

Information Resources for Online Learning: An Instant Trust Perspective

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Abstract

The learning environment is fast changing in the era of digital world. The new era of online learning will be student-centric, relying heavily on online learning resources. The increasing pervasiveness of online learning, together with the rise of student-centric way of learning in the online era, highlights the need to understand how students interact with the resources available online. In this paper, we focus on one particular element – how users place trust on online learning resources. Research suggested that online learners place trust almost *instantly* on online information resources, without much evaluation of the sources, and trust the Internet too much by default, treating it the same as a formal library. Given the need for suitable approaches to understand the formation of online user trust on learning resources, this paper aims at taking a first step by providing an overview of relevant literature for analyzing the online trust formation process. We propose that the e-commerce trust literature is a promising starting point. In the e-commerce context, consumer trust is a big obstacle – it is so difficult to engender trust. In the online learning context, we are facing a somewhat reversed problem: users are placing trust on online information resources so quickly – *instantly*, and we need to understand the process. We find that a dynamic dimension of trust formation is missing in the current literature. The dynamic, instant dimension of trust is not well understood. Given the special instant nature of online trust, we propose that there is a niche in the extant literature for a dynamic approach of investigating the formation of trust by users on online learning resources.

Keywords

Trust, Online Learning, Instant Trust, Trust Formation

Research context

The learning environment is fast changing in the era of digital world. Online technologies, such as the Internet, are a particular power force in transforming how people learn. In his recent book, *Disrupting Class*, Clayton Christensen et. al (2008) described how learning and education would be transformed by technologies. Traditional learning is very much uni-dimensional. Curriculum and pedagogy are structured in monolithic ways. With the latest online technologies, such as Web 2.0 applications like Facebook, and Wikipedia, the business world is moving towards the consumer-centric end. Similarly, the new era of online learning will be student-centric, relying heavily on online learning resources.

The pervasiveness of online learning is expected to grow dramatically. It was estimated that in a few year's time, the market of education technology may grow to penetrate deeper and wider in scope into the education sector. An estimate was, by 2024, up to 80% of courses and modules will be provided online in a highly student-centric way (Christensen et. al 2008).

The rise of student-centric way of learning in the online era highlights the need to understand how students interact with the resources available online. In this paper, we focus on one particular element – how users place trust on online learning resources. This is of particular important for two reasons.

Firstly, trust, in the materials and resources used, is an essential element for learning to happen. However, trust misplaced on poor quality resources could be a big obstacle to effective learning. From the web, learning and research resources are widely and easily available, with the advent of tools such as Google and the proliferation of the Internet. These resources may come from a very diverse set of sources, with huge fluctuation in quality.

The online environment is freely accessible by everyone. The proliferation of Web 2.0 technologies increases the proportion of Web content being user generated (e.g. expert blogs) and user-centric (e.g. user ratings of products) dramatically. This makes the online environment contains content much less controlled and filtered than the traditional print-based context. The issue is further complicated if a student centric approach is adopted. The students may easily draw on materials from both formal and informal resources. Formal resources could be journal articles, online texts, etc; while information resources may be blogs, wikis, and so forth. The issue of whether users are placing trust on the resources appropriately corresponding to the underlying quality of the resources needs much attention.

Secondly, trust is formed in very different ways compared to learning in a traditional context. Trust to online resources is formed almost instantly. A recent report suggested that users determine the trust worthiness of an online information resource in a matter of seconds (University College London 2008). Internet user in general trust online information resources too much, having a view that the Internet is as trust worthy and credible source of information as a formal library (University College London 2008). Younger generation in particulars, search and browse online information resources in a speed so fast that very little time is spent on evaluating the information got, let alone its relevance, accuracy or authority (Glasgow Caledonian University 2009).

The unique learning environment provided by the web makes understanding of the instant formation of online user trust particularly important. To achieve the objective of using online learning effectively, the formation of trust, as one of the major antecedents for learning to happen, need to be understood. The online environment and the move towards a more student-centric approach call for special attention to how users place trust on online information resources. The very special nature of online trust – instant formation, needs to be taken into account to enable us to have a better understanding of how learners' trust on online learning resources is formed.

Aims and objectives

The project proposes to study the dynamic dimension of trust is not well understood. Given the special instant nature of online trust, we propose that there is a niche in the extant literature for a dynamic approach of investigating the formation of trust by users on online learning resources. A dynamic dimension of trust formation is missing in the current literature, and we will take a first step by reviewing existing approaches of presenting online resources in ways, which may engender trust.

Design

The project is currently in the first stage. Given the need for suitable approaches to understand the formation of online user trust on learning resources, this paper aims at taking a first step by providing an overview of relevant literature for analyzing the online trust formation process. We propose that the e-commerce trust literature is a promising starting point. In the e-commerce context, consumer trust is a big obstacle – it is so difficult to engender trust. In the online learning context, we are facing a somewhat reversed problem: users are placing trust on online information resources so quickly – **instantly**, and we need to understand the process.

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