

## The Correspondence Students' Personal Attributes Using Song and Hill's Conceptual Model for Understanding Self-Directed Learning

Ma. Junithesmer D. Rosales

Office for Teaching and Learning Development, Polytechnic University of the Philippines

### Abstract

This study is an attempt to describe students in correspondence mode of learning delivery (CMLD) using Song and Hill's Conceptual Model for Understanding Self-Directed Learning. It applies the method of qualitative descriptive inquiry in which the personal attributes of students were analyzed and described. It is basically an attempt to obtain baseline data to understand CMLD students' choice of delivery mode; their strategies to overcome challenges or problems in learning; and their motivation in learning. Out of 45 CMLD students, 24 gave their consent to be part of this study. The data obtained through email or Messenger found that CMLD students: (1) take responsibility in their choice of learning delivery; (2) have personal autonomy; and (3) view mentors/teachers, mentoring, family, friends/peers as motivations that help them learn. Hence, the optimization of learner's personal attributes as well as its link to other aspects of the conceptual model may be explored in the future to understand the interconnection between how students process learning and how learning context enable them to benefit from the correspondence mode.

**Keywords:** correspondence mode of learning delivery, self-directed learning, personal attributes, learner, mentor

### Introduction

This study sits on the premise that a change in learning environment may promote a discovery of a new agency in the way students' learning is viewed. The likelihood that there are students who still cannot participate in online classes permeate the academe. The correspondence mode of learning delivery (CMLD) promises a new kind of agency for learners of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. CMLD in the Polytechnic University of the Philippines was introduced during the pandemic. It caters to students who cannot afford to go online due to poor internet connectivity, lack of device, gadget or tools used for online learning, or financial constraints. These students are provided with instructional materials sent to them via courier wherein they have to learn independently their lessons and turn-in class requirements at the end of the semester via courier. Because of this mode of learning, there were debates on how students manage their learning.

Self-directed learning is an education technique used progressively within tertiary institutions where there is a growing acknowledgement of its significance (Du Toit-Brits & Van Zyl, 2017). The pandemic has changed the education landscape and higher education institutions like the Polytechnic University of the Philippines has been pushed to find ways to help students who struggle from their present situation to fit into the mainstream of online teaching and learning delivery. Yet, as this holds promise into the future of education, still, there are students who cannot enjoy learning online because of their perceptions of belonging in an online course (Adnan & Tasir, 2014) or even their self-efficacy especially in facing challenges of the learning environment (Shen, Cho, Tsai, & Marra, 2013). Moreover, there are teaching and learning areas that are still problematic because of new pedagogical developments in the field (Amin, 2019).

In 1999 Deanie French, author of "internet [based] learning" claimed that traditional hand-outs, course outlines, power point presentations, lecture notes are potential raw materials for web

postings and can be building blocks for creating internet based course modules and other online elements. Today, more than 20 years later, these traditional elements are found as examples or as cited materials in modules used by students in the modular/distance/blended or correspondence mode of learning. With that said, this paper hopes to share some inputs on what the students' in correspondence mode of learning delivery (CMLD) feel about their situation, particularly their personal attributes and how this dimension in the study of self-directed learning can improve our understanding of learners. In particular, this study is poised to satisfy the following objectives: (1) describe students' choice of CMLD; (2) describe the strategies of students in CMLD to overcome struggles in learning; and describe the students in the CMLD in terms of their motivation in learning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper hinges on the “Conceptual Model for Understanding Self-Directed Learning” by Liyan Song of Towson University and Janette R. Hill of the University of Georgia. Their collaborative work on “The Conceptual Model for Understanding Self-Directed Learning in Online Environments” was the inspiration for this investigation. In their paper, they mentioned that their concept incorporates SDL as a personal attribute and a learning process based on their analysis of various perspectives in SDL, namely: Philip C. Candy (Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning, 1991), Brockett and Hiemstra (Personal Responsibility Orientation, 1991) and Garrison's (Three Dimensional Model of Self-Directed Learning 1997) SDL models.

To them, the development of the three models on SDL enabled scholars to have an extensive understanding of how it works for learners in a traditional, face to face context of learning. But, Song and Hill (2007) elaborated that there is a need for new perspectives on how context influences SDL. They included a third dimension, which is the learning context. In the current study, it pertains to the correspondence mode of learning delivery.

To describe SDL of students, this current study focused only on the initial stage of the process, which is the identification and description of personal attributes—resource, strategy, and motivation—in order for us to have a baseline data on what initially goes on with the learner.

As used in the study, resource pertains to the reasons for the students' choice of CMLD. It may reveal the availability (or lack) of resources. Strategy means the ways in which students cope with problems or challenges in the learning environment. And, motivation is their reason for staying or continuing learning despite the challenges.

### **Literature Review**

There are several perspectives on self-directed learning that were formulated by scholars to understand how learners manage their learning. SDL is an approach to education where students take responsibility for their learning process (Bosch, 2017 cited in Mentz, De Beer, & Bailey, 2019). SDL enables individuals to improve their self-confidence, autonomy and lifelong learning skills (Spencer and Jordan, 1999 cited in Tekkol & Demirel, 2018)

In Song and Hill's (2007) model, they believe that specific learning context has an impact on how much a learner has control over their learning experience. As students become the center of the learning process, self-directed students are the ones who determine their learning goals, they select their own leaning resources and come up with preferred learning strategies (Boyer, et al., 2014 cited in Mentz, de Beer, & Bailey, 2019)

Garrison (1997) posits that self-directed learning is a central concept in the study and practice of adult education. In his comprehensive model of self-directed learning he described three overlapping dimensions: self-management (task control), self-monitoring (cognitive responsibility),

and motivation (entering and task). In his model, personal attribute is under the dimension of self-management, which includes use of resources and motivation.

On the other hand, Brockett and Hiemstra's (1991) Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model stresses that personal responsibility is a key element that guides the learner's self-direction. They regard SDL as both a process and a goal. They believe that SDL as a process allows learners to take responsibility for and control of their learning (Nasri & Mansor, 2017). As indicated under personal attribute that goal orientation involves personal responsibility, which implies that students have control over their response to the situation. (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991; Bosch, Mentz, & Goede, 2019).

Meanwhile, Candy's (1991) Four Dimensional Model states that a learner's self-direction is different in a different content area under the dimension of student control (Song & Hill, 2007; Bosch, Mentz, & Goede, 2019). The personal attributes in this model include personal autonomy and self-management of learners.

The aforementioned theories were the bases for the conceptualization of Song and Hill's model. Song and Hill believe that there is a need to explore how context influences SDL. The models by Garrison (1997), Candy (1991) and Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), were done during the time when there is preponderance of face-to-face classrooms and there are obviously more interactions among students and teachers. But, in the case of the new normal and the emergence of an agency in learning using the CMLD, the inclusion of a third dimension in Song and Hill's model provided an area of interest that may open a locus for a context in learning other than the classroom, library, or learning spaces in the school.

### **Methodology**

This study utilized qualitative descriptive design. It also used as guide Song and Hill's Self-Directed Learning conceptual model focusing CMLD students' personal attributes. With the limitations that students have in terms of the conduct of personal interviews using available online platform due to financial difficulty, email and Messenger were used to better facilitate data gathering because video interview was costly to them. Out of 45 correspondence mode students majoring in English from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines who are in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year in college, 24 willingly took part in the study.

The process of gathering data was guided by the article written by Bowden and Gonzales (2015) titled "Interviewing when you are not face-to-face: The use of email interviews in phenomenological study", and extended it to the use of Messenger as this is the most common social media application used by the participants. The questionnaire was sent to the email and created chat group on Messenger to retrieve or follow-up responses. Ethical steps were followed and then the data obtained were analyzed in order to satisfy the objectives of the study.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### ***The description of students' choice of correspondence delivery mode of learning***

In the aspect of choice of CMDL, the students were asked why they chose CMLD over online mode of learning delivery. The students' choice may directly or indirectly mean that they have certain constraints, whether it is personal or academic.

However, based on the conceptual model, personal attribute generally pertains to moral, emotional and intellectual management and there are general precepts from which the following specific attributes were culled to describe students' choice as: taking responsibility, convenience, optimism, feeling limited, feeling anxious, and annoyance.

Taking responsibility is common based on the analyzed responses. Out of 24 participants, 11 responses from Participants 2,3,4,5,6,9,16,19,20,21, and 23 fall under this theme. For example, Participant 2 said “the internet got more unstable before the start of the semester, that is why I have decided to switch to correspondence mode... I have decided to take a part-time job and used the time to work and earn money for my self.”

This reason is also similar in the responses of Participants 6, 9, 16,19, 21, and 23 because most of them are taking part-time job to support their studies as well as their family.

Participant 4 made it clear that choosing CMLD “was a solid decision [...] For a working student like me, I don’t own my time fully. I have to do the studies offline and I was really grateful that we have this mode of learning since the first semester almost killed me.”

Participant 5 who hopes to graduate on time gave a similar sentiment, which somehow echoes the desire to graduate on time.

Participant 3, shared that “I decided to change my learning mode... I cannot do different tasks simultaneously... Besides my study [sic.], I have to teach and keep an eye out for my nephew... do his modules... which is why I cannot manage to attend some of my classes.” This statement reveals responsibility in assuming different tasks and roles, which is similar to the answer of Participant 20.

Meanwhile, Participant 8 is optimistic about the choice made, “correspondence would be a great help to us students who are affected by the pandemic.” Optimism is also revealed in the responses of Participants 10,14, and 17. The optimism of the participants reveal further that despite the challenges of the difficulty and lack of resources, they are glad that CMLD is an option.

Consequently, some participants have a different perspective on their choice of CMLD. Four of them are anxious of it. For example, Participant 12 said “I don’t have the means and access on internet. I also find it hard to attend and to keep up to online classes. It’s difficult for me because I feel like I’m having anxiety every time I attend to [sic.] online class.” This response is similar to the feeling shared by Participants 11 and 13.

Alternatively, some participants find it convenient to be in the correspondence mode like Participant 7 and 22. Whereas, Participant 15 feels limited; while Participant 24 is annoyed.

Because of these varying reasons in choosing CMLD, it is evident that the participants generally took to taking responsibility for their choice because of their personal situation. They need to work in order to sustain their studies and their family. According to Garrison (1997) taking responsibility allows an individual to construct meaning. In this case, the context and situation of the participants allowed them to socially construct it in order for them to continue their college education. The construction of meaning by means of their choice enabled some of the participants to be optimistic, and find CMLD convenient. However, it is not the same case with those participants who said that the choice made them feel limited, anxious, and annoyed.

#### ***Strategies of students in the correspondence mode to overcome struggles in learning***

There are several reasons for students to persist in their studies. In order to survive in a challenging learning environment, a student has to come up with strategies to overcome problems or challenges.

According to Song and Hill “successful learning in any learning environment involves the use of learning strategies.” (p.34) There are two ways in which strategy will be described here based on the idea laid out by Candy (1991) and integrated in the model of Song and Hill. For Candy, personal autonomy and self-management are concepts used to examine self-direction. The former refers to how an individual can conceive goals, exercise freedom of choice, reflect rationality, exercise self-restraint and self-discipline (Candy, 1991 cited in Jones, 1993). The latter refers to the ability of

an individual to conduct one's own education (Candy, 1991 cited in Song and Hill, 2007). It is also a collection of attitudes and skills required for self-direction (Candy, 1991 cited in Jones, 1993, p.186)

Based on the data, most of the participants (Participants 1,4,6,7,8,9,10, 11,12,13,15,16,19, 20,21,22, 23, and 24) exercise personal autonomy as a strategy to cope with challenges and problems. For example: Participant 1 wrote "Knowing is half the battle so I tried to connect with my classmates from the online learning mode and asked for resources that will help me in understanding the content of the subjects we have. Now what's left for me to do is the other half of the battle, which is the application of said knowledge, which I will come in terms with when I finally get a hold of the modules." This response shows how the participant conceived his goal and come up with a strategy to achieve his goal.

For Participant 8, when answering modules "I am trying to be more careful with what I cite in the module and I review my answer before I submit it... I do exercise my mind and live a healthier lifestyle so I'll be able to comprehend one at a time." This self-regulation and attitude of being careful about what to write in the module may indicate the participant's attitude of self-restraint and self-discipline.

We cannot predict when the challenge or struggle will arise; hence, for Participant 9 the challenge begins when the modules arrive. "Make way. I also do advanced readings on the modules" was what this participant wrote, which shows a hint of self-discipline.

"In my own way, I've set specific days that I will read and answer my modules because I'm currently working and I can only answer modules on my free days. I always set and will really ensure I will finish some activities in that free time" was the answer of Participant 13. Setting specific days, answering the module during free time is an example of how this participant manages her time.

Furthermore, "Creating a to-do list, managing my time efficiently, and thinking about my dreams and aspirations in the future are the effective ways to overcome the struggles of correspondence mode delivery. I also attend online classes in order to be not left behind and to understand the lessons easily" was the answer of Participant 15. Her answer implies that she has set goals and through self-direction, she manages her learning so that she will not be left behind.

Meanwhile, some participants exercise self-management. For example, Participant 2 wrote "I learned how to properly manage my time even more—to set my schedule regarding my to-do list—and to efficiently and effectively look for information that might help me in understanding a topic or lesson which helps me to slowly overcome what I'm struggling with." We can infer from her response that it is her attitude that propels her to adhere to her schedule or study time. Likewise, she finds ways to cope whenever she encounters certain struggles in learning.

And for Participant 14, "The struggles I encountered during the semester as a correspondence mode student were mostly highlighted on self-study...I start my day at an early time. In this way, I can begin organizing my schedule for the whole day. I exercise in the morning to prepare myself for the busy day". This reveals the cause of a struggle and the strategy to manage his learning.

Whether it is through personal autonomy or self-management, the shared strategies were expressed based on the students' varied views on learning. According to Candy (1991 cited in Jones, 1993, p.186) strategies somehow depends on their [students'] situation in life. While self-management puts import on the notion that a learner must be concerned with how he/she understands his/her own self-directed learning (Candy 1991; Bonham, 1992). It can be inferred that various situations call for specific learning strategies. That is why, even though there are struggles, the students still persisted to overcome them.

### ***Motivation of students in CMLD***

To describe the motivation of students in CMLD, they were asked to identify what kind of support or who will enable them to become motivated. The data revealed that teachers/ mentors, mentorship, family, peers/ friends are among the factors that the participants perceive to help them in CMLD.

For students who believe that teachers/mentors motivate them, the following are some examples: Participant 5 shared that “students must be self-exploring, debating, critical, under the guidance and direction of teachers.” While “having a mentor” is the simple answer of Participant 9 and “teacher” for Participant 13.

There are participants who view mentorship as a factor that may be able to help them become motivated to learn in CMLD. Like Participant 11, “someone who is skilled in this subject to teach me and mentor me as I pursue my dream of being a professional educator.” The said participant pointed out the importance of having a skilled mentor to teach the course. While “mentorship and professional growth” is the response coming from Participants 6, 16, 21 and 22. Although we may ask why professional growth for these four participants, Participant 21 supplied that “I can learn in their experiences and their knowledge because I know that they have a lot of things to teach.” Similarly, Participant 16 responded, “I will need a lot of advice from the people who have experiences so that I will acquire learning from them.”

Other participants claim that their family is their motivation: “My family” (Participants 7 12, and 24); and “better relationship with my family” (Participant 20). Although the two responses have different interpretations, still, the family is what and will motivate them.

Some participants also revealed both family and peers/friends as sources of motivation. Like Participant 2 who derives “emotional support from family and peers”; Participant 17 shared “I was born very close to my family... my friends they were the people I met when I was still learning how to fly.” While Participant 18 is motivated with the “spiritual support from my family... my friends”, and Participant 10 with “family support, peer support”. Indirectly, this may reveal the importance of relating to or having a conversation or dialogue with the identified family and peers. It is said that dialogue with peers and facilitators [mentors], which are readily available in classroom-based environment is scarce in a personalized environment (Hung Lau, Lam Kam, Nkhoma, Richardson, & Thomas, 2017). In this investigation, CMLD is mostly conducted at the home environment of the student.

There were also other reasons mentioned to be motivated like: “human connection and empathy” (Participant 1); “someone I can look up to” (Participant 3); “support to my professional growth” (Participant 4); “Individuals who could be potentially a part of our support system” (Participant 8); “local government” (Participant 14); “technological equipment for instruction” (Participant 15); “people around me” (Participant 19); “moral support” (Participant 23); and “faith in God” (Participant 24).

We can glean from the results that motivation in the context of CMLD provided a spectrum of sources from the people who are in the participants’ immediate/personal environment (family or social environment people in general, teachers/mentors) and other host of reasons. Garrison (1997 cited in Bosch, Mentz, & Goede, 2019) said that effort towards learning is only possible if students are motivated.

### **Conclusions**

Understanding the situation of students in CMLD is challenging especially when it comes to monitoring their progress and whether they are actually learning in a context outside of the class-

room. Self-directed learning for students in higher education indeed has its potential for describing what students bring to the learning process when they are in a different learning environment.

From the analyzed results, the following are the conclusions of this study: (1) Taking responsibility in their choice of learning delivery is a decision made by a majority of CMLD students because of their situations and experiences in life; (2) Personal autonomy or the capacity to pursue a course of action in a challenging learning context is predominant among the participants; and (3) mentors/teachers, mentoring, family, friends/peers are the principal reasons that spur motivation in learning among students in CMLD.

Since this investigation is limited to the description of students' personal attributes, exploring how it links with other aspects of the conceptual model may be conducted in the future to better understand the process of learning of students, the kind of intervention or mentorship received from the teachers and how these can be a potential area for discovering other locus so that students who engage in SDL may benefit from it.

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