

Lynn Akin | lakin@mail.twu.edu
Arglenda Friday | afriday@mail.twu.edu
Texas Woman's University
Denton, Texas, USA

Online Learning and the Nature of Choices

This exploratory research examines the nature and impact of choices within an online learning environment. Andragogy, constructivism, and learning styles theories support providing self-direction to adult students. In this study, two sections of an online course during the same term (spring), with a total enrollment of 60, were selected to receive assignment choices. In this online class, modules were the weekly units and the choices could be exercised in three specific modules with generally 3 choices per module. They were freely allowed to select, out of the offerings, those assignments that appealed to them. The choices were designed to address varied learning styles and the principles of both constructivism, and andragogy.

In the research design, each student was assigned a random number by the GTA and this number was known only by the student and the GTA. The choice assignments were sent to the course GTA with the random number, and the GTA posted all of the assignments in the appropriate forum under the student identification number. All feedback from the instructor was publicly made and to the random number. The choices were handled in a 3 module cycle: module A was the actual choice, module B was the quiz, and module C asked the students about the nature of their choice and their opinions and reflections.

The research questions included what type of choices would be most frequently selected by online learners, did personality type play a role in choice selection, did previous professional experience play a role in choice selection, did certain choices lead to higher grades, and did student like having choices. Demographics of the students are included and results are both qualitative and quantitative in nature. One surprising element of the research was the difficulty students had with the anonymity of the choice design and student anxiety about their grades, even in an anonymous, un-graded environment.

Colleagues will be able to maximize their understanding of the full use of online environment, discuss the elements of adult learning theory, consider student anxiety about grades and performance, faculty grading techniques when choices are involved and the ability to measure ones grading rubrics and consistency when assignments come in at different times. Since the topic is about choices, the audience will be given choices, and then allowed to consider and reflect on their choices at varying points during the presentation.