Prospectus

The Social Intelligence of Undergraduates Enrolled in Traditional versus Online Higher Educational Programs

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**Problem Statement**

The 2013 online education report from the Babson Survey Research Group provides evidence for the continuing growth and importance of online higher educational programs in the United States. In the autumn of 2012, the number of students taking at least one online course has risen to a record 7.1 million, or 33.5% of all higher education students (Allen & Seaman, 2013). According to the same source, 74% of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to traditional learning environments with face-to-face instruction. Despite this finding, there is little known about the effects of online learning on one’s social intelligence development.

Silvera, Martinussen, and Dahl (2001) define *social intelligence* (SI) as a multifaceted construct comprising (a) social information processing, (b) social skills, and (c) social awareness. While SI is understood to comprise dispositional and even innate traits, it is a learnable skill that facilitates positive social change by fortifying human relationships and increasing wellbeing, contributing to one’s success in all areas of life (Joseph & Lakshmi, 2010; Nejad, Pak, & Zarghar, 2013; Saxena, 2013). A traditional learning environment with face-to-face interaction with faculty and peers can reasonably be understood as an environment conducive to SI development, but there is no known evidential support for how online higher education compares to traditional higher education in SI development, specifically for undergraduate programs. This study will fill this gap in understanding by measuring the SI of both traditional and online undergraduates.
Significance

Joakim and Harikrishnan (2013) measured the SI of 1040 online higher education students in India and looked at factors internal to the population such as marital status, courses taken, and whether the students lived in an urban or rural setting. They found that students living a rural setting scored significantly lower on SI. There was no comparison to traditional higher education students; therefore, it remains unknown if a difference in SI exists between the two groups. Given the steady rise in online higher educational program participation, it is important to know if these programs are conducive to SI development or if they are inferior to traditional programs in cultivating SI development. This study will contribute to the literature by measuring the SI of undergraduate students between 18 and 25 years of age in both online and traditional undergraduate programs, and looking for a difference in SI. If online higher educational programs are found to lack the structure that fosters SI development, educators involved in course design can focus more on developing the SI among students.

Background

Selected articles related to SI and online versus traditional education and students are described here:

1. Allen and Seaman (2013) provide comprehensive and updated information on online education including growth, percentage of students taking online classes compared to traditional classes, and attitudes toward online educational programs.

2. Some of the differences between online and traditional students were tested by Stevens and Switzer (2006). Their results showed that online students had higher levels of
interest, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation, suggesting the importance of autonomy in an online environment.

3. Khalid (2013) provides a thorough list of the pros and cons of online education for students, instructors, and institutions.

4. Joseph and Lakshmi (2010) discuss the many personal and societal benefits of SI, as well as the effects of poor SI, providing support for the significance of this construct. They look at five dimensions of SI including situational awareness, presence, authenticity, clarity, and empathy.

5. Silvera, Martinussen, and Dahl (2001) operationally defined SI and designed and tested a measurement tool called the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale.


7. Caplan (2005) looked at how individuals who lack components of SI are more likely to prefer online social-interaction over face-to-face communication, possibly creating an online environment of socially challenged students. This study provides evidential support for students low in SI to favor online education, but does not address the effect of online education on SI.

8. Crowne (2013) used the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale on a population of university students in the United States and hypothesized that SI was superordinate to emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence. The results did not support their hypothesis.
Framework

This research will be guided by Albert Bandura’s *Social Learning Theory* (Bandura, 1977) and Daniel Goleman’s *theory of Social Intelligence* (2007). As understood by Bandura, learning comprises a cognitive process that takes place in a social context. This social learning is mostly observational and is facilitated by many of the aspects of SI. While there is empirical evidence to suggest that some form of social learning can take place in a virtual environment where observation is more about observing online behavior (e.g., Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, & Merget, 2007), other empirical evidence exists that suggests that certain types of learning and development (e.g., social skills) might be inhibited in an online environment (e.g., Caplan, 2005). Goleman (2007) draws on the findings of neuroscience to conclude that online communication is unable to contribute to the development of SI, and stressed that face-to-face communication is the most conducive to SI development. Specifically, Goleman argues that mirror neurons are largely responsible for the shared emotions required for social intelligence—without face-to-face contact, these neurons do not fire.

Research Questions

RQ1 – Does type of learning environment (online vs. traditional) influence the level of SI as measured by the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale among undergraduate college students?

H₀: There is no significant difference in the level of SI between online and traditional undergraduates.

H₁: There is a significant difference in the level of SI between online and traditional undergraduates.
RQ2 – Does college rank (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) influence the level of SI as measured by the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale among undergraduate college students?

H₀: There is no significant difference in the level of SI among undergraduate college students based on college rank.

H₁: There is a significant difference in the level of SI among undergraduate college students based on college rank.

Nature of the Study

Quantitative

The nature of the study will be quantitative, with a non-experimental design using survey methodology. Two independent variables will be used in this study: a) type of learning environment, and b) class rank (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior). Age will be controlled for given the possible differences in SI among age groups.

Possible Types and Source of Information or Data

1. The measure used will be the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale, developed and tested by Silvera, Martinussen, and Dahl (2001). This measure of SI will be administered to undergraduates in programs at traditional and online universities. This is a self-report measure of SI comprising 21 items with a 3-factor structure (7 items for each factor): (a) social information processing, (b) social skills, and (c) social awareness. All answers are given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.
Possible Analytic Strategies

As Caplan (2005) suggests, those who lack aspects of SI prefer online education to traditional education. For this reason, the “class rank” variable has been added to look for differences in those just beginning the program and those completing the program. In order to address the research problem, the effect of the higher educational programs on SI needs to be known, not only the SI of the students. A 2 x 4 between groups design, which is analyzed by a two-way (factorial) ANOVA, will be used for this study. The main effects for each variable will be analyzed along with interaction effects.


