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Students' perception of technology-assisted learning in undergraduate medical education – A survey



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ABSTRACT

The use of technology assisted learning (TAL) has widely increased over the last decade. TAL has become a significant part of many universities' curriculum delivery or at least a necessity for both teachers and learners to aid in the learning process. A learner's attitude toward, and acceptance of, training methods are important precursors to the success of any educational method, which in turn may be determined by factors such as individual learning style, type of technological tool available, learner's general perception about using technological assistance, technological complexity for use, etc. Although previous studies have focused on the influence and effectiveness of technology in aiding the teaching–learning process, it is also important to study these factors. Therefore, this study was conducted with the objectives to identify undergraduate medical and health science students' preference for use of various TAL tools, their perception about the effectiveness of technology in aiding the learning process, and to investigate the influence of learning style on students' perception of TAL. This cross-sectional study was conducted as a survey. The survey questions were directed toward identifying students' learning style, and their perception of TAL. Student volunteers were provided with two self-administered questionnaires, the index of learning style (ILS) questionnaire (test–retest correlation coefficient 0.7–0.9) and a pre-tested questionnaire to measure perception of TAL. Majority of students have a strong component of visual learning style, and therefore preferred interactive animations and videos to aid in their learning. They also demonstrated increased acceptance of TAL as measured in terms of their attitude, and perceived knowledge gain. Nevertheless, students' perception of TAL and their learning style existed independent of each other.

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Technology assisted learning (TAL) is increasingly becoming important for both formal education and corporate training (Tai, 2007). Previous research has compared

different learning media and produced some evidence suggesting that TAL, if adequately designed and implemented, can generate learning outcomes comparable to or even better than those attainable by traditional, classroom-based learning (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovsk, & Wozney 2004; Hu, Hui, Clark, & Tam, 2007).

Numerous studies have been done to evaluate TAL methods. In a meta-analysis (Cohen & Dacanay, 1992) a “medium-sized effect” of computer-assisted instruction on student learning was identified, and more

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research was recommended to identify specific features of computer-assisted instruction that lead to improved student performance (Cohen & Dacanay, 1992). A review of literature by Chumley-Jones, Dobbie, and Alford in 2002, studied four domains. Domain 1: studies evaluating knowledge gains, Domain 2: learners' attitudes, Domain 3: studies evaluating efficiency of learning and Domain 4: studies evaluating costs of WBL programs. They found that web based learning (WBL) methods can result in student gains but cautioned that although WBL is a valuable addition to the educational armory, but it does not replace traditional methods and therefore educators must define WBL's unique educational contribution (Chumley-Jones et al., 2002). In a 2006 David Cook summarizes several years of research in Web-based learning (WBL) to illustrate that, in general, research fails to address the questions that will inform the use of this powerful tool. He also stated that WBL has many advantages it is not inherently better than other media. The author suggests that learning outcomes be defined first and WBL be used only when it appears to be the most effective means of achieving these outcomes (Cook, 2006).

Web-based teaching is said to provide a new paradigm for imparting knowledge (Sanz, Iskander, & Yu, 2000, Zahorian, Swart, Lakdawala, Leathrum, & Gonzales, 2000), whereby students are able to learn any time, even when they are at home. As a result, learners can progress on their own initiative to study the content of the course. However studies did not compare the students learning styles with these TAL. At University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), numerous technological resources (database) and materials, such as e-books, videos, interactive animations etc., are used by the faculty of medicine and health sciences (FMHS) to enhance student learning. This is with the intention of helping the students understand the concepts better and clear, to make the method of delivery easy and interesting, and to facilitate easy access to education materials at the convenience of learner.

Though incorporating TAL in the teaching–learning process may benefit in terms of easy delivery and easy access to information, it is questionable whether TAL guarantees knowledge gain. Also, it is worth noting that learning engagement underscores the importance of participation in study and often has a positive association with emotional engagement, as signified by learning interest or satisfaction. Therefore student attitude and acceptance of a training method are important precursors to the success of any educational method (Jwayyed et al., 2011).

Another important determinant of the effectiveness or satisfaction with the use of TAL is student learning style (Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006). Students' academic achievements are highly related to their learning style as every individual have their distinctive learning style in which they feel comfortable (Wei, Hoo, & Jasmine, 2011). Some consider this determinant as only a moderating factor (Eom et al., 2006; Hu and Hui, 2012; Neuhauser, 2002).

The objective of this study was to identify the various TAL tools preferred by the undergraduate medical and health science students of UTAR, their perception of the use of TAL method, and to investigate the influence of student learning style on their perception of TAL. We stated the null

hypothesis that student perception of TAL is not influenced by their learning style.

1. Methodology

This exploratory cross-section study was conducted through a student survey using two questionnaires, one to identify student learning style and the other to determine student perception. Prior to the commencement of study approval from university scientific and ethical review committee was obtained. Hundred and thirteen ($N = 113$) undergraduate students from year 1 to year 3 of study in Medicine, Physiotherapy and Nursing courses at FMHS volunteered to participate in this study. Participation ranged.

1.1. Learning style

Learning style was identified using the ILS questionnaire developed by Richard Felder and Linder Silverman. The test–retest reliability of this questionnaire scores is satisfactory (0.7 and 0.9), with an internal consistency $\alpha = 0.5$, and Pearson correlation coefficient relating preferences of 0.2 or less (Felder & Spurlin, 2005). Therefore the current version of this instrument may be considered reliable, valid and suitable.

1.2. Student perception of TAL

Common approaches to understanding perceptions in schools include the use of questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews. While each of these approaches provides good information, questionnaires may be the best way to assess perceptions because they can be completed anonymously and readministered to assess changes in individuals' experiences and thinking over time (Bernhardt).

The questionnaire for this study was constructed with the intention to measure student perception in 2 main domains, knowledge gained with TAL and their attitude toward TAL. There was 12 items on each domain which was scored on a 5-point response option of strongly disagree (0), disagree (1), neither agree nor disagree (2), agree (3), and strongly agree (4). The score on each domain ranged from 0 to 48. The questionnaire also gathered other information such as demographic data, some information regarding their computer skills, computer usage, preferred use of technological resources (TR), awareness of learning style, and ILS questionnaire. To maintain anonymity and to ensure honest response, information that may identify the student was not asked. A pilot study was conducted to test the questionnaire prior to its actual implementation. Components that were considered inappropriate or repeatedly tested were either modified or deleted. At the completion of this study, the student volunteers were given information on various learning styles, and the strategies to improve learning as given by Richard M. Felder.

2. Results

In this study, 65.5% of the respondents were female. Majority of student participation was from medicine (68.1%) followed by physiotherapy 30.1% and nursing 1.8%.

Table 1
Self-reported computer skills rating by respondents.

| Computer skill rating | No. | % |
|-----------------------|-----|-------|
| Expert | 6 | 5.3 |
| Intermediate | 94 | 83.2 |
| Novice | 13 | 11.5 |
| Total | 113 | 100.0 |

Table 2
Duration of computer use and time spent learning with the aid of technology.

| Duration | Computer use | | Time spent learning | |
|------------|--------------|------|---------------------|------|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| <30 min | 3 | 2.7 | 7 | 6.2 |
| 30 min–1 h | 9 | 8.0 | 38 | 33.6 |
| 1–2 h | 23 | 20.4 | 45 | 39.8 |
| 2–5 h | 54 | 47.8 | 17 | 15.0 |
| >5 h | 24 | 21.2 | 6 | 5.3 |

Regarding the skill in using computer majority rated them as intermediate, (Table 1) and mostly used computer for 2–5 hr daily with up to 2 hr of actual learning time (Table 2). Only 43.3% students were aware of learning style.

The different educational resources used by students are shown in Table 3. UTAR Web based learning environment (WBLE) was used by 75.22% of the respondents and the next was Wiley online resource. Among these databases, Students preferred interactive animations (76.1%) more than the other types.

The mean score (S.D.) of perception of knowledge gained was 32.42 ± 5.81 , and the score of attitude toward TAL was 31.37 ± 5.74 (Table 4).

For the MBBS students and physiotherapy students, visual learning style seems to be the most frequent used or the one most these students relied on, followed by sensing and reflective learning (Figure 1).

We analyzed the influence of learning styles on the perception of TAL by comparing the mean perception score for different student learning style category using the independent *t*-test. We considered only the strongest component of each learning style and its respective perception score for this purpose. The result showed a significant difference only between the mean perception score (attitude only) of student's with a sequential and global learning style ($p = 0.04$ CI: 95%). For the perception of knowledge gained, there was no significant difference in the mean score for any of the learning style.

Table 3
Types of educational resources used and the format.

| | UTAR WBLE | Wiley | M D Consult | Medline Plus | Others |
|--|-----------|--------|-------------|------------------------|--------|
| <i>Educational resources (database)</i> | | | | | |
| Number | 85 | 73 | 44 | 23 | 36 |
| Percentage | 75.22 | 64.60 | 38.93 | 20.35 | 31.85 |
| | Video | e-Book | e-Journal | Interactive animations | Others |
| <i>Format of resources (type/material)</i> | | | | | |
| Number (<i>n</i>) | 81 | 39 | 15 | 86 | 10 |
| Percentage | 71.68 | 34.51 | 13.27 | 76.10 | 8.84 |

Table 4
Frequency distribution of perception score.

| | Knowledge | Attitude |
|--------|-----------|----------|
| Mean | 32.42 | 31.37 |
| Median | 32.50 | 32.00 |
| S.D. | 5.81 | 5.74 |

3. Discussion

Majority of the participants were females. Participants used computers for 2–5 hr a day of which only 40–50% of time was used for learning. Majority of students used UTAR WBLE followed by Wiley plus online resource. UTAR WBLE is a platform for education related interaction between university, staff and students. The increased use of this resource may be because it is one of the most preferred medium of interaction by the staff where they upload educational material, conduct online assignments, and continuous assessment etc.

More than half of the participants were unaware of the concept of learning style; the reason could be that learning style is not emphasized upon in secondary education. It should be noted that individuals have different learning styles, characteristics, strengths and preferences in the way they take in and process information (Hong & Chan, 2000). Knowing students' learning styles can help in various ways to enhance learning and teaching (Graf, Kinshuk, Liu, 2009). Therefore it is important to know the learning style so that student can choose their strongest mode of learning in understanding the difficult concepts.

Majority of students preferred the use of interactive animation and videos to aid in their learning. Also majority of participants were visual learners, which may be the reason why such a preference was seen. This may suggest that lecturers should include such materials to aid in the teaching learning process.

Our study results revealed that student's had high mean score for perception of both attitude toward TAL and knowledge gained. This is a very good indication that students have become increasingly dependent on technology to aid their learning, and (or) that technology as a learning aid has gained increased acceptance among students. Though students found technology to positively influence and aid their learning, their learning style had no significant impact on their perception, except for the students having a strong component of sequential learning style demonstrating a favorable attitude toward TAL. Though visual learning style was most often used by majority of students, it did

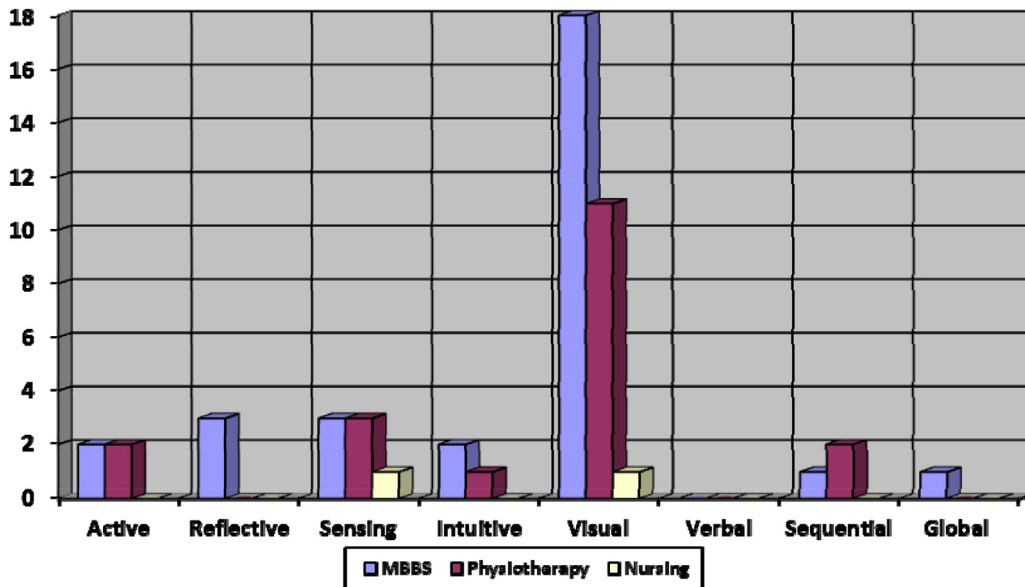


Fig. 1. Comparison of various ILS categories among the 3 different courses.

not significantly influence their perception of TAL. However, this study result cannot be generalized in view of its limitations.

4. Limitations of the present study

When influence of learning style on student perception was analyzed, the data was categorized based on only the stronger components of learning style. This had resulted in each category having unequal sample size, or very small sample size, unequal variances within each group etc. All these could have resulted in type-II error in interpretation of study results. The measurement of knowledge gain was done only through student perception, without any actual assessment of such gain through examinations/quiz etc. Therefore this component cannot be considered an actual reflection of such gain and is not realistic. The questionnaire developed to measure perceived knowledge gain and attitude toward learning, though pre-tested before use has no proven reliability or validity. There could also have been influence of gender on the study results which was not analyzed, neither was any information on student socio-economic status gathered. However, there is tremendous scope for further research in this area, and future research shall overcome these limitations.

5. Conclusions and future prospects

Majority of undergraduate medical and health science students of UTAR were having a strong component of visual learning style, and therefore preferred interactive animations and videos to aid in their learning. These students also demonstrated increased acceptance of TAL as measured in terms of their attitude, and perceived

knowledge gain. Nevertheless, students' perception of TAL and their learning style existed independent of each other.

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