Digital divide or digital choices? Exploring the experiences of older students using new technologies

Background
Research in e-learning is usually focused on technological or pedagogical issues and learner perspectives are under-represented in the literature. Course-designers would benefit from an understanding of learner perspectives such as identity, control and whether a study environment or communication is personal or impersonal. Using a qualitative grounded theory approach, this paper is part of an ongoing project using surveys, semi-structured telephone interviews and diaries to explore students’ study experiences. The participants are distance education students of The Open University, on short introductory courses in Mathematics and Arts with optional use of computers.

Method
The paper focuses upon detailed thematic analysis of transcripts of five semi-structured telephone interviews about use of computers for study. All five older learners had home internet access. A postal survey had previously been used with 300 students. The interviewees completed and returned that questionnaire before the interview. The questionnaire covered study goals, attitudes towards, access to and use of technologies in daily life and for studying.

Results
These students had access to the technology and many of the required skills, but did not necessarily use the computer for every task. Emerging themes included: personal/impersonal, anxiety, control, independence and support. Detailed coding identified critical incidents, e.g. choosing between two media (such as telephone or email when contacting the tutor, or reading web pages rather than printed materials). The paper identifies these incidents and suggests some common factors that may affect student choices, such as informal support in the home or need for control over study environment. Factors affecting the acquisition of computer skills were also explored.

Conclusion
Informal computer support and control over the study environment are important factors. The location of the computer in the home can affect preferences, e.g. a student may prefer books to web pages, simply because a book can be read in a comfortable chair. A model is suggested that links the major themes from the data. Further work will explore longitudinal data from student diaries. Finally, educators need to recognise these affective issues, to provide effective support for computer-mediated learning.

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