THE IMPACT OF LEARNING PREFERENCES ON RETENTION OF ADULT STUDENTS IN AN ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAM

Juliann McAdoo
Olivet Nazarene University
Ed.D. Cohort XV
March 24, 2018
Statement of the Problem

Because online course completion rates are lower than completion rates in the traditional classroom (Capra, 2011) and incompatibility with learning style is one of the major factors leading to withdrawal from online courses (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014) consideration of the learning style preference of students in an online degree program is important. The mismatch between learning style preference and course design and delivery could de-motivate a student to the point of withdrawal, leading to the consequences of low retention for both the student and the institution.
The purpose of the current study was to investigate the impact of student learning preferences - based on a multiple intelligences model - on retention of adult students in a fully online undergraduate degree program at a Midwestern university in order to recommend enhancements to course design and academic advising strategies.
Learning Styles Research

- Lack of agreement on the definition of learning style and if there is an optimal learning style for the online environment (Kauffman, 2015).

- After multiple studies there is no agreement on, or approval of, one theory (Bechter & Esichaikul, 2008, Stokes, 2000).

- Instruction tailored toward a student’s learning style may produce better task outcomes (Cegielski, Hazen, & Rainer, 2011)
Retention

- Little research exploring connection between learning preference and retention

- Much of the literature related to retention in online courses focused on attrition is just one course.
Student Satisfaction

- Compatibility with learning style contributes to higher satisfaction in online courses (Cole, et al., 2014)

- Students with certain preferences experienced higher satisfaction with online courses (Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006)
Significance of the Study

Much of the literature related to retention in online courses focused on the attrition rate in just one online course. Therefore, as a result of this study, the body of knowledge about longer-term retention of online students was expanded. In addition, measuring the relationship of learning preferences with major area of study, student satisfaction, and retention, will provide a framework for recruiting and advising online students, as well as for making enhancements for online course design.
Quantitative
Archival data
Survey data
Convenience sample
Correlational

Research Design
SmarterMeasure Assessment

- Required assignment
- Licensed through SmarterServices, LLC
- Construct validity indicates goodness of fit for online learning as statistically significant at the .01 level (SmarterServices, LLC, n.d.a).
- Reported Cronbach Alpha reliability of .81 for the learning styles subscale (SmarterServices, LLC, n.d.b.)
Student Satisfaction Survey

- Modified Penn State survey
- Delivered via email
- Available for two weeks
- Two reminders
- Six-point Likert-type scale
- Coefficient alpha of .95 = high internal consistency
Participants

- 273 students
- 49% Caucasian
- 75% female
- 64% ages 24-31
- 90% transferred college credits
- Mean GPA 2.48
- 42 completed surveys
Survey Responses by Major

School of Business:
- Business Administration: 12%
- Accounting: 7%
- English: 7%
- Elementary Education: 5%
- Human Resources: 5%

School of Arts & Sciences:
- Addictions Counseling: 5%
- Communication: 2%
- Health Care Management: 19%
- Human Services: 10%
- Nursing: 12%
- Christian Ministry: 2%
- Data Science and Technology: 2%
- Psychology: 12%
Distribution of Students by Learning Preference

Number of Students

- Verbal / Linguistic: 8
- Visual / Spatial: 12
- Physical / Bodily-Kinesthetic: 34
- Solitary / Intrapersonal: 38
- Social / Interpersonal: 47
- Logical / Mathematical: 47
- Aural / Musical: 87
RQ1: What is the relationship, if any, between learning preference and major for students taking courses in an online undergraduate degree program?

Data:
- Learning preference profile obtained from SmarterMeasure database
- Major program of study obtained from University database

Analysis:
- Phi-coefficient correlation of nominal data: primary learning preference and major

Findings:
- No statistically significant correlation between learning preference and major, $r (42) = .172, p = .275$. 
RQ2: What is the relationship, if any, between learning preference and retention in an online undergraduate degree program?

Data:
- Learning preference profile obtained from SmarterMeasure database
- Enrollment data for fifth term from University database

Analysis:
- Phi-coefficient correlation of nominal data: learning preference and enrollment status

Findings:
- No statistically significant correlation between learning preference and retention, $r(265) = .190$, $p = .141$
RQ3: What is the relationship, if any, between learning preference and student satisfaction with learning in an online undergraduate degree program?

Data:
- Learning preference profile obtained from SmarterMeasure database
- Student satisfaction survey composite score
- Range of possible satisfaction scores: 13-65

Analysis:
- Point-biserial correlation of nominal data (learning preference) and Interval data (composite satisfaction score)

Findings:
- Mean satisfaction score: 54.30
- No statistically significant correlation between learning preference and student satisfaction, \( r(42) = .172, p = .275 \).
RQ4: What differences exist in student satisfaction, major, and retention based on learning preference?

Test 1: Student Satisfaction and Retention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retained</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>54.8750</td>
<td>8.58367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Retained</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>52.1538</td>
<td>14.65063</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings:
Statistically significant relationship between student satisfaction and retention, $t (35) = .715, p = .024$
RQ4: What differences exist in student satisfaction, major, and retention based on learning preference?

Test 2: Student Satisfaction by School Governing Major

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governing School</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Sciences</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>55.8182</td>
<td>9.07449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>51.1333</td>
<td>13.11415</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings:
No statistically significant relationship between student satisfaction and governing School, $t (35) = 1.287, p = .133$
Conclusions

- Learning preferences are dynamic and students can adapt.
- No optimal learning preference for the online environment.
- Student satisfaction and retention are linked.
Implications

- Lower retention of students with a primary learning preference of aural or physical implies the need for further research.
Limitations

- Sample size
- One institution
- Time frame for data collection
- Lack of control for differentiated instruction
- Non-traditional schedule
- Students assessed with multiple learning preferences
Recommendations

- Similar study with a larger sample size across multiple institutions
- Longer time frame to fully measure retention of adult students
- Better identification of a student's true primary learning preference
- More research on differentiated instruction in a post-secondary setting
- Specific research by the University to investigate why School of Business students reported lower satisfaction with the online program
References


