INTRODUCTION

The use of technology in education has facilitated many changes. Among those changes is the way instruction is delivered. Today's learning environments have the technological means to open learning to the world and support interaction styles that are fundamentally different from those of a traditional classroom environment and no longer need to conform to the traditional classroom environment (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Martens, 2005). Where previously only face-to-face interaction was possible, technology can be used to "transform" space and time and enables students to communicate, coordinate and collaborate their activities at any time without the need for face-to-face contact (Alavi, Wheeler, & Valacich, 1995). The appeal of the e-learning environment to students becomes evident. The challenges posed in traditional learning settings do not disappear when students and teachers enter the e-learning environment. With these challenges present, can students be successful in the e-learning environment? When addressing the success or failure of students in e-learning courses, several factors must be considered. What perceptions and attitudes do students hold in regards to online courses? What factors influence achievement in online courses? Are students motivated to succeed in online courses? And finally, can instructors contribute to student perceptions and attitudes, thus affecting their success?
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

As with traditional instruction, students enter the e-learning environment with attitudes and perceptions. However, attitudes and perceptions are not exclusive to students. Teachers and course designers also hold perceptions. As Martens, Bastiaens and Kirschner discuss, there is often a gap between what teachers and course designers perceive and what students perceive. E-learning environments tend to lean towards a constructivist approach. This presents a challenge for teachers. Constructivist design principles are difficult to implement because developers must be able to predict how students perceive the tasks (Martens, Bastiaens, Kirschner, 2007). This can carry heavy implications if the gap in perceptions is too wide or if teachers fail to correctly predict how students will perceive the tasks. The implications will be very positive if predicted correctly. A negative perception potentially creates barriers to e-learning; conversely, a positive prior perception motivates a student to engage with the learning systems. The positive associations do have an impact upon students' openness to the concept of blended-delivery modules (Flynn, Concannon, Bheacháin, 2005). Although there are challenges facing teachers in regards to student perceptions, there are factors influencing student achievement that will help make decisions and make it easier for teachers to correctly predict student perceptions.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ACHIEVEMENT

Determining the factors that influence student achievement in e-learning courses can be difficult. What works for one student may not work for another student (Martens, Bastiaens, Kirschner, 2007). Although each student is different, there seems to be several
factors that are common. Flynn, Concannon and Bheacháin identified several influencing
factors in two areas, the social uses of technology and the cognitive support the
technology provides. They found the factors that had considerable effect on the success
or failure of students included peer-to-tutor interaction online, attitudes and actions of
peer groups in class, and the grading scheme of the class. Factors that were reported to
have considerable effect on the success or failure of the cognitive support provided by the
technology included prior experience of both the subject matter and the technology,
flexibility to have students learn without the instructor being present, allowing practice
and feedback using online tests, and delivery of lecture notes, and access to help and
support (Flynn, Concannon, Bheacháin, 2005). Learner satisfaction with the course may
also be a major factor that contributes to success or failure. This is affected by both
positive and negative experiences in the learning process (Chen, Lin, & Kinshuk, 2008).
There are many considerations in regards to the learner being satisfied with the
experience. The success of e-learning requires consideration of administration,
functionality of the e-learning system, instructional process and interaction among
participants (Chen, Lin, & Kinshuk, 2008). According to Chen, Lin and Kinshuk, two of
these considerations should be considered more heavily. Interaction and instruction
categories are comparatively more important in determining learners' satisfaction in e-
learning (Chen, Lin, & Kinshuk, 2008). Fresen identifies even more factors that may
play a role in how students perform. Issues such as change management, accessibility,
learner-centered environments and technology access and reliability have an impact on
the quality of web-supported learning (Fresen, 2007). While there seems to be many
factors that influence success or failure, the factor mentioned in the research most often
was interaction. Students want to interact with other students and the teacher. The use of technology as an exclusive course delivery method was considered insufficient. Face-to-face tutorials and group learning were central to both student confidence and the learning process (Flynn, Concannon, Bheacháin, 2005). There seems to be many factors to consider when determining success in e-learning and as previously mentioned, each of the influencing factors affect each student differently. The most difficult challenge for educators in the e-learning environment may be motivation.

MOTIVATION

There are many motivating factors to consider in the e-learning environment. There is not one exclusive factor as discussed by Shroff, Vogel and Coombes. The findings from our study reveal that there is neither an exclusive list of influential factors nor a universal model for all situations supporting individual student intrinsic motivation in technology-supported environments (Shroff, Vogel, & Coombes, 2008). It is important for teachers and designers to understand what motivates students. A better understanding of the nature of intrinsic motivation and the ability to gauge students' intrinsic motivation while interacting with technology-supported learning environments promises to contribute to the design of more effective educational programs and thus ultimately to higher educational performance (Shroff, Vogel, & Coombes, 2008). I believe intrinsic motivation becomes very important to student success because of the constructivist nature of e-learning. With the student-centered approach, if a student is not motivated, they will not be engaged in the process and learning will be minimal. I think it is important for teachers to understand where the motivation of the student comes from.
Intrinsic motivation is based on the self-determining needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2004). It is very difficult for instructors to learn about their students in the e-learning environment and knowing your students makes it easier to recognize and gauge what motivates them. To overcome these challenges, there are considerations instructors make in their role in the e-learning process. The role they take can influence student satisfaction, which influences motivation.

ROLE OF INSTRUCTORS

As a teacher in the e-learning setting, the role you play may be different than the traditional setting. The role you assume may also have an impact on the success of your students. Although the course is delivered by electronic means, interaction is still a major factor. Learners expect and demand instruction with high levels of interaction among the learners and between learner and instructor. Failure to meet these demands may have serious consequences. When learners do not get enough feedback in an online course, they feel frustrated with the course and tend to drop out (Kearsley, 2002). Chin, Lin and Kinshuk (2008) found that the communication and interaction among classmates, the interaction for the class discussion board, the interaction for office-hours and the interaction for the issue-based discussion board all have significant influence on satisfaction. Therefore, it is important to effectively manage these synchronous and asynchronous tools to better facilitate interaction among learner-learner, learner-teacher and learner-content (Chen, Lin, & Kinshuk, 2008). The need for interaction is impacting other areas as well. The demand for interactivity has placed a new focus on instructional
design and the relevant technologies (Burnett, 2001). Traditionally, teachers may have assumed the role of the leader in the educational process. The adaptation of different distance learning technologies through the e-learning environment uses constructivist principles of learning, allowing learners to construct new knowledge based on their previous store of information (Beitz & Snarponis, 2006). Because of this approach, the role shifts towards more of a facilitator or coach in e-learning. The increased use of e-learning technology in education is often seen as a result of the general shift toward adult learning theories in which the educator is viewed not as a distributor of content, but as a facilitator of learning and an assessor of learning outcomes (Ruiz, Mintzer, & Leipzig, 2006). Moving away from a teacher-centered model and having the instructor play a conversational or informal role allows for more student participation and dialogue (Hutchinson, 2007). I believe assuming this role allows for the interaction and feedback students desire in e-learning. Along with the role of facilitator, teachers may also find themselves in the role of support person. Providing socioaffective support is an important element in collaborative online work groups to give the students a sense of belonging and help motivate them to apply themselves to the tasks at hand, especially at times when they are finding their study difficult to manage. This level of support can be given to the students by way of posting supportive comments and sharing personal experiences with them. Evidence suggests that support and encouragement has provided a network of social interaction that inspires the mutual respect and trust required for a successful collaborative group process (Stacey 1999). As technology has changed instruction, it has also changed how students view the teacher.
CONCLUSION

While considering the factors that contribute to successes or failures in e-learning, I have developed several conclusions. What perceptions and attitudes do students hold in regards to online courses? Students do possess perceptions in regards to e-learning. What the instructor perceives and what the student perceives differs and it becomes a process of gauging perceptions and making predictions about what students expect and believe. What factors influence achievement in online courses? As Fresen suggests, it is impossible to list all critical success factors for quality web-supported learning (Fresen, 2007). There are many factors that influence achievement. It is going to be different for every student. The repeated discussion of motivation and learner satisfaction seems to suggest they are among the more important factors. There are many factors that contribute to motivation and learner satisfaction. Are students motivated to succeed in online courses? There are strategies and techniques that teachers can use to contribute or detract from student motivation. The student-centered approach taps into the intrinsic motivation of the student. Teachers must consider this when dealing with course design and instruction. Can instructors contribute to student perceptions and attitudes, thus affect their success? Instructors can absolutely affect student success and help mold their perceptions of e-learning. Instructors must consider many factors that lead to positive or negative experiences for students. These experiences are what determine how they view future endeavors in regards to e-learning.
References:


Rob Martens, Theo Bastiaens, Paul A Kirschner. (2007). New Learning Design in Distance Education: The impact on student perception and motivation. Distance Education, 28(1), 81-93.