Online Learning: Student Perceptions
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Question:

Online learning is becoming increasingly prevalent. Nearly 4 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2007 term, a 12% increase from 2006, and over 20% of all students were enrolled in online courses" (Allen & Seaman, 2008). These numbers will to continue to rise. How do students perceive online learning? What factors influence this perception? Which methods of online instruction do students prefer?

Answer:

Students recognize both the benefits and the drawbacks of online learning. A in a traditional classroom, students’ opinions of online learning greatly depend upon the instructors and learning activities that took place. Students’ familiarity with online learning and technology also plays a large role in their rating of online learning.

Proof:

• Meyer (2007) researched student discussions in a hybrid course: half were during the face to face sessions and half were on the course discussion board. After each discussion, students took a survey regarding the depth and effectiveness of learning, discussion length, and the ability to remember details. In contrast to the classroom discussion, all students were involved in the online discussion; the average number of posts per student was 4.8, well above the requirement. The number of students who stated there was ‘no difference’ between the online and face to face discussion increased steadily, from 24 after the first discussion to 33 after the fourth.

• Meyer (2003) asked students to compare face to face and threaded online discussions. She analyzed responses for higher-order thinking and students perceptions. Students expressed that online discussions took more time, provided the opportunity for more thoughtful and well supported responses, and highlighted writing skills. An overwhelming majority of students, while averse to the additional time commitment, reported the additional ‘time to reflect’ as an advantage to threaded discussions.

• Anderson and Haddad (2005) surveyed 109 students in online courses to determine the effect of gender on participation in online discussions. Though past studies have shown that female students often are less active in traditional classroom discussions, the results of the survey indicate that female students felt more free to voice their opinions in an online environment, and that they perceived a deeper level of learning as a result.

• Glass and Sue (2008) asked students in an online math course consisting of weekly homework, discussions, and quizzes plus midterm and final exams to rank the effectiveness of the activities weekly. Students found homework, PowerPoint presentations, and video recorded lectures to be the most beneficial tasks. Out of 58 students, 50 rated the class good or outstanding, and 54 found it to be intellectually challenging.

• Cuthrell and Lyon (2007) studied 32 graduate students in Education about their preferences for six different instructional strategies: interactive PowerPoint, group discussion, audio files, read and respond, read and teach, and interactive video lecture. Students found the individual activities to be somewhat boring yet convenient. Group work was less convenient but more effective. With the audio and video intensive activities, technology became the focus of many students rather than the course material. Cuthrell and Lyons concluded that online instructors must employ a variety of instructional strategies to appeal to a wide range of students.

• Greener (2008) examined student perceptions of a blended classroom, and found that once students overcame the initial hurdles of low technical skill or computer access, they preferred the flexibility and interactivity that allowed them to further explore ideas raised in the traditional classroom. Students also strongly preferred working in small groups.

• Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) studied 76 graduate students to determine the benefits and
challenges of online courses. They found that course design, learner motivation, time management, and familiarity with technology lead to success in an online course while technical problems, time constraints, and a lack of community are the barriers to learning online.

• Arbaugh (2004) asked students throughout a four year online MBA program to determine whether or not their perception of online courses changed as they became more familiar with the delivery medium. He found that student perception of online learning became more positive as students took subsequent courses, and that the most notable change came between the first and second course.

• Powell (2007) researched student satisfaction with multiple sections of two different delivery styles of the same MPA course: a traditional classroom setting and an online course with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities. The satisfaction levels among students for both course formats were similar, with slight differences apparent in instructor preparation and usefulness of assignments. Powell determined that the instructor of the course was the determining variable in these instances, rather than the delivery format.

• Wu and Hiltz (2004) surveyed 116 students in online courses about the effectiveness of asynchronous and synchronous discussions in their classes. They determined that student motivation and enjoyment resulted in a higher perception of learning, and that the instructor played a vital role in facilitating both of these aspects. Gender and previous experience with online courses did not have an effect on student perception of learning.

Further Reading:

• The Sloan Consortium publishes the Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks and other reports. http://www.sloan-c.org/

• Educause seeks to advance of higher education through information technology through the reports from the Educause Center for Applied Research, Educause Learning Initiative, and Educause Connect, all of which provide current information about the uses of technology in education. http://www.educause.edu/

Sources:


About this Teaching Tip Sheet:

This Teaching Tip Sheet was prepared by Ms. Kris DeAngelis at the Center for Teaching and Learning at UNC Charlotte. Please visit us online at teaching.uncc.edu for more professional development resources.