

Learning Online: The Student Experience

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Abstract

The post-millennial era and the Internet evolution have opened flood gates for e-learning as a mode of education. However, overreliance on secondary information as a vehicle to inform the impact of e-learning provides filtered information regarding online learning. Many studies and articles have explored the impetus of online learning, but there remains a gap in understanding online learning through the students' perspective. In a provocative and equally intriguing book, George Veletsianos reconnoiters online learning by critically focusing on students' experiences to inform his findings.

Keywords: e-learning, educational technology, internet education, open and distance learning



LEARNING ONLINE

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE
GEORGE VELETSIANOS

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In “Learning Online: The Student Experience” book, Veletsianos follows a journey of day-to-day experiences of students using e-learning as he tackles various issues such as traits of learners, emotional aspects, distractions, mobility, exam irregularities, and motivation, among others. The rallying call is for the holistic development of online education to craft an education system that impacts the learner. Veletsianos unearths new ramifications that will shape the development of new and relevant pedagogy for online learning.

Veletsianos is a Professor of Education whose expertise majors in digital education and emerging technologies. He is a full professor at Royal Roads University and holds the Canada Research Chair in Innovative Learning and Technology and the Commonwealth of Learning Chair in Flexible Learning. Professor Veletsianos has twenty years of experience developing and evaluating digital learning settings. He has authored six books and published over one hundred peer-reviewed papers, reports, and book chapters. Veletsianos is a decorated author, scholar, and research with vast experience in digital learning environments. His works allow stakeholders in the education industry, especially e-learning, to dig further and understand digital learning extensively. In his recent book “Learning Online: The Student Experience,” Veletsianos used a distinct approach of basing his research on a personal experience giving the study a foundation for identifying and understanding the topic from a new perspective. Each chapter focuses on an individual learner’s experience addressing a specific issue from the previous chapter.

A critical aspect that Veletsianos addresses is the emergence of demand for online learning across different demographics. From the book’s introductory part, the author acknowledges the massive enrolments for online courses, with numbers going to a hundred thousand per session, as he quotes (Veletsianos, 2020). The author also immediately agrees that there are several issues that stakeholders fail to understand regarding online students basing his argument on the issue of demographics. Ou et al. (2019) pinpoint the most common variables that describe demographics as age, sex, income level, employment, race, location, level of education, hobbies, lifestyle, and preferences. The book brings forth a demographical basis as factors affecting online learning among students coherently. For example, chapter four highlights the story of two learners in different parts of the world and different age brackets and their experiences in online learning.

In one story, a learner named Peter works full-time in a demanding police officer job that sometimes requires him to work for twelve hours. Peter is in his mid-thirties with a family; he lives in Europe—a background Veletsianos describes as affluent, and his sole motivation for learning is to earn a promotion at his workplace. From the author’s description of the respondent, several demographical connotations are linked to Peter joining an online class. First, his demanding work schedule and the need to progress career-wise support his engagement in e-learning. Second, Peter lives in an affluent hometown; thus, he needs better pay to sustain his family and personal needs. Peter represents the traditional view of online learners who were civil servants or organization employees who yearn to better themselves career-wise. It is a notion that has progressed for ages segmenting online education for a particular class of people.

In contrast, Veletsianos gives the reader a different perspective of an online learner, still focusing on demographic factors. In her early twenties, Jenifer has a flexible daily schedule, but she still undertakes an online course despite living within the school. The respondent works part-time at a local restaurant near the school; she dances ballet and is a sophomore. The author depicts Jenifer from a normal perspective of a university student who has plenty of time at her hands and who perfectly fits for a physical class. However, Jennifer still engages in an online course. From these comparisons, the author believes that online learning is on the rise across the board. The observation contradicts the earlier feel that the working class or people with a rigid daily schedule are the ones who participate in online learning. The different demographic variables between Jennifer and Peter give the reader an awakening on the dynamics in e-learning.

The author subtly tells us regarding demographics that stakeholders, especially policymakers and curriculum designers, should look at online learning with a flexible mindset, understanding that learners are blended based on various factors. Rizvi et al. (2019) assert that it is challenging or unwise to classify online learners into a single segment but appreciate the diverse nature. This diversity also means that online learners have different needs. Sophomores will comprise a specific age group with certain characteristics and needs in a

traditional setup. Generalization of requirements and characteristics may result in some of the learner's needs getting overlooked; hence, the student experience is challenging.

Besides, the book addresses the psychological aspects of learners and how they affect their learning attitude. There is a deeper analysis of loneliness, isolation, anxiety, connectedness, and social learning. Hong et al. (2021) mention that personality traits are distinctively different and bring constant individuality. The interviewee mentioned in chapter one claims to be anxious while driving home from work to go and attend his class. He expresses uncertainty at some point and also hopefulness for better experiences in future coursework. Chapter seven identifies lack of connectivity as a significant undoing for e-learning. Students say they need social engagement and connection that is partially achieved through online platforms. According to the personality theory, the daily transactions of a human being follow a specific pattern throughout a variety of situations (Kamal & Radhakrishnan, 2019).

The book delves further into the need for connecting to the emotional aspect of the learner with their learning experience as opposed to just focusing on the output of learning in terms of academic performance. In the book's first chapter, the author converses with a learner who is also a facilitator in a community college. Veletsianos describes his interviewee as an inactive social media person painting a picture of an individual with little or insufficient knowledge of technology. The tone created by the author brings the impression of a person who would vouch for the traditional course as opposed to an online course. Inversely, the interviewee response shows a motivation towards online learning based on emotional connectives. As opposed to the notion created, the respondent feels comfortable with online class claiming closeness with his peers and more attention to his coursework. The respondent contends that online groups give him a sense of belonging and feel equal to his peers.

The interviewee is in his early fifties, and his lack of social media interest invokes bias towards his take on e-learning. However, the personality trait or rather psychological factors influence his interest in getting exposed to something new. The selection of such a respondent is critical. It allows the readers to interact with the experience of someone who has been in both online and traditional learning and practices teaching at tertiary levels. Veletsianos, in this case, uses such a respondent intentionally and purposively to outline how psychological factors influence the need for online learning irrespective of physical aspects.

In a similar breadth, the book touches, akin lightly, the issue of resources and the impact on e-learning. A story mentions a learner who relied on a family computer and another who dropped out of school. These two excerpts narrate how constraint resources pose a challenge to learners. Resource unavailability is a fundamental issue that affects learners' experiences both on e-learning and traditional setup. There was an attempt to tie the case of resources with the emotional aspect of learners. However, the argument reflects a universal condition that is not unique to the digital environments. Various resource challenges impede both online and traditional courses. According to Adnan and Anwar (2020), simple factors such as inadequate time to interact online to challenging issues such as limited computer skills, and lack of computer laboratories affect online learning. Similarly, lack of enough computers will still be a challenge to traditional classes affecting presentations and coursework.

One of the book's significant undoing is the author's subjectivity, as observed in the aforementioned descriptions of interviewees in this review. The author appears to be subjective and drives the reader's understanding in a particular direction by giving a bias description of the interviewee, creating a specific context in the reader's mind. The challenge associated with subjectivity is that the audience fails to obtain the advantage of construing knowledge impartially. The thesis and the book's introduction create an intriguing need to understand the student's experience concerning online learning. However, at some point, the author felt a little bit in control of the interview deluding the objectivity aspect of the study.

A second issue identified with the book involves the solutions suggested to the outlined problems. Some of the solutions are superficial and fail to open up new, lucrative, and informative answers to the research problems as anticipated. Veletsianos repeatedly refers to social media as a hindrance to the active participation of online learning. In a different chapter, he propagates the need to teach students how to use social media to foster connectivity. Sobaih et al. (2020) agree that social media is a tool that needs to be used

carefully, especially in the rise of COVID-19 pandemic online learners have been primarily affected. Veletsianos agrees with social media as a hindrance tool in one section and demonizes it in another section. The abrupt change of tunes creates disharmony in the unity of the solutions provided by the author.

The physical outlook and the arrangement of Veletsianos' work create an aesthetic beauty that sparks the reader's interest. The visual representation of the hardcover is simple and straightforward. The visuals on the hardcover contains an image of a person using a laptop on their reading table having some reading materials beside. The implication is that the person is interacting with e-learning module and presumably a student. The illustrations give clear context of the book eliminating any aspect of ambiguity. Veletsianos selected a clear title, "Learning Online: The Student Experience," that summarizes the book's content. A reader will grasp the expected content in the book by just skim reading the title. The volume of the book is also manageable for an average reader with only one hundred and seventy-four pages to cover. The work is divided into chapters consisting of independent topics that make it easier to read through.

From the analysis of this review, the intended readership for the book is policymakers, curriculum designers, and higher education facilitators and learners. Learners and facilitators will find the book imperative and thought-provoking. The book tackles serious issues, such as how demographics and psychological variables affect online learning. Strategists and curriculum designers will find the book a bit superficial and focus on different themes simultaneously. A lack of coherent empirical evidence can move policymakers into making changes to the current online education design. However, the content of the book remains substantial in awakening a discussion on digital learning methods. There is a serious need to take a look and acknowledge that students' experiences matter and use the information in framing a curriculum.

There is also an urgent need to discuss the emerging digital learning environments and the social and emotional impact on the learners and education facilities. The book ignites an engagement of the psychological issues and their role in this new medium of moving instructions. Veletsianos carefully captures elemental moments in student's phase in school both psychologically and physically. The need for association, mental condition, motivation to do more, societal expectations, career progression, academic excellence, exam irregularities, teacher-student interaction among other aspects that affect learners. As a result, the book is timely regarding the imperative change of dynamics in education and creates an environment for engagement. A few issues can be noted from the scholarly point of view regarding the strength of the thesis and the argument afterwards. Veletsianos ought to engage further in this topic and critically analyze the responses from the interviewees and focus on a specific theme for better understanding and bringing forth new information into the limelight. However, the book is recommendable and remains a good read for the audience.

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