than traditional formats.

A number of researchers have identified the convenience of online learning being offset by the time taken by students to familiarize themselves with accessing, navigating and engaging with the e-learning platform (Hokanson & Hooper, 2000; Anderson, 2002; Wang, 2009). These researchers further maintain that low student satisfaction with OLC is equated with the excessive amount of time imposed by the instructor for students to engage with tasks for the sake of engaging rather than higher-order thinking and learning (Ru, 2008).

A review of recent literature suggests that learning in an OLC is most successful when the student's active engagement is visible to others (Michinov, Brunot, Le Bohec, Juhel, & Delaval, 2011). Swan (2001) observed that 'asynchronous' interaction with instructors and peers positively influences student perceptions of online delivery.

Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) posited that intentional and critical virtual dialogue is a predicator of student satisfaction within online learning environments. Referred to as 'social presence', this ability of students to engage in reciprocal communication with instructor and peers underpins quality e-learning communities.

Aligned with social presence, cognitive presence focuses on designing cohesive learning communities, integrating critical thinking and discourse to promote and sustain higher levels of learning and thinking. Cognitive presence is evident when students purposefully construct knowledge through shared understanding, by engaging within the OLC with subject content for the purpose of constructing deep knowledge (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001).

According to these researchers, social presence and cognitive presence are partnered with teacher presence. Teacher presence is 'the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive, social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes' (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006, p. 10). The instructor is responsible for leading the OLC through interactive discourse, critical exchange, and reflective thinking tasks.

Researchers have asserted that previous experience in the use of the Internet, not necessarily Web-based learning provide a sense of presence in the online platform (Shih, Munoz, & Sanchez, 2006). Researchers have further suggested that students with previous experience in online courses are less likely to feel disoriented with hybrid programmes (Anderson, 2002; Arbaugh & Duray, 2002). The research further suggests that students engaged with OLC do benefit from acquiring the skills to use the technology associated with online delivery. Furthermore, they need to develop proficiency in navigating the e-learning platform, engaging in online discourse, submitting

assignments electronically, and actively partaking in discussion board discourse (Easton, 2003; Shih, Munoz, & Sanchez, 2006; Shih et al., 2006).

Online learning novices have preconceived notions that discourse online is more difficult than in traditional classrooms (Arbaugh, 2000b). These notions dissolve over time as students progress with their online mastery while simultaneously developing their online presence and identity (Palooff & Pratt, 1999). Students then develop their capacity to persist as learners within the OLC. This process reflects the natural system principle of growth and development.

The phenomenon of being ‘lost in hyperspace’ happens when students become bewildered with the online platform, to a point where the structure of the platform has lost meaning for them (Danielson, 2002; Schoon & Cafolla, 2002). This disorientation has the potential to greatly impede student understanding, engagement and appreciation of what the OLC has to offer. This may then contribute to a barrier mindset, with disappointment and aggravation associated with the e-learning platform (McDonald & Stevenson, 1998). Ensuring students have a sense of social presence throughout the online delivery, along with access to support if they do become perplexed with the learning management system, are feasible ways of addressing this potential obstacle.

The principle of growth and development is a timeless natural law and applies to all human behavior. The individual goes through three phases – beginning, developing and established – if the learning’s, appropriate to the context, will be new learning’s. In the OLC, some students will be beginning learners navigating the platform for the first time. These students will require high levels of support and scaffolding from instructors and peers. Those in the developing phase will be more willing to take risks and explore the OLC, and those in the established phase may be more adventurous with navigating the platform and embarking on tasks within the OLC. Getting the support right for students is the challenge for instructors leading OLC.

1.1. Structure of the Study

The JCU Singapore Master of Guidance and Counselling (MGC) postgraduate course is a blended teaching programme, combining 13 weeks online with 25 hours of face-to-face teaching conducted over one week – evenings and weekends. The course is taught on a trimester basis. There are 12 subjects in the degree – eight core subjects and four electives. The minimum entry requirement is successful completion of a three-year bachelor degree or diploma from a tertiary institution, approved by the JCU Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences. The MGC course is only available to Singapore citizens, Singapore PR (Permanent Resident) or Dependent Pass Holders. The degree can be completed in 16 months full-time (four subjects per study period) or 24 months part-time (two subjects per study period).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This paper reports the results of 26 students enrolled in the MGC course who were surveyed to investigate their perceptions of the blended teaching structure and their suggestions for improving the course. The paper reports their perceptions of satisfaction with, and the benefits and barriers of, the online delivery of the blended programme. It is part of a bigger research project aimed at studying the social, cognitive and teacher presence in the MGC postgraduate programme.

This mixed-methodology online study included both quantitative and qualitative components, allowing the research team to capture a comprehensive understanding of students’ perceptions (Creswell, 2012).

2.2. Subjects

88.5% of participants completing the survey were females; 11.5% were males. The age of participants ranged from 20–29 years (7.7%) to 50 years and older (15.4%). 50% were aged 40–49 years and 26.9% were between 30 and 39 years old. The mean age of participants was 41 years. The ethnic composition included Chinese (53.8%), Indian (15.4%) and ‘foreigners’ (30.8%) – Australian, Irish, Canadian, American and French.

96.2% of students were enrolled part-time, compared with 3.8% who had full-time status. On average, 28% were enrolled in one subject per trimester; 52% in two subjects; and 20% in three subjects. 46.2% of students resided within 10 km of the campus; 42.3%, 11–30 km away; and 11.5% lived more than 30 km from the campus.

2.3. Procedure

The online survey lasted for three weeks and was conducted online during the third study period of the 2011 academic year. Ethics approval was obtained from JCU’s human research ethics committee. Twenty-nine students replied to an email and SMS invitation from the research team to voluntarily and anonymously participate in this online study. Of the 29 returned surveys, 3 were invalid, leaving 26 surveys to be used for analysis.

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was performed to calculate the type (either positive or negative) and the strength of the relationships. A standard convention level of probability (p) < .05 was used for evaluating statistical significance. The confidence level was 95%.

The online survey was based on the conceptual framework of Billings (2000) and Paechter & Maier (2010). This framework was structured around specific themes of students’ perceptions of satisfaction with, and the benefits and barriers of, the postgraduate course. The item pool included 65 items. Different Likert scales were used to express the level of agreement with the items specific to digital technology and the online learning platform. Open-ended questions focused on students’ perceptions of satisfaction with, and the benefits and barriers of, the online delivery of the programme.

3. Results

The top reasons for students enrolling in the MGC programme included changing careers (61.5%) and advancing existing qualifications (57.7%). Smaller percentages indicated the content (34.6%) and fulfilling a general education requirement for their existing work position (23.1%). 3.8% of students chose to enroll because the course was primarily delivered online. The sense of place that JCU Singapore has, along with the course having full Singapore accreditation, were additional factors influencing enrollment decisions.

66.7% of students who took 16 months to complete the course were satisfied with the online delivery. 95.5% of students indicated that they communicated with instructors throughout the 13-week study period. 62.5% of students satisfied with the online community of inquiry were satisfied with the quality of the online delivery. There was a positive correlation between these two factors: $r=0.537$, $N=24$, $p<.01$.

All students indicated that they had regular access to a computer, enabling them to access, at their convenience, all online course material. 88.5% of students indicated that they frequently accessed material online. There was a positive correlation between the frequency with which students accessed subject material online and their perceived satisfaction with the online component of the course: $r=0.527$, $n=26$, $P<.01$. 82.4% of students satisfied with the online mode reported they were satisfied with the subject outline content.

All but one of the students in the 40–49 years age bracket stated that they had basic computer experience with word processing and Internet browser software. 26.9% of students identified themselves as expert users of word processing and Internet browser software (e.g., Firefox); 46.2% reported that they had considerable knowledge; 19.2% some knowledge; 3.8% limited knowledge; and 3.8% with no knowledge. The capacity of students to download files varied: 15.4% had some knowledge; 53.8% considerable knowledge; 23.1% expert knowledge; and 7.7% limited knowledge.

Communication in the OLC was positively perceived, with 52% of students announcing they were comfortable interacting online with instructors and peers. 62.5% of students reported that instructors responded online to their inquiries in a timely manner. Students made it clear that the quick response time was a benefit of the online mode. While 73.1% of students acknowledged that their opinion was respected online, 60% stated that virtual discussions were more impersonal than face-to-face conversations. 54.2% of students specified that they began or continued peer and instructor communication online leading up to or following on from face-to-face teaching weeks. This finding was statistically significant: $r=.350$, $n=24$, $P<.05$. More students in the 20–49 years age bracket preferred face-to-face to email or SMS. This is in contrast to students, 50 years and older, who preferred instructor and peer email and SMS communication.

86.7% of students who indicated that they received adequate orientation with the e-learning platform were satisfied with the online delivery. 30.8% of students encountered problems accessing or navigating the online platform. 61.5% of students indicated that support initiated in the orientation phase of their online learning was sustained for the duration of the subject.

84% of students reported that navigating the online platform was easy compared with 16% who indicated that it was a barrier to their course satisfaction.

'Getting passwords etc. and finding my way around the site took ages.' (Participant)

Accessing the e-learning platform was positively correlated with online satisfaction: $r=.357$, $n=26$, $P<.01$. Accessing material online was also positively correlated with online satisfaction: $r=.527$, $n=26$, $P<.01$.

The online content was positively acknowledged by students as contributing to their course satisfaction.

'The online information is great, very interesting, thus the learning is great.' (Participant)

There was a strong, positive correlation between student satisfaction and interacting online with the lecturer: $r=.257$, $n=25$, $P<.01$. There was a negative correlation – $r=-.128$, $n=24$, $P<.01$ – between student satisfaction with online learning and lecturer response to student inquiries in a timely manner.

The professionalism of the instructors in terms of their ability to communicate their expert knowledge, and their work-related experience, was named as an advantage of the MGC programme.

'The quality of the subject and the expertise of the teaching staff are above expectations.' (Participant)

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between student satisfaction with online learning and instructors creating a sense of an OLC. There was a positive correlation between the two variables: $r=.553$, $n=25$, $P<.01$.

Students developed their sense of visibility and of belonging within the university through their connectedness with the locally based academic staff member at JCU Singapore. This staff member was their point of contact throughout the study periods for all issues regarding their study pathway.

'Very helpful to have the lecturer available at JCUS so that enquiries and help can be got easily.'
(Participant)

Regular and repeated opportunities to engage in rich dialogue and debate with a diverse student group were recognized both as a benefit and a unique feature of the MGC programme.

'We are fortunate to have mature, experienced students in MGC programme at JCU Singapore, and can learn so much from each other; a multicultural learning environment is enriching.' (Participant)

Students valued the flexibility and accessibility of online learning, recognizing them as advantages of the course. Whilst online learning was not a significant factor in their enrolment, it was a factor contributing to course satisfaction.

'It gives me flexibility to plan for my learning, allowing me to schedule family, personal, work commitments and educational needs accordingly.' (Participant)
'Being able to access study materials remotely ... All can be accessed anywhere, anytime, even when one is out of the country.' (Participant)

While the students were generally positive and satisfied, they did identify barriers to their online learning satisfaction. Themes related to accessing and navigating the e-learning platform emerged from an analysis of the responses to the survey's open-ended questions.

'Technical ... Getting passwords etc. Some security and software issues.' (Participant)
'In the beginning of the course it took ages to just log on.' (Participant)

Students' suggestions for improving the quality of the online mode included: induction training in navigating the online platform at the start of the study programme; standardizing the layout of the subject material on the online e-learning platform; more efficient and effective design of the platform; and enhancing their social presence on the platform.

'For subject outline where the recommended readings are listed week by week, links to these readings, especially the reserve online materials, can be embedded instead of needing to navigate into reserve online and search for the reading.' (Participant)

Further recommendations for improving the programme included exposing students to professional learning sessions focusing on academic writing.

4. Discussion

Establishing and sustaining effective OLC requires a substantial shift away from the traditional face-to-face delivery format. According to O'Quinn and Corry (2002), this shift is 'in how educators orchestrate the act of learning' (p. 1). To teach successfully in the online environment, instructors need to adapt and change their traditional course design, in conjunction with modifying and/or changing their teaching, learning and assessment paradigms. The same services provided for face-to-face programmes need more than modifications for the online environment. An understanding and appreciation of the pedagogy of online learning, teaching and assessment is essential, so that application to and translation of this learning environment are achieved.

Educating students about their role and responsibilities when learning online is important and this task resides in the jurisdiction of instructors. For most students familiar with traditional teaching, a mindset shift is required when the curriculum is delivered in a blended or external mode (i.e., 100% online delivery). Accessing course material in the virtual world, compared with visiting a bricks-and-mortar library, is a practical example of the mindset adjustment.

The design of the e-learning platform is intended to promote the multifaceted concept of social, cognitive and teacher presence. Students are at the centre of this platform, a partially instructor-controlled and instructor-centred online community of inquiry. They are active participants, engaging and interacting in workplace-linked learning tasks. The role of instructor in this environment evolves from a source of authority to one of course designer, manager, leader, teacher, catalyst, facilitator, coach, supporter and evaluator (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Garrison et al., 2000).

An analysis of the data in this study indicates that students' satisfaction with the Internet as a course delivery medium is influenced by the fact that learning, teaching and assessment can occur anywhere and anytime. Both in the literature and in this study, students identified this convenience and flexibility factor, enabling them to study at their own pace and in their own space, as contributing to their course satisfaction (Glogowska, Young, Lockyer, & Moule, 2011).

'Able to access the material and ... Convenience; availability of important information such as assignments, announcements ... Database accessible online.' (Participant)

Students' time management capabilities in scheduling and balancing their studies with life commitments were identified as a benefit of the online mode. This requires students to be motivated as self-directed learners.

'It gives me flexibility to plan for my learning, allowing me to schedule family, personal, work commitments and educational needs accordingly ... Lots of motivation in self-studying is required.' (Participant)

It was not familiarity with online learning but the instructor's poor online design and layout of the course material that created frustration for some students.

'One never knows where something will be found. For example, online readings are NOT titled correctly in some modules.' (Participant)

Technological difficulties accessing the platform were a barrier for some students in the MGC course. Some of these difficulties were the result of ineffective systems, including the password generation system.

'In the beginning of the course, it took ages just to get logged in.' (Participant)

As confirmed in this study, reliability and user-friendliness of the technology to access the OLC are essential to the success of online delivery (Essex & Cagiltay, 2001). Technical support is crucial throughout this process. The level, frequency and duration of this support will vary according to the technical competencies of the students.

Students had a number of suggestions for designing a user-friendly e-learning platform. These recommendations were directed toward addressing many of the barriers in relation to the online delivery.

'More support in how to access LearnJCU information and subject materials and readings – sometimes we are taking too much time to download materials.' (Participant)

Whilst students' perceptions of the structural design of the online learning environment influenced their satisfaction levels, it was the social constructivist pedagogy framework and competency of instructors that were named as benefits of the MGC programme. Instructors, acknowledging and catering for a diverse student population, teaching across the spectrum of intelligence, engaging with students in negotiated self-directed learning tasks, were all commented on as benefits of the online component of the hybrid programme.

'I like the respect that is accorded to students that they are free to pursue their levels of commitment as to how deeply they would like to go with each subject, and in whichever manner they are comfortable with.'
(Participant)

Students were in agreement as to the benefit of an academic staff member based at JCU Singapore supporting their learning, giving them a sense of belonging, connectedness and identity with the program and the university.

'It has been terrific having the coordinator locally based; feels like there is much more connection and interest in our individual learning goals.' (Participant)

The multicultural cohort of students was named as a benefit of the MGC program, with online discussions being influenced by the diverse cultural cohort of students.

'The rich sharing by students of different backgrounds and age groups allows cross-fertilization of ideas.'
(Participant)

Psychological distance in the virtual world has been identified as a factor hindering students engaging in OLC (Rovai, 2003; Hong, 2002; Rovai & Baker, 2005). This finding was not replicated in this study. Students identified a sense of social connectedness with instructors and peers that positively influenced their engagement within the OLC.

Whilst 73.1% of students stated that their opinion was respected online, they did not identify the platform as a vehicle for increased –instructor-student interaction (Kim, Liu, & Bonk, 2005). Face-to-face was the most preferred discourse with peers (80.8%), followed by email, SMS, and online discussion board. Students residing the biggest distance away from the campus nominated email and SMS as their preferred modes of communication.

5. Limitations and Future Work

The findings of this study highlight possible directions for future studies, as well as practical systems, processes and procedures that could be implemented to eliminate barriers named by students as influencing their online course satisfaction.

Researching the impact of instructor skill in leading, managing and facilitating collaborative engagement and presence online requires further attention. The support needed at an institutional and school discipline level, versus the support provided to design, lead, manage and teach online postgraduate courses, requires attention. More research is needed on how staff and students manage virtual place and space learning in online postgraduate programmes.

Longitudinal research, over the duration of the course and subsequent online courses, may provide a clearer picture of students' perceived satisfaction with the online delivery in hybrid programmes. Studies indicate that students' involvement in multiple online courses positively influences their satisfaction levels (Arbaugh, 2004). According to Lee, Hong, and Ling (2001), as students gain experience with online delivery, their perception of the medium becomes more favourable. It may then be beneficial to examine whether students' familiarity with the technical nuances of online learning change their perceptions of satisfaction with online learning courses.

Whilst Hrastinski (2009) maintains that student participation in OLC drives online learning, Shaw (2010) claims that any form of online participation is better than no participation. This begs the question of how to measure the synergy between online participation and online learning.

6. Implications and Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to an understanding of students' perceptions – satisfaction, benefits, barriers – with the online delivery of the MGC hybrid postgraduate programme. Good quality instructors, who were highly experienced and well qualified practitioners, capable of designing interactive, collaborative, reflective and critical online environments, were aligned with student satisfaction. The presence of an academic staff member based at JCU Singapore was applauded by students and named as a significant factor in establishing their identity as MGC students.

Students did not align themselves as members of an OLC but as members of the JCU Singapore community. Was this due to the fact that an academic staff member dedicated to leading and supporting the MGC programme was physically located on campus? Research is required to investigate what factors contribute to students sense of identity within the MGC program.

Having a multicultural peer group with whom to engage was named as a benefit and strength of the online delivery. Flexibility and convenience were also identified as benefits of the online delivery.

Barriers to students' satisfaction with the online delivery included technical glitches with accessing and navigating the e-learning platform. Findings further highlighted the importance of students learning how to learn online – identifying what they know and need to know, and what to need to do to find out what they need to know.

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