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The impact of multiple representations of content using multimedia on learning outcomes across learning styles and modal preferences

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ABSTRACT

The innovative use of educational technologies provides valuable opportunities for educators to design an enhanced, interactive, more inclusive and engaging curriculum. Key pedagogical motivations for utilising educational technologies include the desire to improve learning performance and student engagement. In particular access to multimedia has provided an opportunity to present multiple representations of key content areas using a combination of text, video, aural and interaction to cater more effectively for different learning styles and modal preferences. This paper presents the findings of an experiment to measure the impact of multiple representations on learning outcomes, including student learning performance and engagement. While in this pilot study multiple representations of content did not lead to a significant improvement in learning performance (although it did improve slightly), students reported very favourably on their use of the multimodal learning elements and perceived that these had assisted comprehension and retention of the material. Implications for educators, limitations of the experimental methodology and directions for future research are also presented.

Keywords: *multiple representations; interactive multimodal; multimedia; educational technology; learning styles; modal preferences; learning outcomes; learning performance; engagement*

INTRODUCTION

In the field of distance and online education, traditional print-based materials have been converted into electronic files to be presented online (such as HTML or PDF) for many years now. The better examples of these materials also attempt to include different forms of multimedia enhancement so as to be more interactive, interesting and engaging for students. These multimedia enhancements could include, for example, video and audio elements, recorded lecture presentations (audio enhanced PowerPoints), interactive audio-enhanced diagrams and simulations, interactive quizzes and crosswords, and graphics. By using these different forms of media content knowledge can then be represented in ways that potentially mesh with (or cater for) different student learning styles; appealing to their individual modal preferences (Birch & Sankey 2008; Moreno & Mayer 2007). The concept of learning styles, in this context, simply proposes that "different people learn information in different ways" (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer & Bjork 2008, p.106), while the concept of modal preferences refers to the existence of study preferences; that is, "the fact that people will, if asked, volunteer preferences about their preferred mode of taking in new information and studying" (Pashler et al., 2008, p.106).

MULTIMODAL LEARNING

In recent years, multimedia in conjunction with hypermedia have been successfully applied to many e-learning environments in order to cater for a wider variety of student learning styles and modal preferences (Sprague & Dahl 2010; Sankey & St Hill 2009; Birch & Gardiner 2005). Although there are many known measures for determining a person's learning style this paper will limit itself to the realm of cognitive learning styles and more particularly modal preference.

Fleming (2001) proposed that learners have a preferred learning style, namely, visual, aural, read/write or kinaesthetic, with many learners (about 40%) presenting as multimodal; that is being able to process information using a combination of these modalities. To assist some learners, it has been observed in previous studies, that the addition of some multimedia elements into e-learning materials can be used to develop a more inclusive and engaging curriculum, appealing to visual, aural and kinaesthetic learners, thereby counteracting some differences in student performance (Birch & Burnett 2009; St Hill 2000). To further support this concept, neuroscience research has revealed that "significant increases in learning can be accomplished through the informed use of visual and verbal multimodal learning" (Fadel 2008, p.12). In such cases students have been found to feel more comfortable and perform better when learning in environments that cater for their predominant learning style (Cronin 2009, Omrod 2008). This phenomenon is known as the "meshing hypothesis" (Pashler et al. 2008, p.109). Presenting material in a variety of modes may therefore encourage students to develop a more versatile approach to their learning (Hazari 2004). Within the field of cognitive science, recent findings suggest that,

> *Multiple intelligences and mental abilities do not exist as yes-no entities but within a continua which the mind blends into the manner in which it responds to and learns from the external environment and instructional stimuli. Conceptually, this suggests a framework for a multimodal instructional design that relies on a variety of pedagogical techniques, deliveries, and media (Picciano 2009, p.11).*

Multimodal learning environments provide opportunities for instructional elements to be presented in more than one sensory mode (Mayer 2003). Accordingly, material presented in a variety of presentation modes may lead learners to perceive that it is easier to learn and improve attention rates, thus leading to improved learning performance, in particular for lower-achieving students (Moreno & Mayer 2007; Chen & Fu 2003; Zywno 2003). Fadel (2008) states that, "students engaged in learning that incorporates multimodal designs, on average, outperform students who learn using traditional approaches with single modes" (p. 13). Likewise, Mayer (2003) contends that students learn more deeply from a combination of words and pictures (visuals) than from words alone; known as the "multimedia effect". Shah and Freedman (2003) extend this thought and discuss a number of benefits of using visualisations in learning environments, including: (1) promoting learning by providing an external representation of the information; (2) deeper processing of information; and (3) maintaining learner attention by making the information more attractive and motivating, hence making complex information easier to comprehend.

A major benefit to multimodal design, as identified by Picciano (2009), is that it "allows students to experience learning in ways in which they are most comfortable, while challenging them to experience and learn in other ways as well" (p. 13). This experiential aspect (and often non-linear) of the multimodal learning environment has been found to increase learners' control over the way that they progress through their materials (Karagiorgi & Symeou 2005). Thus, students may become more self-directed, interacting with the various elements housed in these environments. Therefore, depending upon their predominant learning style, students may self-select the learning object or representation that best suits their modal preference (Doolittle, McNeill, Terry, & Scheer 2005). It is the notion of engagement that Picciano suggests has the most significant implications, on student learning, as it allows learners to engage in ways they prefer, by way of their interest or ability, whilst also challenging them to learn in other ways, by experiencing approaches not as well-related to their preferences, or abilities, making the learning experience more holistic.

Different Approaches to Suit Different Learning Styles and Modal Preferences

Integral to the design of the multimodal learning environments is the premise that students learn in different ways and that each student has a preferred learning modality (Sarasin 1999). In other words, "different modes of instruction might be optimal for different people because different

modes of presentation exploit the specific perceptual and cognitive strengths of different individuals" (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork 2008, p.109). This being the case, when learning environments are designed to cater to multiple sensory channels, information processing can become more effective (Kearnsley 2000).

Fundamental to the design of effective learning environments therefore are the principles of multimodal design in which "information (is) presented in multiple modes such as visual and auditory" (Chen & Fu 2003, p.350). However, even though visual images are proven to be an integral part of human cognition, they have tended to be marginalised and undervalued in contemporary higher education (McLoughlin & Krakowski 2001). If material such as verbal texts (audio), diagrams, drawings, photographs, and videos are all regarded as texts to be read, then these elements can be confidently applied to the development of new inclusive curricula (Roth 2002). It is therefore becoming increasingly necessary to develop strategies for the multiple representation of a whole range of instructional concepts to cater to the diversity of learners we find today entering higher education. This is even more critical when we think in terms of distance education (or online), where students get little or no face-to-face instruction and much of the instructional materials are text-based, either in a printed form or on-screen. The problem with this being, "the generation of students entering higher education now have grown up in a world oriented to visual information" (Todd 2009, p.15).

The use of multiple representations, particularly in computer-based learning environments is recognised as a very powerful way to facilitate understanding (Moreno 2002). For example, when the written word fails to fully communicate a concept, a visual representation can often remedy the communication problem (Ainsworth & Van Labeke 2002). Some simple examples of multiple representations include, using point-form text or images with audio enhancement in the form of mini-lectures for various topics (Figure 1), interactive diagrams with embedded transcripts and voiceovers (Figure 2), video presentations, interactive graphs and forms, audio explanations of concepts, and still images.

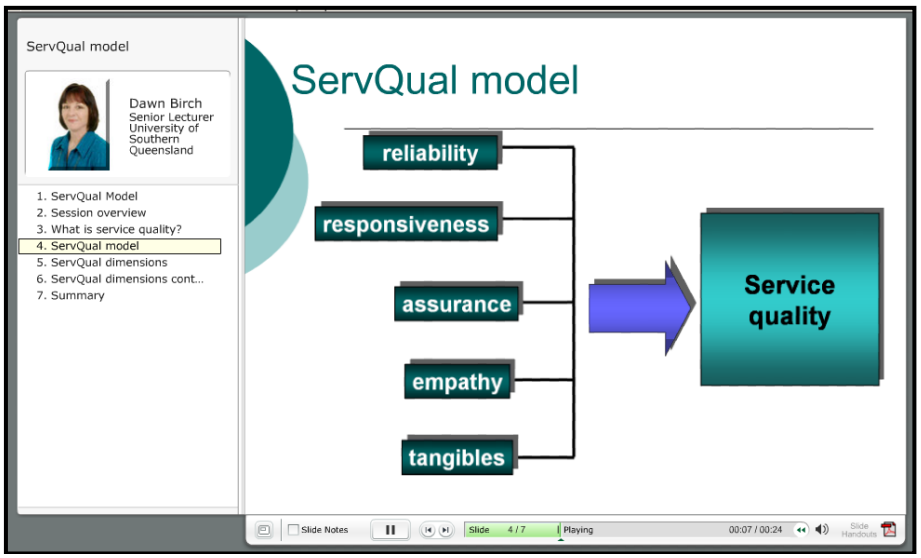

Figure 1: *Audio-enhanced PowerPoint presentation*

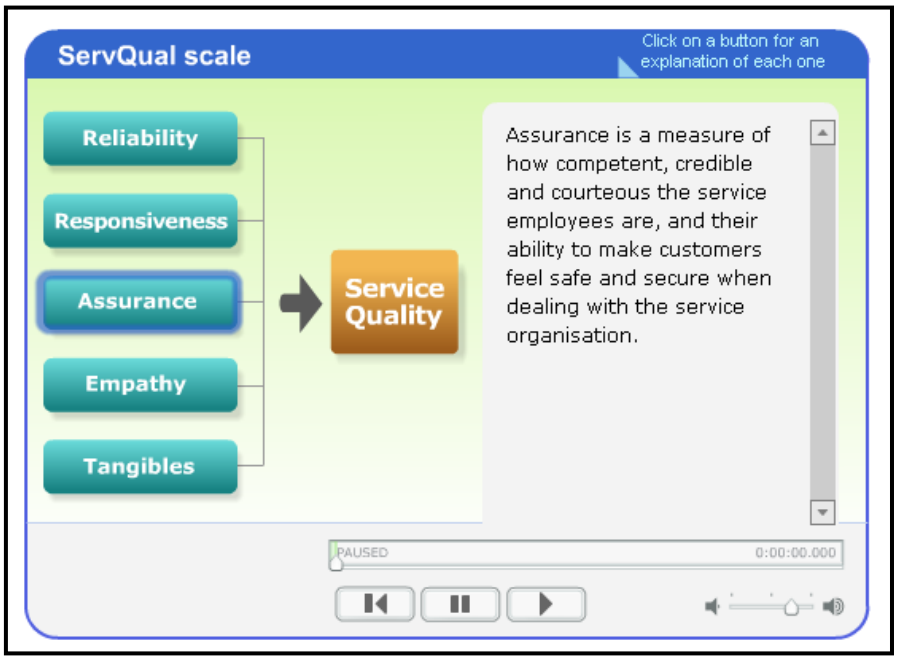

Figure 2: *Interactive narrated diagram with a text-based transcript*

In the examples provided above (Figures 1 and 2), the multimedia elements (visual, aural, and interactive elements) present additional representations of the key (or fundamental) information also provided in text-based, or written form. This approach caters for a range of different learning styles and modal preferences. It gives students a choice in how they can access course content, and thus may be considered a more ethical and inclusive response to the needs non-traditional learners (Sankey & St Hill 2009) allowing them also to physically engage with the materials in different ways (interacting with the multimedia).

Facilitating Metacognition

Educators may try to design for all the different learning styles, however limitations can arise because many students "don't even realise they are favouring one way or the other, because nothing external tells them they're any different from anyone else" (DePorter 1992, p.114). So even though it has been seen that there is a real need to design learning environments to cater for a range of different learning styles and modal preferences to aid student cognition, consideration of students' metacognition is equally necessary. In other words a student needs to have an understanding of how they themselves learn best. Consequently, a further aspect that needs to be considered is providing an opportunity for individual students to become aware of their own preferred approach to learning.

It has been suggested that when students are aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses as learners they become more motivated to learn (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone 2004). The potential of this awareness is that students can then question their long-held beliefs or behaviours and be taught to monitor their selection and use of a range of strategies to aid their learning (Sadler-Smith 2001). This strategy has also been shown to increase the confidence and the grades of students by helping them to make the most of the learning opportunities that match their preferred style (Coffield, et al., 2004). To determine their predominant learning style, students can be encouraged to complete some form of learning styles inventory. McLoughlin

(1999) emphasises that "teaching students how to learn and how to monitor and manage their own learning styles is crucial to academic success" (p.231).

The need for evidence of the learning styles hypothesis

Despite the ongoing call for evidence-based practice, difficulties in assessing the impact of educational technologies on learning outcomes have been reported due to the need to provide all students with the same opportunities (Cronin 2009; Forte & Bruckman 2007; Mayer 2009) and ethically this is quite correct. This means that the ability to study real students in real courses becomes quite problematic, making it necessary to try and simulate as closely as possible what would be considered a normal study situation for the student. This pilot study sought to address the dearth of experimental studies in this area by running a simulated study experience to test the "meshing hypothesis"; that is, the claim that instructional resources should mesh with the student's learning style (Pashler et al., 2008, p.108).

The problem investigated in this research was to determine the impact of multiple representations of content on learning outcomes across learning styles and modal preferences. Four research questions were developed to investigate the research problem:

1. Do multiple representations of content lead to improved learning outcomes and does this vary across learning styles and modal preferences?
2. What types of representations of content (visual/aural/text/kinesthetic elements) lead to improved learning outcomes and does this vary across learning styles and modal preferences?
3. Do multiple representations of content lead to cognitive overload, thus reducing learning outcomes and does this vary across learning styles and modal preferences?
4. What is the optimal combination of representations of content for improving learning outcomes and does this vary across learning styles and modal preferences?

METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the research was to pilot a methodological approach whereby the authors might establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the ways in which content is presented to students and measure the differences, if any, in learning outcomes. Differences across predominant learning styles (visual, aural, read/write, kinaesthetic, multimodal) and modal preferences were also investigated. A quasi-experimental design was selected to allow for groups of students to be exposed to different configurations of study materials and presentation modes and then measurement of students' learning performance. A post-experiment survey was also conducted to identify which learning elements and combination of resources were considered to be most helpful in assisting learning. The quasi-experimental design was also chosen due to the need for a non-random allocation of participants in the experimental groups used. Trochin (2006) suggests that this methodology is appropriate where the grouping of participants cannot be regarded as equivalent, while still allowing for the application of a pre and post-test regime. Although this methodology did prove to complicate the statistical analysis used in this study, due primarily to the limited number of participants, this was still seen as appropriate for this pilot study, even if a limitation.

Undergraduate and post-graduate students studying at the University of Southern Queensland in Australia were emailed to seek their willingness to participate in the multimodal experiment (Table 1). Participation was entirely voluntary; however, an incentive of an AUD$30 university bookshop voucher was offered to encourage participation. Students were also encouraged that this study would potentially assist the university in its efforts to provide more interesting and engaging

learning resources for them in the future and that their assistance would be greatly appreciated. Once students had expressed their intention to participate, in preparation, they were asked to determine their predominant learning style by completing the VARK (visual, aural, read-write and kinaesthetic) learning styles inventory online (http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp) and to email their VARK scores and result (predominant learning style) to the researchers.

Table 1: *Process of the experiment*

Prior to experiment	
1.	Expression of interest to students, asking them to participate
2.	Completion of VARK learning styles inventory by all interested students
3.	Selection of participants based on spread of learning styles
4.	Allocation of experimental group, date and time for experiment
During experiment	
5.	Pre-test of concepts (x2), before exposure to each learning scenario
6.	Completion of learning scenarios (x2)
7.	Completion of post-tests (x2), after exposure to each learning scenario
8.	Completion of online survey at conclusion of experiment

The experiment itself involved the development of two learning concepts, both drawn from Services Marketing theory. The first concept concerned customer satisfaction and addressed the 'Expectancy Disconfirmation Model'. The second concept concerned the measurement of service quality and focussed on the Service Quality (ServQual) Model. These two concepts were chosen as neither of them were particularly difficult to understand, different enough from what these students may have already studied. Students who had previously studied Services Marketing were excluded from the experiment to control for prior learning. The learning material was presented in six different ways (conditions: see Table 2 below) with an additional representation of the content being added for each subsequent condition, with Condition 6 representing the highest number of representations of content used in this experiment.

Table 2: *Learning Conditions Used in the Experiment*

Representations of content for both the Disconfirmation Model and ServQual Model					
Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3	Condition 4	Condition 5	Condition 6
• Text • Study guide	• Text • Study guide • Printed PowerPoint	• Text • Study guide • Printed PowerPoint • Recorded PowerPoint with audio	• Text • Study guide • Printed PowerPoint • Recorded PowerPoint with audio • Interactive diagram with script only	• Text • Study guide • Printed PowerPoint • Recorded PowerPoint with audio • Interactive diagram with audio only	• Text • Study guide • Printed PowerPoint • Recorded PowerPoint with audio • Interactive diagram with script & audio
Group C (10)	Group B (10)	Group A (10)	Group D (10)	Group F (10)	Group E (10)
Group D (10)	Group E (10)	Group F (10)	Group C (10)	Group A (10)	Group B (10)

Sixty (60) participants were recruited, allowing for ten to be placed in each of experimental groups. Each participant was exposed to two learning concepts across two different learning conditions; the aim of this being to include two participants from each of the five learning styles (visual, aural, read/write, kinaesthetic, and multimodal) in each group. However, only four of the participants who agreed to participate in the experiment had a predominant 'aural' learning style. The most common learning style from those agreeing to participate in the experiment was 'multimodal'. So where a shortage of participants with one of the predominant learning styles existed, a multimodal learner was included to make up the number for each group.

As the participants needed to access the multimodal presentations via computer, the experiment was conducted in two student computer labs at The University of Southern Queensland (USQ). The learning conditions and the post-experiment survey were stored in two separate online sites. Before commencing the experiment, participants were provided with information about the experiment and asked to sign a consent form. They were also informed that the purpose of the experiment was to measure the impact of two learning scenarios (conditions) on their learning to see if these varied across learning style compared to condition. To control for confounding factors, a standardised set of instructions, format and setting were used for every group. They were further instructed to carefully work through each learning scenario, ensuring they did all of the required reading, listening and interacted with each element within each condition. They were then allowed access to the experiment website where they selected their assigned group and followed the instructions, working through each learning condition. To measure prior knowledge and learning, each participant was asked to complete a pre-test comprising multiple choice questions for each concept and then to complete a post-test (identical to pre-test) after being exposed to each learning scenario. To control for confounding factors, a standardised set of instructions, format and setting were used for each group.

Demographic data for each participant was gathered from university records including gender, age, program and grade point average. A post-experimental survey was developed to gather students' perceptions of the learning elements they were exposed to during the experiment. Each was asked which of the two learning scenarios they had found to be: (a) easiest; and (b) most enjoyable to learn. Six open-ended questions provided each student with an opportunity to express what they felt had been the most helpful resource/s they had been exposed to during their interactions with the two allocated learning conditions and why. These qualitative measures were administered to provide students with the opportunity to give a more in-depth account of their encounter with the multimodal learning environment (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott 2002).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Of the sixty students participating in the experiment, approximately two thirds (68.4%) were females and one third (31.6%) were males. Students across a broad age range participated in the experiment with the youngest student being 17 years and the eldest student being 60 years. The majority of students were under 30 years of age (70.0%).

The majority of students in the study had a predominant multimodal learning style (35%), with equal numbers of kinaesthetic (21.7%) and read/write (21.7%) learners. Visual (16.7%) and aural (6.7%) learners were under-represented in the sample. There were differences in learning styles across gender. The males in the sample predominantly had a multimodal (52.6%) learning style, with no visual learners, while females were more evenly distributed across the multimodal (26.8%), visual (24.4%), kinaesthetic (22%) and read/write (19.5%) learning styles. There were very few aural learners in the sample with only 7.3% of the females having an aural learning style as against only 5.3% of the males. The spread of participant learning styles is seen in Table 3.

Table 3: *Learning styles of participants*

Predominant learning style	Female	Male	Total
Visual	10 (24.4%)	0 (0%)	10 (16.7%)
Aural	3 (7.3%)	1 (5.3%)	4 (6.7%)
Read/write	8 (19.5%)	4 (21.1%)	12 (20.0%)
Kinaesthetic	9 (22.0%)	4 (21.1%)	13 (21.7%)
Multimodal	11 (26.8%)	10 (52.6%)	21 (35.0%)
TOTAL	41 (68.4%)	19 (31.6%)	60 (100.0%)

The majority of the participants in the sample (60%) had a university grade point average (GPA) of 5.0 or above (out of a possible 7.0) with only 8% of students with a grade point average of less than 4.0, indicating that there were very few lower-achieving students who had elected to undertake the experiment. There were no significant differences found across the distribution of six experimental groups with respect to gender, age or grade point average.

In addition to the experimental data, a thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted on students' responses to the six open-ended questions provided in the survey. An initial scan of the total 333 comments was performed using the qualitative analysis tool, Leximancer, to provide an initial feel for the key themes contained within these data. The Leximancer scan revealed a considerable cluster of concepts around the key words of: information; reading; learning; audio; concept; diagram; learn; helpful and easier. From this initial investigation using Leximancer, the analyses of these qualitative data continued using the more robust NVivo (v8) software to explore what were considered the four main (or over-riding) themes:

- The usefulness of having a combination of resources (139 comments)
- The usefulness of audio (50 comments)
- The place of reading within online environments (59 comments)
- The right amount of choice (14 comments)

These four themes have been be explored in relation to the four research questions, in turn.

Research Question 1

The first research question was concerned with whether the multiple representations provided in the different iterations of the content lead to improved learning outcomes and whether this varied across the students' learning styles and modal preferences. The majority of students (93.4%) improved from the pre-test to the post-test after being exposed to the learning materials for Learning Concept 1 with the average change in performance from pre-test to post-test being 41.4%. Likewise, the majority of students (91.8%) improved from the pre-test to the post-test after being exposed to the learning materials for Learning Concept 2 with the average change in performance from pre-test to post-test being 48.3%. While students were asked not to guess the answers and to select 'don't know' where they did not know the answer, many students did select both correct and incorrect answers in the pre-test indicating some use of logic and/or guessing. The learning concepts used in the experiment were not difficult, and thus it may have been possible to make a logical assumption or an intelligent guess from the questions asked.

Students reported that Learning Concept 1 (concerning the Disconfirmation Model) was perceived to be easier to learn than Learning Concept 2 (the ServQual Model) by the majority

(58%). On the other hand, the majority of students reported enjoying Learning Concept 2 (57.39%) more than Learning Concept 1.

The experimental data did not reveal any significant differences in learning performance across the six groups and the six different conditions for either of the two concepts that could be explicitly accredited to the presence of different levels of multiple representations. And this lack of support for the learning style "meshing" hypothesis is consistent with the findings of other experiments conducted by Massa and Mayer (2003) and Constantinidou and Baker (2002). However, it should be emphasized that the sample sizes (ten per condition) were too small to make any statistical inferences. Moreover, some methodological limitations were evident including the lack of participants with a reported aural or visual learning style. The possibility that the concepts were too simple or common sense could also have resulted in an inflated pre-test score, due to correct guessing and/or logic in the first instance. This along with the unnatural research setting (to some), possible testing effects, and the self-selection process which resulted in a sample of students with a higher than standard grade point averages (the average GPA of the participants was 5.06/7.00) could also contributing factors to this finding.

Given the literature indicates that multimodal learning may be of greater benefit to lower-achieving students, while higher achieving students perform well regardless of how the content is presented, this could provide some further explanation for the lack of impact of the multiple representations of content on learning performance in this particular experiment (Zwyno 2003). So, although this pilot study found it problematic to establish, from the quantitative data, to what extent student learning improved due to the presence of the multiple representations, the qualitative data has told a somewhat different story, particularly when it comes to investigating the remaining research questions. Which, given the other factors discussed above, cannot rule out the fact that the multiple representations may have contributed more to the student's learning the concepts contained in the two conditions than the quantitative data indicates.

Research Question 2

The second research question sought to determine which types of representations of content (visual/aural/text/kinaesthetic elements) lead to improved learning outcomes in the students, and whether this varied across the different learning styles and modal preferences. While there were no differences across learning performance, most students indicated that all of the learning resources were helpful with the more enhanced multimodal learning resources considered to be the most helpful. Using the Friedman Test (Friedman 1940), a ranking of the treatments was possible as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4: *Perceived helpfulness of learning resources (7 point scale)*

Learning resource	Mean	Ranking
PowerPoint with audio	5.62	1
Interactive diagram with script and audio	5.42	1
PowerPoint handout	4.22	2
Interactive diagram with script only	4.20	2
Study guide	4.16	2
Textbook reading	3.98	2
Interactive diagram with audio only	3.66	2

This finding indicates that the audio enhanced PowerPoint and interactive diagrams with audio and transcript embedded in them were significantly different to the other learning resources, with these two resources being considered to be the most helpful to the student's learning experience. These two elements (included in condition 6) comprise a greater number of representations of the content and include visual, aural, text-based and kinaesthetic elements, all aimed at appealing to a variety of learning styles and modal preferences.

While the sample is too small to draw any statistical significance, the data does indicate (Table 5) that kinaesthetic learners, in particular, found the audio enhanced PowerPoint presentations to be very helpful, while aural learners found the interactive diagram with embedded transcript and audio to be very helpful. It is also interesting to note that the visual and kinaesthetic learners rated the textbook reading as being the least helpful, while the aural and read/write learners rated the interactive diagram with audio only embedded as being the least helpful. This could indicate that visual and kinaesthetic learners may be at some disadvantage when the learning resources are primarily text-based.

Table 5: *Perceived helpfulness of learning resources across learning style (7 point scale)*

Learning resource	V	A	R	K	MM	Ave
PowerPoint with audio	5.7	5.7	5.1	6.5	5.1	5.62
Interactive diagram with script and audio	5.7	6.5	4.3	5.3	5.3	5.42
Study guide	4.1	3.3	5.2	4.6	3.9	4.22
Interactive diagram with script only	3.5	4.7	4.0	4.2	4.4	4.16
PowerPoint handout	3.3	3.0	3.8	5.1	4.7	3.98
Textbook reading	2.3	5.5	4.7	2.6	3.2	3.66
Interactive diagram with audio only	3.5	2.5	2.4	4.4	3.2	3.20

Students were also asked a series of open-ended questions concerning the various learning resources. Responses confirmed that students identified with the modal preferences for learning, and in many cases, that was in keeping with their predominant learning style. Many students commented on how the various learning resources assisted them to understand and retain the content, while others commented on which learning resources were easiest, more interactive or more enjoyable to use. A selection of student comments, across the various learning styles, is provided in Table 6.

Table 6: *A sample of comments regarding learning resources across learning styles*

Learning style	Comments regarding different learning resources
Visual learners	• *I enjoyed being able to interact with the buttons on the diagram* • *The resources were more interesting and interactive* • *I prefer having a visual aid while listening to the speaker* • *There was less information to read – less information overload* • *The combination of reading and listening was good* • *The audio learning was the easiest, along with a visual aid being in the diagram* • *It had a flowchart diagram which made it easy to organize the concept in my head* • *I was able to listen to the slide show and see the words with pictures as they were spoken* • *I did not enjoy Learning Concept 2 as there was no audio or diagrams. I find learning easier with additional aids.*

Learning style	Comments regarding different learning resources
	• *I could learn the same knowledge in a different way, which let me check my understanding fully* • *The most helpful is the diagram with script and audio as there are two different modes of learning available.*
Aural learners	• *I like to see something and also hear it* • *The visual provided a much better understanding* • *Reading the visual diagrams certainly aided in memory retention* • *The interactive diagram assisted with retaining information*
Read/write learners	• *I find the reading the most useful and I tend to get distracted with listening and I tend to understand more with reading* • *Listening and reading was better for me* • *I liked information in the written form* • *I found the recorded lecture helpful with definitions and a summary of important points* • *Lists appeal to me* • *I found Learning Concept 1 easier because it was just reading, but in Learning Concept 2 you got to read it a few times and that helped me understand* • *Repetition of the learning objectives helped* • *Clicking on topics had definitions popping out of the screen* • *I enjoyed reading the materials, but having a real person's voice added a personal element* • *I liked the interactive part because it was fun to play around while learning* • *A mix of stimulus material which tends to be better for maintaining concentration/focus on the topic – short/sharp tasks*
Kinaesthetic learners	• *I enjoy listening and seeing* • *The combination of audio and visual kept me a bit more interested* • *It was much more interesting to listen and interact* • *It is more interesting to hear an actual person speaking about it* • *It was more attractive and normally visual mechanics seem better tools for learning for me* • *There were a couple of different ways I could learn the material. I didn't just have to read the material* • *The interactive study guide with audio helps to cement my knowledge – also the interactive diagram* • *The diagram really helped. The colors helped me when I was picturing what I had learnt* • *Hearing the information spoken and maybe put into different words than the text book helped me to get a fuller understanding* • *I could see what was being presented and therefore could recall the information much easier* • *The audio reinforces what is being read* • *The audio made concepts more confusing – like it clouded over what was supposed to be a simple concept*
Multimodal learners	• *I could first read a clear definition, and then I could see a diagram, and then I could listen* • *Pictures that I click on made it easier to understand the flow and having the audio to read while I was looking at the diagram* • *There was a variety of different approaches to learning the material and I could utilize all of them if I wanted*

Learning style	Comments regarding different learning resources
	• *The information was presented through the audio visual element which reinforced things* • *A tangible and visual effect that enforced my learning capacity* • *Someone explaining the concepts to me rather than just visual textual resources* • *The interactive diagram was fun to do as I got to click on things while the PowerPoint slides had little pictures on them* • *It is hard to focus on reading the text for a long time. Interactive learning is easy and more importantly it is enjoyable.*

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed two major themes related to Research Question 2. The first theme related to the usefulness of audio (50 comments), and the second theme, related to the place of reading within online environments (59 comments). The use of audio in online learning environments has long been purported to provide advantages for student learning (Clark & Mayer 2003; Fahy 2005; Hazari 2004). This finding was certainly confirmed and reinforced in this study. However, it is when audio is used in conjunction with other resources, such as images or text, that the advantage is most prominent.

In the case of the study materials used for these learning environments, audio was provided in two main resources; the audio-enhanced PowerPoint presentations and in the interactive diagrams (with or without a transcript embedded). The audio component was mentioned some fifty (50) times in the qualitative data, and on nineteen (19) of these occasions, audio was perceived to be a necessary component. This combination of resources was not only seen to provide information, but also led to a greater perceived understanding of the materials being presented and made learning more enjoyable. Previous studies have established that using a combination of verbal and non-verbal approaches, that stimulate both visuals and audio modalities, can increase working memory (known as “Dual Coding Theory”) and have a significant impact on how students retain information, consequently make learning more enjoyable (Calandra, Barron & Thompson-Sellers 2008; Clark & Mayer 2003; Pavio,1991).

The following comments exemplify these attributes:

- *I enjoyed reading materials for both concepts, but hearing a real person's voice as part of Concept Two added a personal element that made learning more enjoyable. (Read/write learner)*
- *Hearing the information spoken and maybe put into different words than the text book helps me to get a fuller understanding. (Kinaesthetic learner)*
- *I think hearing the information helps my recall. The diagrams I can "picture" in my mind when recalling information. (Kinaesthetic learner)*

The second theme arising from the thematic analyses and this is also related to Research Question 3, concerned the place of reading in online learning environments. The fifty-nine (59) comments about the reading materials provided (electronic and hardcopy) fell into three main categories; the lack of interest in using reading materials, or the boring nature of the reading (40); the perceived sufficiency of the written materials provided (17); and two requests for less reading. In relation to the lack of interest in using reading materials or the boring nature of the reading, some students commented:

- *Even though I always do my textbook readings I find them long and boring and I get distracted easily when reading them. (Read/Write learner)*
- *I lose my concentration when I'm simply reading, especially if it's new information. It's more interesting to hear someone speaking about something, as it's more personal. (Kinaesthetic learner)*
- *Simply reading a text book doesn't engage me and I tend to become disinterested and start skimming through the text, identifying only what I believe I may be assessed on and not take in a lot of what is in the text. (Kinaesthetic learner)*
- *I found the text book reading the least helpful because I found it to be less fun and sort of boring. It was overwhelming with all of the text and I found that I couldn't understand it as well as I could with the interactive diagram. (Multimodal learner)*

These comments should not be judged in isolation, rather they should be considered in conjunction with the finding concerning the usefulness of providing a combination of resources. The following two comments illustrate this connection:

- *It was much more interesting to listen and interact, as I find that when I'm just reading I have to read over and over again for the concept to sink in. It is helpful to have things explained several times and in several different ways. It was helpful to listen at the same time as reading, as extra information was added on in the sound. (Kinaesthetic learner)*
- *Having an aural aid [for Concept 2] made the concept more enjoyable, compared to Concept 1 where just reading it on my own was less enjoyable. (Multimodal learner)*

Research Question 3

The third research question sought to investigate whether multiple representations of content lead to cognitive overload, thus reducing learning outcomes and whether this varied across learning styles and modal preferences. The experimental data did not indicate that the multiple representations of the content led to cognitive overload, thus there was no reduction in learning outcomes and no differences were found across the six conditions for either concept. However, the thematic analysis revealed comments concerning the perceived potential for cognitive overload and the perceived 'right amount' of materials to be provided. Some students commented on being given too much choice (15 comments) with statements such as:

- *Having the audio made concepts more confusing - like it 'clouded' over what was supposed to be a simple concept. (Kinaesthetic learner)*
- *The first Concept for me was information overkill, it appeared that there was so much for me to absorb with the diagram as well as the reading. (Visual learner)*
- *More repetition of what was already learned, just another visual of what I had read. (Read/Write learner)*

Indeed, some students found it sufficient to simply read their materials. For example:

- *The readings gave me what I needed to know without fluffing around with extras that may well have confused me, the information got straight to the point.(Visual learner)*
- *I find the reading the most useful and I tend to get distracted with listening and I tend to understand more with reading. (Read/Write learner)*

Having seen that there were some concerns around having too much choice, albeit that these comments are very much in the minority, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that a scaffolding approach, utilising a combination of learning materials (a multimodal approach) to the provision of key information may be optimal. Pashler, et.al. (2008) state that "It is undoubtedly the case that a particular student will sometimes benefit from having a particular kind of course content presented in one way verses another" (p.116). That being the case Mayer (2009), however, does caution that too many layers of multimedia enhancements may serve to confuse, rather than enhance, so clearly establishing student expectations around the use of multimedia and scaffolding its use is essential.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question sought to determine whether there was an optimal combination of representations of content for improving learning outcomes and whether this varied across learning styles and modal preferences. The experimental data did not reveal any statistical differences across learning conditions or learning styles with respect to learning performance. However, the qualitative data also indicated that there may not be any optimal combination, with learners from both within and across different learning styles expressing different preferences with respect to the learning resources. The thematic analysis revealed that a combination of resources was considered to be particularly useful (139 comments). Providing more than one representation of a particular concept was found to be the most valuable attribute of the materials. The following comments typify the sentiments that were expressed:

- *I was able to access various types of learning materials which helped in the understanding of the material. After listening to the resources, I found it easier to take in what the material was trying to teach me, it reinforced it in my head. (Kinaesthetic learner)*
- *There was a variety of different approaches to learning the material and I could utilise all of them if I wanted.*
- *The combination of reading and listening was good. I do not find it easy to learn when I am just reading. By having the two resources I was seeing and hearing the information twice which helped. (Multimodal learner)*
- *It combines two powerful teaching styles; visual and audio. When you can integrate two or more teaching styles together, there is greater potential for learning. (Multimodal learner)*

Hence, a choice of resources and the reinforcement that choice allowed were fundamental to the students' appreciation of the learning environments. The main finding here may be that students like to have options and will gain benefits from those learning styles most suited to their learning style or modal preference.

IMPLICATIONS, GENERALISABILITY, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although there was an improvement in the scores students received between the pre- and post-test (and this should to be expected) the quantitative data for this pilot study did not necessarily indicate that participants performed better because of the presence of multiple representations. However, the qualitative data clearly indicates that students perceive learning resources with additional representations of content to assist their comprehension, understanding and retention of content, and to be more interesting and enjoyable to use. In particular, students expressed a

strong preference for a combination of learning resources and options. Given these findings, the importance of improving student progression and retention, and engendering a joy of learning, leading to life-long learning, educators should be encouraged to continue to explore the use of educational technology and multimedia for developing multiple representations of content. Audio enhanced PowerPoint presentations and interactive diagrams with transcripts and audio, in particular, were valued by participants in this study.

A number of limitations should be considered before drawing conclusions from this pilot study. First, it is difficult to make any inferences from the quantitative data regarding the impact of providing multiple representations of content on learning performance due to small sample and limitations of the quasi experimental methodology. In addition to the small sample size, there was a predominance of: (1) higher-achieving students; (2) multimodal learners who typically learn across a range of conditions; and (3) a lack of aural and visual learners in the sample. Given the literature indicates that multimodal learning may be of greater benefit to lower-achieving students, while higher achieving students perform well regardless of how the content is presented, this may be one factor that explains the lack of impact of multiple representations of content on learning performance within this experiment (Zwyno 2003).

Having said that, the extent to which the research findings and conclusions from this study are limited to this sample, the findings are consistent to previous studies (Sankey & St Hill, 2009; Birch & Sankey, 2008) conducted over recent years in relation to the application of multimodal design principles at a course/unit level. To that degree only these findings can be seen to be generalizable to a student population whose primary access to their study materials is in an online mode, or via a computer in some way. However, this premise should really be tested further prior to a wide spread adoption of this methodology.

Future research should involve a larger sample, higher representation of lower-achieving students, and a more even representation across learning styles. Future research could also involve more complex concepts to allow for a stronger measure of improvements in learning performance across pre- and post-tests. A larger and more representative sample could be recruited to allow for an empirical investigation of the impact of using educational technologies for developing multimodal learning resources across various groups. For example, in addition to exploring differences across learning styles and modal preferences, differences across gender and age groups, lower versus higher achieving students, English Second Language (ESL) versus English First Language (EFL) students, and on-campus versus distance learners could also be investigated. Moreover, the unnatural study conditions (for some students) and difficulties in controlling for extraneous factors in a quasi-experimental design should be addressed (Sekaran 1992). Ideally, future research would involve investigating learning performance under more natural study conditions to reduce possible testing effects. Under experimental conditions, students may be more actively involved in processing the learning content and pay greater attention to the content than they would in real life. The difficulties experienced with the quasi-experimental methodology in this pilot study may provide some explanation for the dearth of empirical data on the impact of multimodal presentation of content on learning styles, despite calls from educators for evidence that technology-enhanced learning leads to improved learning outcomes.

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