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Online Versus Face to Face College Courses

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Abstract

Students have perceptions of the on-line course environment whether they have taken an on-line course or not. A random sample (N = 100) of undergraduate (n = 34) and graduate (n = 66) students were administered a student perception questionnaire on students' attitudes towards studying online versus traditional classroom instruction in a large, private, southern New England University. Thirty-nine percent of the participants have a part-time job, 29% have a full-time job, and the remaining 32% are not currently employed. Thirty-three percent of the sample was male and 67% were female. Results of the survey questionnaire indicate that 29% of the sample attended or had some online course experience. Fifty-six percent reported having positive perception towards online education and yet only 22% would actually take an online course if given the opportunity. Time management and flexibility were given as prime reasons for taking on-line courses. Although all students use the Internet very much in their daily life, the results show that students still seem to prefer the traditional classroom environment for their education.

Key Words: On-line course, traditional classroom study, teaching efficiency

Introduction

In recent decades, the Internet has become the most popular tool for students. Students use the Internet for different aspects of knowledge, for their amusement, to meet friends, and so forth. Many researchers have inquired about the effects of online participation and students' study efficiency. Chin-Chung Tsai (2006) found that students' Internet perception may impact their attitude about this new technology and influence their learning efficiency on the Internet. With the popularity of the Internet, the on-line course becomes a new type of learning option. According to Tsai (2006) learners' attitude about the Internet influences their learning interest and performance in on-line classes. Wu and Tsai (2006) claim that high Internet self-efficacy students may do better with the Internet learning. However, students enrolled in the online course were significantly less satisfied with the course than the traditional classroom students on several dimensions: such as replies to immediate questions; non-verbal communication; and the language of the professor (Summers, Waigandt, & Whittaker, 2005). At present, there is a growing number of universities offering online classes. Therefore, our research ascertains college students' perceptions and attitudes about choosing a traditional class versus Internet, Web-based, and/or on-line courses.

Statement of Problem

There are numerous factors that go into choosing how one wants to learn and/or the type of course chosen. This uncertainty ultimately leads to a question: Is one instructional method better than another? Research on this topic will start to reveal college students' attitudes and perceptions towards each choice. Thus, the objective of this research is to explore college students' attitudes and perceptions concerning on-line courses and face-to-face classes.

The purpose of this research is to expand on previous research and to compare students' attitudes and perceptions between on-line courses and traditional classes. It will help educators and colleges to improve education systems and increase teaching efficiency.

Research Questions:

What are the attitudes and perceptions of students towards face to face and online courses?

What are the perceived advantages and disadvantage on face to face and on-line courses?

Why would students choose one form of learning over another?

The Review of Literature

Students have much interest in the Internet. They spend hours every day online. Female students try to conceptualize it as a technology; however, male students use it as a tool (Tsai, 2006). According to Ying-Tien Wu and Chin-Chung Tsai, (2006) the attitude about the internet could show students' Internet self-efficacy. Students have more positive Internet attitudes and Internet self-efficacy if they spend more hours online every week. Also, Ying-Tien Wu and Chin-Chung Tsai's (2006) research showed that male students have much more positive attitudes on their "perceived control" of the Internet than females. Lastly, it also indicated that graduate students show more interest in the Internet (Wu & Tsai, 2006). Online time does not have significant influence on achieving passing grades, but students who failed in the traditional classroom do not always fail on line (Davies & Graff, 2005).

When registering for a class, today's students are faced with a choice: should one enroll in a traditional lecture-based course or an online course? While the traditional, on-campus courses have long been part of the social and learning college experience, many students of varied ages feel that an online course best fits their individual needs. As technology advances, the ability of universities to offer these online courses is growing along with the success of these types of

classes. According to Beard et al. (2004), thousands of students are now choosing to pursue degrees by utilizing Internet-based courses as opposed to on-campus courses.

One reason why online courses have become successful is that they allow students to attend class on their own schedule. Many of today's learners pursue degrees while also juggling a work life balance. These online courses allow them to view course material, study, and interact with other students at their convenience. Many students who opt for online courses also feel that the social environment nurtures the learning experience. Sites like Blackboard allow teachers and students to easily navigate all course material and discussions boards while also allowing a chat room and personal email to both the instructor and fellow students (Beard, 2004). According to Maurino (2007) online classes create more interactions among the class than on-campus courses. An additional factor of choosing an online course is that doing so will spare students the financial burden of travelling back and forth from campus and home.

Although online courses are growing, many students still choose to enroll in traditional courses that allow face-to-face interaction (Maki, 2002). This is perhaps because many of their attitudes toward online courses are often negative (Robinson & Doverspike, 2006, p.66). One reason for this negative attitude may be because, despite technological advances, some students are more successful when learning through in person interaction with professors and fellow peers (Beard, 2004). It is also true that many college students desire the time-honored college experience and are able to easily attend classes as they live on campus or are willing to travel to campus for lectures. They see this social environment as best suited to fostering their ideal learning experience. Other students may feel that they lack the technological skills necessary to take a course that is solely computer-based (Beard, 2004, p. 29). Others may feel that they will not have enough contact with their classmates and professors through online interaction (Beard,

2004, p. 31). According to Robinson and Doverspike (2006) an important person in a student's life may influence their choice of whether or not to take an online course. For example, parents may tell their children to enroll in only traditional courses, as they did when in college, because they believe that their children will not learn as much through an online course (Robinson & Doverspike, 2006, p. 64).

On the other hand, the students in the online course may not be satisfied compared to the students in the traditional classroom. Further results indicated that the Web students were generally less satisfied with the course than those in the traditional classroom, despite the fact that the instructor, a statistics professor with 20 year's experience, was the same professor for both the face to face class and the Web class (Summers, Waigandt & Whittaker, 2005). When considering instructor variables, students who attend on line class do not have real class time, they have to wait other people together to discuss questions. There are significant differences between the Web and the traditional students' satisfaction about the instructors' enthusiasm, openness, concern and interest in students learning. From the course variable, the web students have less time to discuss problems than the traditional class. The Web students may have perceived fewer opportunities to ask the instructor to explain problems and questions personally and depend on an electronic medium for communication (Summers, Waigandt & Whittaker, 2005).

Some primary sources reveal that there is no significant difference between traditional course learning and on-line course learning. According to Warren and Holloman (2005), there are no significant differences in the students' study outcomes between web-based course and traditional classroom lecture. The research collected data from the students who took both on-line instruction and face-to-face instruction for the same course (Warren & Holloman, 2005).

Dellana, Collins and West (2000) also found that there was no significant difference for one management science course scores between the traditional classroom and on-line instruction. However, the research is somewhat limited, where the population and samples are American college students.

Method

Data were collected as part of a small pilot study on college student attitudes toward online study and the traditional classroom. The study was an anonymous questionnaire, and data were collected according to the standard survey collection method. Total number of usable questionnaires was 100, with a gender makeup of males (n=33) and females (n=67) which was used for the analysis. According to the respondents, 34% were undergraduate students and 66% were graduate students currently attending college. Thirty-nine percent of participants have part-time jobs, 29% have full-time jobs, and the other 32% do not currently have a job. This was of high relevance to our research questions and we also developed other questions on the questionnaire to reflect other relevant variance towards our research problem.

The questionnaires were developed with a series of questions regarding students' perception and actual experience towards online education. The survey method was random selection of participants regardless of gender and education level. The data collection shows multiple variables that contribute to whether students' perception towards online education was positive or negative. Sample questions such as: "what are your perception towards online education in general?" and "if opportunity presents, would you take an online course?"

Other factors include perception towards the benefit of taking online classes, weight of online degree compared to traditional degrees, and the perception of whether online classes were more effective than traditional classes. One item measures their attitude towards the online

credibility and other items ask an open ended question of whether they would take online classes if the option were given. The questionnaire concluded with what people think about online education, its effectiveness, quality and benefit of the online education compared with traditional classroom education.

Different questions revealed the relationship between different variables to students' attitudes about e-learning and face to face lectures. The researchers tried to control other variables that could impact the results. The researchers decreased other independent variables threatening to affect attitude in an effort to increase the research's internal validity. However, descriptive statistics (percent of response) are used in tabulating the results for greater simplicity and clarity.

Results

Twenty-nine percent of the sample respondents indicated they attended or had some online course experience. Fifty-six of the sample reported having positive perception towards online education and yet only 22% would actually take an online course if the option was offered. The greatest benefit for taking the online courses was time management; over 28% of the sample stated that time management was the greatest benefit and the other 29% stated the flexibility of the schedule is more beneficial. Over the topic of effectiveness, 80% of sample stated that online courses are not as effective as traditional courses. Twenty-percent of the sample reported they believe they are the same. Only 35% out of 29% of those who took online courses believe they are effective. In terms of degree value, only 35% of the sample thinks that online degrees should carry the same weight as a traditional degree and 65% of sample thinks that traditional classroom style education degree should weigh more than online courses. And 63% of sample thinks online courses would facilitate dishonesty and compromise academic

integrity, only 37% of samples think otherwise. Over 87% of sample responded that traditional college provides better academic support than online educators. And 13% of sample believes that online provides a better academic support than others.

Discussion

If opportunity were given, only 22% would actually attend an online course, 33% would not take online courses and 45% of sample is not sure whether they would take a course or not. In summary, students' perception towards online education is somewhat negative. Due to the fact that only 29 out of 100 took online courses, and out of those 29 in the sample, only 35% believe that the online education are just effective as traditional education. The biggest benefit of online education still is not the quality of the outcome, but rather the time benefit that it offers. Over 29% believes flexible schedule and 28% time management are the best benefit of the online education. The outcome of the system and the concern towards dishonesty are large issues for both educators and employers. Strikingly, 63 out of 100 (63%) think that online education facilitates the academic dishonesty and compromise integrity.

When considering all our research questions, there was a somewhat negative attitude towards online education both during the education period and the degree. Students have a positive attitude towards traditional face-to-face education, and this study's results support this where more students believe traditional classes are more effective, provide better academic support, less dishonesty, more academic integrity and should weigh more than online degrees.

Conclusion

The results of this research revealed that students rather to be in a traditional class than in on-line class. Although, on-line classes can deliver the same information that can be delivered through traditional classes, traditional classes have more advantages than the on-line ones.

Students in face to face class can ask immediate questions and can read the body language of the instructor. Students also, can share their knowledge with other students and can be engaged in activities that may help them to gain more information. This research also indicates that teaching efficiency in face to face interaction is better than on-line courses. Colleges and instructors need to think about more how to make on-line courses as the same effective as traditional classes.

Recommendations and Future Research

This research is limited in time and sample. We only spent a few weeks to do this research. Only 100 questionnaires had been sent out. Compared with millions of college students in America, Johnson & Wales University students are a small amount. It may not reflect the real attitude for the whole population.

Researchers found that although students use the Internet very often, they still prefer to attend traditional class instead of on-line classes. From the questionnaire's results, students feel on-line classes as not as effective and less social than traditional classes. They cannot communicate and ask questions easily. Educators need to be concerned about these problems and try to find good ways to solve these problems. On-line courses may be combined with other types of learning methods to increase their efficiency and quality. Professors in on-line classed should be more involved and practice more teaching skills. For future research, comparing the teaching quality of on-line courses and traditional ones is recommended.

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