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# Empowering Non-Traditional Students to Succeed in Online Programs

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## ABSTRACT

*In their research on student learning Rieh and Hilligoss (2008) study the proximal factors of today's students and how they interact with technology, in their pursuit of information. This paper looks at how race, age and job status are related to students' perception of their in*

## INTRODUCTION

In the classroom students develop relationships based on both commonalities and differences. According to Epstein (2006), offering a blend of both online and traditional programs will achieve higher enrollment and more fulfilling educational experiences.

Adults possessed knowledge of how to evaluate information in traditional print media before newer digital media, especially the Internet, were introduced. Consequently, they had to learn how to apply the old rules and criteria for evaluating information to the relatively newer digital media. Their experiences differ from those of today's youth, who have used digital media since a very young age. With the advancement of online programs, students can work at their own pace and in their own time. However, in the class setting, the face-to-face interaction may help visual and kinesthetic learners. This may help foster a good study group or working relationship, in order to achieve academic success.

### **The Current College Climate**

In his most recent State of the Union address, President Obama expressed his concern about the US losing its competitive edge and not producing enough minority college graduates and qualified graduates overall (Sturgis, 2012). To that end, President Obama has pledged to modernize and adopt improved technology to teach, measure, and administer coursework.

From 2000 to 2006, there was a 10 percent growth in overall enrollment at two-year institutions, according to the most recent figures from the Department of Education. During the 2006-7 academic year, 6.2 million students were enrolled in the country's 1,045 community colleges, 35 percent of all people working toward a degree that year, according to a new National Center for Education Statistics study (Moltz, 2008). The 2009 Sloan-C report on online education confirmed that Americans are flocking to web-based classes. Last year, enrollment increased 17 percent in online classes. Overall, higher education enrollment increased by 1.2 percent last year, according to the report.

Moore (2008) suggests the class of 2009 will probably have a tough time finding jobs, even if they have stellar credentials, as employers start to feel the full brunt of the economic crisis. Recent graduates, though, are still finding work, despite the recent economic downturn. There is a consensus among college counselors that more seniors will turn to graduate school, as jobs continue to dry up. Students hope to build their skills and improve their prospects.

## **Historical Perspective of Student-Teacher Philosophy and Interaction**

While the characteristics of college students closely approximate those of children and teenagers in terms of technology adoption and immersion, the information tasks they must perform in their daily lives are more like those of adults given that they often must strike a balance among school, work, and social life (Rieh & Hilligoss, 2008). This means that the kinds of information tasks in which college students engage are potentially much more diverse and complex than those of younger children and teenagers, and may be equally or even more complex as those of many adults.

Bonser (1992) tells us beginning in the 1960s, college students began to think strategically about the role, philosophy and leadership of their schools' administration. He goes on to say administrators can meet the demands of these more discriminating consumers, if they adopt a total quality management approach similar to the one that has been successful in other types of organizations.

Rogers's (1969) theory of education has as its goal the facilitation of the whole and fully functioning person, who is a citizen and leader in a democratic society. He sees the facilitation of citizens as vital, without which education will "doom us to a deserved and universal destruction". Learning style refers to the way in which a student approaches the learning process, and learns and retains new and difficult information (Dunn & Dunn, 1993). It is a personal trait that develops from inherited characteristics, previous experience, and the demands of the present environment (Kolb, 1981).

Teaching style consists of a teacher's personal behaviors and the media used during interaction with learners (Kaplan & Kies, 1995). In other words, it is mostly related to how the teacher teaches or to the instructional methods used (Felder & Silverman, 1988).

More recently, a learner-centered approach to teaching design has evolved that views learners as active participants in their own learning experience. The learner-centered model refers to a "perspective that couples a focus on individual learners with a focus on learning" (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

For Paris and Combs (2006), there are three main tenets of learner centered education: 1) the student is the starting point for curriculum making; 2) the teacher and students are co-participants in the learning process; 3) the teacher strives toward intense student engagement with the curriculum.

Palmer (2009) cites the fact that student engagement occurs when a specific situation captures the attention of a student. Kellogg and Tomsho (2009) point out enrollment at two-year schools has been booming for more than a decade, due partly to increased demand for more college-educated workers and sharply higher costs of a four-year college degree. It is important to these students that they succeed.

A major goal of teachers is to spark interest and understanding in the minds of their students (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998). Wrench and Punyanunt-Carter (2005) argue that since the days of Corax and Tisias, theorists have been concerned with the role of ethos, credibility, in communication. Voss, et al. (2007) suggest this may be why colleges are now feeling increased pressure to compete for qualified students.

In their research on distance programs, Lu, Ma and Huang (2007) note Internet technology is gaining a foothold on more and more campuses. Their findings also suggest the Internet has a positive and significant influence on student-centered learning in three dimensions: pedagogical, technological and cultural learning.

## **Research Question**

As noted previously, the makeup and expectations of students attending college is changing. Rieh and Hilligoss (2008) sought to develop a more complete understanding of credibility as it relates to information seeking by examining college students' credibility assessments in a wide variety of activities, using many different sources and media. Prior research focused on

relationships between the antecedents of teacher credibility and perceived quality of academic life (Haley, 2012).

The current study seeks to extend the work of Rieh and Hilligoss (2008) by looking at factors that influence college students' perception of credibility and satisfaction in the digital age. This will be done by exploring the research question 'What, if any relationships exist between the social structural factors of age, race, and job status and independent and dependent variables of teacher credibility and perceived quality of academic life, in online students?'

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In preparation to study the aforementioned question, this section will include a review of the literature germane to the aforementioned research question. Specifically, it will cover the following areas: social structure and proximity, teacher credibility and perceived quality of academic life.

### Social Structure

Social structure is a construct of social network research that refers to patterning in social relations (Freeman, 1989; White, Boorman & Breiger 1976; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). Radcliffe-Brown and Pearce (1976) agree social structure is a condition where individuals are embedded within the social systems that influence their behavior. At the same time, Tichy, Tushman and Fombrun (1979) extended the definition of Pearce and RaBrown, stating a group's social structure is influenced by its social context. Communications researchers consider social structure to represent patterns of interaction. These patterns tend to persist over time and therefore can be thought of as representing structure (Hammer, 1979; Schwartz & Jacobson, 1977). While a review of definitions finds there is no single one that uniformly describes social structure, it does reveal certain recurring themes. These include social norms, habits and practices.

### Proximity

Proximity has been studied extensively over the past 50 years (Monge & Kirste, 1980; Priest & Sawyer, 1967; Tesch, Huston & Indenbaum, 1973). The majority of the research falls into one of three categories: the linear distance approach, the functional approach or the psychological approach (Monge et al., 1985). The linear approach treats proximity simply as the distance between two people.

With regard to functional proximity Thomsen (1969) first observed, the travel time and number of travel irritants between two locations is a better predictor of a travel route than is the simple distance between two locations. Similarly, Monge and Kirstie (1980) hold that proximity between individuals is affected by both the nature of the space and the objects in it.

The third and most current area of research dealing with proximity is the psychological approach. Bennett (1974) holds that an individual's perception of how proximate he or she is to others is a better predictor of what kind of interaction will occur, than is linear or functional proximity. From an academic perspective, the psychological approach to measuring proximity would seem to be particularly relevant both in a traditional classroom setting, and courses that are taught in a distance format.

### Teacher Credibility

The research on the effects of communicator credibility on persuasion dates back to the

1950s. Communicator credibility is viewed as a multidimensional construct incorporating “trustworthiness,” “charisma,” “dynamism,” “co-orientation,” and “expertise” (Umeh & Stanley, 2005). Aristotle refers to credibility as ethos and suggested it consisted of three dimensions: intelligence, character and goodwill (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998).

McCroskey and Teven (1997) suggest that in teacher-student relationships the behavior patterns of teachers affect the behavior patterns of students. Presumably, the more students perceive their teacher cares about them, the more the students will care about the class. Consequently, they will be more likely to pay attention and learn more of the course material.

Additionally, McCroskey and Teven (1999) hold that perceived caring is seen as a means of opening communication channels more widely. This is significant, as it is consistent with the McCroskey’s (1992) earlier work which finds competent teachers explain complex material well, have good classroom management skills that have the ability to answer student questions and communicate effectively.

### **Perceived Quality of Academic Life**

Kalimo (1999) tells us the critical factor for success in professions where knowledge management is important is the human mind. Optimism is a clearly definable construct that seems to represent a robust, trait-like psychological factor (Lipkus et al., 1993). Optimists are able to diminish problems through positive reframing or reinterpretation and by seeking emotional support (Billingsley, Waehler, & Hardin, 1993). Quality of life has also been defined as the difference, at a particular time, between one’s hopes or expectations versus one’s experience (Caiman, 1984). Similarly, Harju and Bolen, (1998) hold that quality of life is satisfaction with one’s overall life or components of it.

Optimism has been linked to quality of life in a study conducted by Scheier et al. (1989). When college students were asked what factors were important to quality of life, they cited: feeling in control over life, satisfaction with school, perceived well-being, and social belonging (Keith & Schalock, 1994).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Having a presented review of the literature germane to the current research, this section presents the plan for the methodology that seeks to address the following research question of this study. Specifically, it discusses the research variables, sample population, hypotheses, and the data collection and analysis procedures. The theoretical basis for investigation of this study comes from the work first done by Rieh and Hilligoss (2008).

The conceptual framework used in this study will be to identify a relationship between two types of variables: a dependent variable an independent variable with three dimensions. The strategic objective of this study is to increase the understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between credibility and perceived quality of academic life among adult college students.

### **Research Design**

Correlational studies consist of observations that determine the values of one variable that are associated with those of another variable in order to describe the degree and form of the relationship between them, but not to establish causality (Gould, 2002 p. 49). Ex post facto studies are correlational studies that provide explanations for those relationships after the fact (Babbie, 1995). The current research will be an ex post facto study of the relationship between the dimensions of credibility and perceived quality of academic life.

## **Hypotheses**

As part of the current research, the following hypotheses are tested:

- H1<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between age and competence and/or age and perceived quality of academic life.
- H1<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant relationship between age and competence and/or age and perceived quality of academic life.
- H2<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between race, goodwill and/or race and perceived quality of academic life.
- H2<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant relationship between race, goodwill and/or race and perceived quality of academic life.
- H3<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between job status, trustworthiness and/or job status and perceived quality of academic life.
- H3<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant relationship between job status, trustworthiness and/or job status and perceived quality of academic life.

## **Data Collection Instruments**

The dependent variable used in this study is perceived quality of academic life which is measured using the 10-question Perceived Quality of Academic Life Scale (PQAL). This is a subset of the Feelings About College scale (FAC), developed by Andrews and Withey (1976). The PQAL uses a total of six items from the longer survey. Students rate how they feel about different aspects of their college experience, using a seven-point, delighted-terrible Likert scale. Okun et al. (1986) reported a median internal consistency rating of .83 across four samples (Okun et al., 1988).

Teacher credibility is the independent variable of interest in this study measured using the Source Credibility Questionnaire (SCQ). There are three dimensions associated with this variable: (1) competence; (2) goodwill and (3) trustworthiness intent toward the receiver. The respondent offers his or her impression of the person being evaluated using a seven-point Likert scale to measure a group of adjectives used to identify each of the antecedents of source credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). The Alpha reliabilities for the three dimensions of credibility were: competence .85; goodwill .92; trustworthiness .92. Taken as a single measure the reliability for the SCQ was .94.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

As noted by Gilligan (2009) and in the 2009 Sloan-C report, enrollment in online courses is increasing steadily. This study examines data collected from a group of 34 community college students attending a school in the metropolitan area of a Midwestern city. All but one of these individuals are completing all or part of their education through online courses. Data for this study was collected via a two-part, paper survey. Since both the SCQ and PQAL are public domain documents, no permission is needed to use either instrument. In this study the independent variable is manipulated and will vary according to the experiences of the respondents.

## **ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

This section provides results of the hypothesis testing done on the aforementioned variables used in this

study. These data are organized in a correlational matrix. The matrix identifies relationships that are significant at the .01 and .05 levels of significance.

**Table 1: Correlational Matrix**

		competence	goodwill	trustworthy	pqal	Age	Race	Job Status
competence	Pearson Correlation	1	-.174	.215	.017	.138	-.029	-.063
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.325	.222	.926	.436	.873	.725
	N	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
goodwill	Pearson Correlation	-.174	1	.117	-.342(*)	.258	-.461(**)	.119
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.325		.511	.048	.141	.006	.502
	N	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
trustworthy	Pearson Correlation	.215	.117	1	.011	.050	.215	-.065
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.222	.511		.953	.778	.223	.717
	N	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
pqal	Pearson Correlation	.017	-.342(*)	.011	1	-.563(**)	.259	-.493(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.926	.048	.953		.001	.139	.003
	N	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
Age	Pearson Correlation	.138	.258	.050	-.563(**)	1	-.023	.523(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.436	.141	.778	.001		.897	.002
	N	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
Race	Pearson Correlation	-.029	-.461(**)	.215	.259	-.023	1	.074
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.873	.006	.223	.139	.897		.677
	N	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
Job Status	Pearson Correlation	-.063	.119	-.065	-.493(**)	.523(**)	.074	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.725	.502	.717	.003	.002	.677	
	N	34	34	34	34	34	34	34

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### For Hypothesis 1:

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between age and competence and/or age and perceived quality of academic life.

H<sub>10</sub>: There is no significant relationship between age and competence and/or age and perceived quality of academic life.

For the first hypothesis, the matrix shows a correlation coefficient of  $-.563$  for the relationship between age and perceived quality of academic life. This indicates an inverse relationship between these two variables that is statistically significant at  $.01$ . Thus, the null hypothesis for Hypothesis 1 should be rejected.

### For Hypothesis 2:

H<sub>2</sub>: There is a significant relationship between race and/or race goodwill and perceived quality of academic life.

H<sub>20</sub>: There is no significant relationship between race and goodwill and/or race and perceived quality of academic life.

For the second hypothesis, the matrix shows a correlation coefficient of  $-.461$  for the relationship between race and goodwill. This indicates a statistically significant inverse relationship between these two variables, at the  $.01$  level of significance. Thus, the null hypothesis for Hypothesis 2 should be rejected.

### For Hypothesis 3:

H<sub>3</sub>: There is a significant relationship between job status and trustworthiness and/or job status perceived

quality of academic life.

H3<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant relationship between job status and trustworthiness and/or job status perceived quality of academic life.

For the second hypothesis, the matrix shows a correlation coefficient of -.461 for the relationship between job status and perceived quality of academic life. This indicates a statistically significant inverse relationship between these two variables, at the .01 level of significance. Thus, the null hypothesis for Hypothesis 3 should be rejected.

### Analysis of Social Structural Factors

**Age.** Table 2 gives a frequency distribution of the respondents by age. Assuming the table shows the age of traditional students is between 18-22, it can be concluded the majority of students who took part in this study were non-traditional age, adults, 73.5 percent

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Age**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 18-22	9	26.5	26.5	26.5
23-27	6	17.6	17.6	44.1
28-32	2	5.9	5.9	50.0
33-37	9	26.5	26.5	76.5
38-42	3	8.8	8.8	85.3
43-47	1	2.9	2.9	88.2
48-52	4	11.8	11.8	100.0
Total	34	100.0	100.0	

**Race.** Table 3 breaks down the students according to race. Here the data indicate the students who took part in the study were predominately white.

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Race**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
V White	22	64.7	64.7	64.7
African American	6	17.6	17.6	82.4
Native American	1	2.9	2.9	85.3
Latino	2	5.9	5.9	91.2
Asian	1	2.9	2.9	94.1
Other	2	5.9	5.9	100.0
Total	34	100.0	100.0	

**Job Status.** Table 4 provides a profile of the employment status of the students who are part of this study. The data indicate the vast majority of these students are work full-time.

**Table4: Distribution of Respondents by Job Status**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Not Employed	6	17.6	17.6	17.6
Employed part-time	6	17.6	17.6	35.3
Employed full-time	22	64.7	64.7	100.0
Total	34	100.0	100.0	

The results of the hypothesis testing showed a statistically significant relationship between the

demographic variables of age race and job status and the antecedents of teacher credibility and perceived quality of academic life. Next, is discussion of the implications of the current study possibilities for future research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The advance of technology has changed the way students access information and acquire knowledge. The findings reported here help to fulfill the purpose of this study which was to extend the research of Rieh and Hilligoss (2008); their work focuses on the proximal factors of today's students and their efficacy in the digital age

As technological advances, in the form of online programs continue to make education more universally accessible, the results of the current research serve as a reminder that teacher-student interaction still plays a significant role in student satisfaction and success.

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