Ultimate or Alternate?
Enhancing the E-Learning Experience for Creative Media Students:
Hong Kong and Singapore Perspective

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Abstract

Online learning (E-learning) platforms such as Blackboard, Moodle, and MOOCs have been widely used in various higher educational institutions. These E-learning platforms have been designed and developed for students to enhance their learning experiences by promoting blended learning. Current research in this area has demonstrated the effectiveness of online learning for distance education and as an online resources tool for students' benefit.

Conversely, the potential of E-learning platforms for art, design, and creative media students' learning experience have not been adequately explored extensively for the full benefit of it; for instance, courses that are meant to provide tutorial sessions, peer reviews, and project-based learning practices are not favorable to be delivered through general E-learning portals.

Hence, this paper aspires to bridge the knowledge gap by providing insights into how the E-learning approach can be harnessed to facilitate the teaching process in art, design, and creative media courses. Through an analysis of sixty(60) face-to-face in-depth interviews and online surveys with current students and educators in tertiary creative media courses in Hong Kong and Singapore, this study seeks to examine the current E-learning model and makes recommendations to generate better understanding in order to build an enhanced conceptual model. Furthermore, the findings of this study will indicate that customized and improved E-learning experiences are much needed for creative media students which could be catered to their specific pedagogical needs of the discipline.

Keywords: E-learning, Online learning, Web-based learning, Creative Media students, Online learning experience

1. Introduction

Online learning has rapidly increased and improved regarding its usage in higher education over the last 20 years. Different platforms have been created for various goals, and the expectations for e-learning have changed. The resources are dynamic, and they can come from any online platforms. E-learning has been promoted and generalized in the educational sectors, regardless of different disciplines' characteristics, because of its versatility, flexibility, and personalization potential (Saadé, R.G., Xin, H., & Kira, D., 2005). Many schools are eager to provide students with numerous online learning platforms with learning management systems (LMS) to support both learning and teaching. However, online learning has not been utilized effectively in design/creative media courses, which require more practice-based learning and development. (Park, 2011). Lim (2004) has argued that tools including hardware, software, and infrastructure only provide the necessary conditions for online learning. According to general knowledge about e-learning, the platforms can be useful for distributing text-based information and managing students' assessment practice. However, creative media courses, such as art and design courses, are required to provide teacher-student interactivity for high-quality tutorial sessions because they focus heavily on technical skills (Oh, 2015), and these skills are catered to by educators who perform demos during class. The nature of these courses, which involves face-to-face consultation for project-based learning, is rather inappropriate for the e-learning environment.

The priority of creative media courses is to nurture students to be creative content creators by harnessing and honing their skill sets. Hence, interactivity and engagement in the classroom are considered essential characteristics of this discipline. Therefore, fixed online learning tools and LMSs should be customized for the unique learning context. This could benefit creative media courses, especially for Hong Kong and Singaporean students who utilize online tools for a blended learning experience, which is usually reinforced by schools. Singapore and Hong Kong are known to have the infrastructure, advanced IT sectors, and international profiles necessary to support rapid e-learning growth (Lee, 2005) (McNaught, 2011).

2. Aims and Objectives

This paper seeks to examine the impacts of e-learning on students' learning experience and to figure out how to customize the current e-learning practices to maximize the educational benefits for students. The nature of creative media courses is to nurture students to be content creators by training them with different technical skills and reinforcing their motivation to keep them creative. Therefore, studio-based learning is essential, with continuous tutorial sessions between teachers and students. However, e-learning platforms are not fully supportive of the studio environment, and the majority of design faculty members don't tend to use e-learning platforms often because they don't find them useful. This phenomenon causes a low usage rate of e-learning platforms in the classroom among design professors. Hence, the blended learning approach might be appropriate for creative media students. Some e-learning systems can function as tools such as bulletin boards or forums, but e-learning platforms run by a learning management system at a higher education institution have one distinctive characteristic: they are internal, and this means that there is no chance for the students to align themselves with industry professionals or to collaborate with people from outside the institution. This amateurish characteristic limits the opportunities of students who would love to explore and broaden their horizons by showcasing their artwork or having

discussions with peers from other institutions. Therefore, this study aims to examine the current e-learning model that the participants of this study use and to propose a customized online learning model for creative media students to enhance their learning experience.

Hence, this study aims to investigate students' enhanced learning experience using customized e-learning approaches. The key research questions are as follows:

> 1) How do students perceive e-learning for their coursework?

> 2) What factors affect students' learning experience when using e-learning platforms?

> 3) How do students perceive e-learning in terms of enhancing the learning experience in creative media courses?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Characteristics of Creative Media courses

Studio practice is the key to teaching art, design, and creative media today (Park, 2011). During studio hours, students carry out practical exercises, as well as conceptual and critical thinking exercises, and share their work with their classmates and teachers. Park (2011) has also claimed that the studio is where students and teachers interact with each other based on traditional principles of supervision, consultation, and discussion. Students usually are given a long-term project, and they try to hit different milestones as they progress with their projects to the end product. Along the way, students encounter problems in completing each different milestone, most of which are practical and technical, and they learn to solve the problems by assessing their learning and working to fix them. Thus, creative media and design education share the similar practice of project-based learning, and Lee (2009) pointed out that project-based learning is considered "a common feature in practice-based design education," where it is "rarely defined in practical curriculum development terms." Creative media students learn from scratch to set up a project pipeline, conceptualize and produce artwork, do post-production, and participate in dialogue sessions. Dialogues foster reflective practice, (Schön, 1983) and this is a fundamental component of design-related education, because through dialogues and consultations, students will become more skilled and gain a deeper understanding of their projects. (Schön, 1987) Through dialogue sessions, students can identify and solve authentic problems, which allows them to assess their learning and bridge the gap between what they have learned and how it can be used in practice (Park, 2011). Waks (2001) argued that regular communication and demonstration enables students to holistically approach the problem or task by integrating societal values and design elements into problem-based learning. By participating in a dialogue, students can develop and sharpen their reasoning skills. It is essential to engage students in interactive pedagogy so as to transform them from simple recipients of information into original contributors of insightful, quality responses (Auyeung, 2004). Students encounter various problems when they work on their projects, and therefore, constant supervision, consultation, and discussion are required in and are essential characteristics of creative media courses.

3.2 Creative media students' perception of e-learning

Recently, researchers have shown that students generally perceive e-learning positively. Students nowadays can be described as "digital natives" or "millennials" who have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, smart devices, and all sorts of other toys and tools of the digital age (Prenksy, 2001). They use different digital gadgets with extensive features on a daily basis, for things such as communication (email, messengers, etc) or social networking (Facebook, blogs, etc.) (Lam et.al., 2011).

Just because most students nowadays are digital natives, however, does not guarantee that they enjoy e-learning for their coursework. The learning management systems adopted by universities provide students with electronic support and functions, working as centralized tools to provide materials (Vovides et al., 2007; Conole et al., 2006). However, most creative media students perceive them only as information distribution platforms. As studio-based practice is the core teaching method for creative media courses, students still consider the traditional training that provides face-to-face teaching to be the proper method for their learning. Students believe that receiving prompt feedback from teachers can provide a better learning experience.

Students also perceive e-learning as a formal, interactive activity; therefore, they are not enthusiastic about using it. LMSs include online pop quizzes and assignment submission as a part of their learning approach, and students consider the learning experience to be very limited (McNaught et.al., 2011). According to the students who were interviewed for this study, students need more a communicative and interactive e-learning approach for a better learning experience. They consider LMSs to be rigid and inflexible systems for learning.

3.3 E-learning in creative media courses in Hong Kong and Singapore

Pedagogy is changing rapidly with the growth of online technologies (Auyeung, 2004), particularly in Asia. Higher education institutions have started adopting various online learning management systems, such as Blackboard, Administrate, Moodle, Canvas, among others. Technology has changed the outlook of learning for both traditional and distance education, and these different platforms offer teachers and students more interactivity.
Broadfoot and Bennett (2003) argue that online learning can generate creativity, high-order thinking, reflection-in-action, and proficiency in design skills. Moreover, it fosters educational values by providing an active and engaging learning experience to students and educators alike. However, it is not immediately apparent how technologies can be employed to develop and deliver high-level interactive learning content for students without a thorough investigation (Milton, 2001), especially for design or creative media students. Although technology has advanced far enough to enable educators to embody many features of face-to-face learning in an online learning environment, researchers continue to argue that it still has restrictions in its functional capabilities to replace traditional learning (Clark 2003; Ho 2002; Quinsee & Hurst 2004).

As the "Intelligent Island," Singapore had become the first fully connected country with a hybrid fiber-optic cable network for almost all homes and businesses in the Central Business District (CBD) by the dawn of new millennium, the year 2000 (Lee, 2005). It had built the

most networked society in the world. Therefore, the education sector was equipped with e-learning activities. Singapore believed that the Internet had been designed as a key tool for transforming the nation into an innovative and creative society (George, 2002), so it was unavoidable that e-learning would be integrated and embedded in the curriculum of higher education, as education plays a critical role in Singapore. Universities and higher education institutions mostly engage in e-learning activities through LMSs. However, creative media, art, and design students see e-learning as less beneficial than students in other disciplines, as they prefer face-to-face tutorial sessions with their teachers in a studio-based learning environment.

The same thing is happening in Hong Kong regarding e-learning activities in higher education institutions. McNaught (2011) discovered that education officials are conservative about the use of technology for teaching and learning in Hong Kong. Nowadays, schools use the term "hybrid learning" to refer to a combination of technology-based and face-to-face learning activities (McNaught, 2011). However, students still lack an understanding of online learning, and they see LMSs mainly as tools for distributing information about their coursework. They appreciate the diversity of the functionality of technology but are also cautious about changing old habits, especially if this might impact their grades (McNaught, 2011). In the case of creative media students, they are more aware that they might not learn as much through online learning platforms than through their traditional tutorial sessions with teachers. These students are usually familiar with the technologies because they have to use different software and internet resources to create their work. However, they perceive an insufficiency in online learning materials, and some mentioned in their interview sessions that they wished e-learning platforms could adopt some more functions from social media. They use social networking services such Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, and many others actively for communication and reference collection on a daily basis.

4. Research Methodology

Qualitative research was employed as the main methodology to carry out this study. The purpose of this study was to identify how the current attributes of e-learning affect creative media students' learning experience and to provide suggestions for a better understanding of e-learning.

For this study, students and educators who represent creative media courses from Hong Kong and Singapore were chosen because these are countries where a relatively high percentage of higher education institutions use Internet networks, have good educational infrastructure, and incorporate LMSs compared to the rest of Asia.

Both face-to-face and email interviews were conducted with a total of 60 interviewees. For a better understanding of students' perceptions of the current e-learning systems and students' needs, the interview questions were based on research questions and the groups were segregated: the first group consisted of students and faculty members who had experience using LMSs, and the second group was comprised of students and educators who had no experience with e-learning platforms.

Albert Bandura (1977) discovered that people learn by observing the consequences of other people's behavior in his "social learning theory" (which later he renamed to "social cognitive

theory"). It is often described as the "bridge" between traditional learning theory and the cognitive approach. This is because it focuses on how mental (cognitive) factors are involved in learning (McLeod, 2016). He referred to "other people" or the "mass media" as models for people to observe and imitate. Observers (learners) learn by observing the consequences of the models' behavior—if the models get rewarded, the tendency of the observer to imitate the behavior increases. Bandura's theory was used for this study to suggest a conceptual framework.

<Conceptual Framework>

Bandura's Social Learning Theory	Phenomenon in E-learning
Attention	- Students notice that their school uses an e-learning system. - Students see their peers using e-learning systems to retrieve their course material. - Students see their peers submitting their assignments through the e-learning platform.
Retention	- Students mainly use the e-learning platform to retrieve their course materials and submit assignments. - Students perceive that e-learning systems are rigid and difficult to use. - Students don't consider e-learning a learning experience.
Reproduction	- Students see their peers using SNSs for their e-learning experience. - Students see the benefits that SNS features could bring to LMSs. - Students are open to innovation.
Motivation	- Students are willing to engage in e-learning with more innovative and customized platforms. - They can see the benefits of enhanced e-learning platforms.

5. Results

Finding 1: Most of the students did not consider e-learning platforms to enhance their learning experience.

Based on the results of the interviews, both students and educators in creative media courses mentioned that using LMSs are not highly favorable for the courses. Interviewees stated that they use e-learning platforms to retrieve information and teaching material, such as lecture notes or assignment briefs with a submission schedule, as well as to submit their assignments to the system. They consider and utilize them as information distributing platforms, so they do not give further experimentation with the platforms a second thought.

They also mentioned that not knowing much about the platform hinders using it to its full extent. Most of the students also thought that simply using specific platforms was not e-learning. However, it still is a good way to distribute the information they need to know for their assignments.

Finding 2: The students mentioned the rigidness of e-learning platforms and that they generally have some technical inflexibilities.

The interviewees indicated that the functions of e-learning platforms could be enhanced. E-learning platforms are still limited when it comes to interactive communication. There is no interactivity—one cannot reply or leave comments on announcements or in the assignment section to get feedback or an answer from the tutor. This makes the platforms one-way channels for students. The lack of such functions does not encourage students to use the platforms more proactively. Moreover, some of them mentioned that the user interfaces are boring and not user friendly, making the platforms even less attractive.

Both groups of interviewees use SNSs (social networking service) to either supplement their specific e-learning platforms or as their main e-learning approach. The group of students and educators who use SNSs as a supplement platform claimed that useful functions of SNSs have helped them a lot to communicate with each other. As the most unattractive feature of e-learning is the lack of interactivity, students feel that a "reply" or "comment" function should be integrated into e-learning platforms.

Creative media students are familiar with brainstorming, sharing ideas using sketchbooks, taking notes, and checking numerous references online, so they require platforms that can give them a more open, flexible, and interactive experience. They also mentioned that if e-learning platforms adopted some tools from SNSs, they would be willing to visit and use the platforms more often.

Findings 3: Interviewees do not consider LMSs e-learning platforms.

Most of the students asserted that LMSs have no effect on their learning; in other words, they do not feel that using LMSs enhances their learning experience in any way. They do not value the experience as part of their learning process because the platforms are merely used for administrative purposes—to distribute course-related information. Moreover, because of the characteristics of creative media courses, students prefer traditional, face-to-face tutorial sessions.

The group of students and educators who did not use e-learning platforms were satisfied with using SNSs as alternative e-learning platforms. They utilize them as information distributing boards as well, but the interactivity between teachers and students or between students and their peers actively happens all the time on SNSs. They share their ideas with images or videos of their references and upload their artwork to the platform for feedback from their teachers and peers. The most beneficial experience they get is that they receive notifications on their smart devices and computers immediately. This immediacy motivates them and connects them to the learning mode, and this atmosphere carries over to the physical classroom because they

are always connected. They are more encouraged to participate because the platforms are more interactive than typical e-learning systems. They are not one-way communication channels but two-way communicative networks.

Some examples from interview sessions:

> *"I think LMS can be similar to SNS which provides interactivity. I want to reply my teacher's announcements or want to share some useful information with my peer but system doesn't allow us to do so. It is, in a way, very restrictive and passive to be a learning platform."*

> *"We have used school's e-learning platform to download course materials (PPT slides), and upload our assignments. That is it."*

> *"I love using our batch's Facebook group to check my teachers' announcements, and share the useful reference with my classmates. Platform is very open for us to do sharing and having discussion sessions."*

6. Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of using e-learning platforms among creative media students and to identify how to make teachers and students more willing to use e-learning platforms.

The findings suggest that e-learning platforms should be more innovative and flexible. Students do not sufficiently know about or understand e-learning, and they believe that the purpose of e-learning platforms is only to retrieve course materials and submit assignments. Moreover, they mentioned that most e-learning platforms have rigid systems, so students encounter technical difficulties when they try to edit their submissions.

The interviewees suggested that e-learning platforms could be enhanced by adopting functions from SNSs, such as a "reply" function or other interactive tools that foster two-way communication between teachers and students. The current generation of students is familiar with the advancements of technology, and they are keen on taking opportunities to improve their learning experience through e-learning. From the findings, we can see that the participants are open to innovation and change to create a positive learning experience. Since every discipline has different expectations and styles of learning, students think that e-learning platforms should be customized for different fields. To create an e-learning platform that students perceive as beneficial, schools and educators should pay more attention to a design that can be adapted for different disciplines. This effort will gradually change students' perception of e-learning and allow them to appreciate the advantages of the e-learning experience.

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