

Online Learning

Satisfaction of Students with Online Learning

Online learning has been shown to be an effective method of delivering course content, however the success of an online learning initiative is only as good as the pedagogy underlying it. Careful thought needs to be put into the structure of the course, the methods for delivering it, and the way in which it is monitored and maintained. For instance, Thurmond, Wamback, Connors, and Frey found that “the virtual learning environment—including emails, computer conferences, chat groups, and online discussions—had a greater impact on student satisfaction than student characteristics” (2002, as cited in Yang & Durrington, 2010).

A study by Palmer and Holt (2009) found that there were five items that were found to account for 70% of reported student satisfaction with an online course. These factors “primarily related to how confident [students] felt about their ability to communicate and learn online, having a clear understanding of what was required to succeed in the unit and how well they thought they were performing in the unit.” What mattered most to students weren’t the digital aspects of the course, but the same things that matter to every student concerned with success in any learning environment – “what they need to know/do to get a good mark/grade and receiving useful feedback on their assignment work.”

Similarly, a study by Swan (2001) found that “three general factors—clarity of design, interaction with instructors, and active discussion among course participants—significantly influenced students’ satisfaction and perceived learning.” Swan connected these three factors—“a clear and consistent course structure, an instructor who interacts frequently and constructively with students, and a valued and dynamic discussion”—to satisfaction because they jointly support student interaction with the course content, the instructor, and fellow students.

Yang and Durrington (2010) summarize the factors that research has shown to influence students’ satisfaction with online learning.

Positive factors include:

- Course structure
- Clear, straightforward, and explicitly stated course objectives and learning outcomes
- Peer interaction, and feeling part of a learning community
- Constructive and timely feedback from instructors
- Design of the online learning environment
- Student support services
- Easy access to the virtual library
- Convenience and flexibility

Negative factors include:

- difficulty understanding instructional goals
- lack of community and feelings of isolation
- technical problems, leading to feelings of frustration (2010).

Course structure was shown to have the greatest effect on students’ perceptions of online learning. In Yang and Durrington’s study, course structure included “the instructional design of online course content, navigation of

the course, course availability and clarity, course expectations and objectives, required student skills and characteristics, convention on hours to spend in the course daily/weekly, and required research ability” (2010).

This course structure also includes the technical aspects of the course. Steward, Hong, and Strudler found that the method of content delivery, including the appearance of the webpages, navigation, and hyperlinks influenced students’ perceptions of online learning (2004, as cited in Yang & Durrington, 2010). Grigorovici, Nam, and Russill found that students appreciated the inclusion of interactive online syllabi (2003, as cited in Yang & Durrington, 2010).

The role played by the instructor is also a crucial determinant of student satisfaction with online learning. Students “want their faculty to be partners in the learning process by providing content expertise, scaffolding learning experiences, helping students make connections, and providing prompt feedback... they expect to have a professor” (Barcelona, 2009).

Comparison Between Online and Traditional Formats

When comparing traditional classroom learning (face-to-face) with online learning formats (asynchronous and synchronous), perhaps the most important finding was made by Chen and Shaw, who reported that when an instructional format was “sustained over substantial periods of time, there were no differences in learning outcomes among the three instructional modalities” (2006, as cited in Ward, 2010).

Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen found that the majority of students who had taken online courses indicated that they “either learned about the same in online courses or learned more in online courses than in traditional courses” (2009). This finding was confirmed by a meta-analysis of 51 studies that found that students who “took all or part of their class online performed better than their peers who took the same class in a face-to-face environment.” This meta-analysis found that online learning provided more “opportunities for learning time, additional access to learning materials, and increased opportunities for collaboration” than the traditional classroom (US Department of Education, as cited in Barcelona, 2009).

In their survey of the literature, Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen also found that other surveys had reported similarly positive findings concerning the outcomes of online learning:

- Leonard and Guha (2001) found that sixty percent of students believed that their online course was more challenging than a traditional course, and that the online environment provided a better learning opportunity.
- Hannay and Newvine (2006) found that over half of students felt they learned more in the online classroom than in the traditional classroom.
- Hannay and Newvine (2006) also found that students reported they were 35% more likely to do their readings in an online course than in a traditional course (Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009).

Between asynchronous and synchronous online learning, Russell found that while “asynchronous course delivery mechanisms are an important component of online learning and have real pedagogical value in facilitating time on task and collaborative learning, synchronous meetings have added value in creating connections among online learners and faculty,” which may serve to reduce the feelings of isolation reported by students in online courses (2005, as cited in Barcelona, 2009).

The online technologies that support synchronous meetings allow “for simultaneous conversations on class content, encouraging both horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical (student-to-instructor and instructor-to-

student) communication at the same time,” and the artifacts left behind by student participation (chat logs, discussion boards, etc.) allow instructors to more easily “check for understanding, provide feedback, and monitor engagement with the material during class” than in a traditional classroom (Barcelona, 2009).

There were also some negative findings regarding online learning. For example:

- Studies by Diaz and Carnal, and Patterson and McFadden, found that attrition rates for online learners often exceed those of their peers in traditional classroom settings (2006, 2009, as cited in Barcelona, 2009).
- Both Grimes and Lofstrom and Nevgi found that problems with technology and feelings of isolation were the greatest obstacles to online learning (2002, 2006, as cited in Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009).
- O’Malley and McCraw found that students felt that it was too difficult to contribute to class discussion in both synchronous and asynchronous online environments (1999, as cited in Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009).
- “Wang and Woo found that the responsiveness of the instructor, interaction and communication between class participants, and the quality of the learning climate were lower in asynchronous online classes than in face-to-face instruction” (2007, as cited in Ward, 2010)
- Ward also found that students perceived asynchronous online learning to be inferior to face-to-face and synchronous online formats in “addressing dimensions of instructional quality” (2010).

Interestingly, Lofstrom and Nevgi found that instructors were “more likely than students to perceive the learning experience online as more meaningful. They reported that students were more collaborative, more reflective, and better able to apply knowledge gained in an online course” (2006, as cited in Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009).

Who Benefits Most from Online Learning

Rovai found that student “characteristics, skills, study habits, [and] goal commitment... can impact students’ persistence in distance education online programs” (2003, as cited in Yang & Durrington, 2010). These characteristics include the willingness to try new things, to take risks, and students with an “internal locus of control” (Drennan, Kennedy, & Pisarski, 2005, as cited in Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009).

“Some evidence suggests that older students might have more favorable views of online learning than do younger students” (Wyatt, 2005 as cited in Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009). This could be explained by the fact that older students tend to be more self-directed in their learning and possess a greater “internal locus of control” than younger students (Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009).

Ross and Powell reported that females tend to be more successful in online courses (1990, as cited in Yang & Durrington, 2010). Similarly, Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen found that the “online course experience seemed to matter slightly more for females than for males” (2009). In comparing synchronous, asynchronous, and face-to-face teaching methods, “females did rate quality and amount of content learned significantly higher than males for asynchronous course formats. Females also rated the respecting of diverse talents and ways of learning higher” higher for synchronous methods than males (Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010).

A significant factor for student success in online learning programs was whether the student had taken an online course before. Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen found that the students they surveyed with the most experience in

online courses were more likely to strongly disagree with the ideas that “students learn more in traditional courses, that online courses are too time consuming, and that the quality of online courses is not as good as traditional ones” (2009).

Similarly, when comparing students in an online program to those in a traditional program, students with no online experience were “less confident they could do well in an online course, perceived that there would not be enough opportunity for interaction with classmates online, that there might be an increased workload for an online course, and that an online course would not cover the same depth or breadth of material as a traditional course” (Daniels & Feathers, 2002, as cited in Barcelona, 2009).

This finding was confirmed by Hachey, Wladis, and Conway, who found that “prior online course experience is strongly correlated with future online course success” (2012). They cite data collected by Muilenberg & Berge, which suggested that “perceived barriers to online learning drop after completing just one course, with fear of the unknown appearing to be an important factor” (2005, as cited in Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012).

Hachey, Wladis, and Conway suggest several methods to combat this problem:

- Improve social interaction and build a sense of community at the beginning of the semester by encouraging online introductions and sharing between students.
- Target student support services at:
 - Students who had previously withdrawn or earned a poor grade in an online course;
 - Students with no prior online course experience (2005).

Finally, the students who benefit from online learning are those who value the “ease of access and minimizing costs (other than tuition) of online formats” (Ward, 2010). These are the students that take online courses for the flexibility that online learning provides. For instance, when asked for their reasons for taking online instead of traditional courses, Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen found that the most common reasons given by students, in order of most frequently to least frequently cited, were:

- job and family related responsibilities
- the university being too far from the student’s home
- the ability to study at one’s own pace
- the traditional classes were full
- the course was only offered online
- health-related reasons (2009)

Academic Integrity

When it comes to academic integrity in online courses versus traditional courses, Grijalva, Kerkvliet, and Nowell found the rates of academic dishonesty to be equal in online and face-to-face courses (2006, as cited in Spaulding, 2009). Lanier, on the other hand, found that the proportion of students who said they had never cheated was higher in traditional courses than in online courses, and that almost twenty-five percent more students admitted to helping other students with online exams (2006, as cited in Barcelona, 2009).

Both Barcelona and Spaulding agree that what matters most when dealing with academic integrity in online courses is students’ perceptions of academic honesty and cheating in face-to-face versus online courses. For instance, Thomas and Davis suggested that “because both teachers and students believe it is easier to cheat in

an online course, more academic dishonesty is likely to occur” (2000, as cited in Spaulding, 2009). Lanier found that even high-performing students felt pressure to cheat in the online environment because they believed that a significant number of other students were cheating and that academic dishonesty was the only way to remain competitive (2006, as cited in Barcelona, 2009).

Ensuring the Quality of Online Learning

When working to ensure the quality of online learning, it is important to “specifically identify problems and issues related to online education” (Yang & Durrington, 2010). Mihai (2009) elaborates on some of these specific issues faced when doing quality assurance for online learning:

- Online learning development involves multiple departments (academic, instructional design, IT) that often work independently of each other (or even outsource portions of the development work).
- The position of online learning at the university is sometimes autonomous or even completely detached from the mainstream activity of the institution, isolating it from the greater quality assurance framework within the institution.
- The quick changes in learning technology, and the large content volume, alongside with budgetary constraints, can impact the quality of online learning programs.
- The quality of online programs can be affected by external conditions that can be difficult to control, such as “computer literacy of both the students and the academic staff and the willingness to embrace the new technologies for the purpose of learning and teaching” (Mihai, 2009).

To address these unique attributes of online learning when performing quality assurance on online learning programs, Mihai recommends a “dynamic process, closely linked to the various stages of the e-learning development, rather than a static, post-factum activity” (2009).

This dynamic process is enabled by a content management system that allows “developer to structure the content in a meaningful manner, thus facilitating a permanent overview” (Mihai, 2009). This system allows developers and users to mark pages that require regular review, dividing the content into “stable” items, and items that are changing constantly. This system also checks links automatically, ensuring that students can “follow their ‘journey’ of knowledge without interruptions caused by dead links” (Mihai, 2009). By creating this intuitive, and disciplined system of back-end administration, developers and instructors can have a permanent overview of what is in their courses, what needs to be checked regularly, and what gaps remain to be filled (Mihai, 2009).

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