

Campus - based student perspectives versus online courses

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a study on student attitudes toward campus-based and online courses in the master's program at the School of Information Resources and Library Science at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The information was obtained from 17 students via an online survey between 2005 and 2009. The findings reveal that online courses were popular because of advantages in convenience, time flexibility, and location. However, some respondents considered the quality of online courses inferior to campus-based courses. Regardless of preference, respondents indicated that instructors, including their technical skills, play a crucial role in the success of both types of courses.

Keywords: online courses, e-learning, virtual courses, SIRLS, distance learning, campus-based courses, face-to-face courses, online learning, library science

Introduction

The practice of distance learning based on mail correspondence existed long before e-learning became possible. Some university degree correspondence programs and numerous other correspondence schools operated in the United States in the late 19th century as a response to challenges presented by an increasingly mobile population and improvements in postal and transportation services.

Today, the terms e-learning, virtual learning, web-based learning, distance learning, online learning, technology-based learning, and others are so interconnected that they are sometimes used interchangeably. In this study we collapsed these terms into two main categories, making distinctions only between e-learning that can be employed in traditional, campus-based courses as one category, and fully online or online distance learning courses as the other category.

E-learning, one type of technology-based learning, is a technological mode of content delivery. It involves the use of electronic media such as the internet, intranets, satellite-broadcast, CD-ROMS, video and audio streaming courses, PowerPoint, webcast, and other means of delivering educational content to students. Online, web-based, or virtual, on the other hand, involve not only technological content presentation, but also the use of a variety of teaching strategies. It goes beyond the use of email, PowerPoint, video streaming material, and other specific technologies. One of the main characteristics of online learning is a physical separation of teachers and learners.

University online courses combine the characteristics of traditional distance education with newer technology-based delivery tools, all within a largely traditional academic educational framework. Instructors now use online tools to post lectures, readings, tests, quizzes, surveys, and discussion boards, among other things. Regardless of delivery mode, the goals of campus-based and online classes remain the same.

Purpose.The purpose of this study was to examine student attitudes toward online and campus-based instruction (courses) in the Master of Information Resources and Library Science degree (MLIS) program at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The School of Information Resources and Library Science (SIRLS), founded in 1969 as the Graduate Library School, focuses on the study of information in social contexts. The overall mission of the school is to help students understand the processes involved in information usage, from its creation to the use of knowledge and information resources in libraries and society in general, including interdisciplinary understanding, interpretation, creation, and use of knowledge and information (SIRLS Vision, 2010). A more specific goal of the school is to prepare graduate students for a variety of careers in the field of information and library science such as positions in academic, public, school, and specialized libraries. The MLIS program purports to be "...heavily weighted in technology and emphasizes theoretical constructs of information resources" (SIRLS Course Descriptions, 2010)

Background and Review of the Literature.Today, the number of online courses and enrolled students is increasing rapidly in many colleges and universities. A survey of more than 2,500 colleges and universities in the fall of 2007 revealed that more than 3.9 million students were taking at least one online course, a 12% increase over the previous year. From fall 2002 to fall 2007 the compound annual growth rate of students taking at least one online course was 19.7%, while the number of higher education students grew at an annual rate of approximately 1.6% during the same period (Allen Seaman, 2008).

According to Keegan (2000), there are several advantages to online learning, such as flexibility in the scheduling of classes and class-related activities by instructors and students, absence of space constraints, and access to education by certain groups (e.g., homemakers, shift workers, travelers, and prisoners). An online learning environment can also facilitate learner-centered and learning-centered approaches, in large part because students may assume more responsibility for their learning. Finally, technology becomes one of the key elements in both the processes and outcomes of student learning in online environments.

In a 2007 study Haigh found that online students were more likely than face-to-face students in the same institution and degree program to believe that online education was of comparable quality to campus-based education. According to Yukawa (2006), the factors influencing online communication styles are complex and multidimensional. For example, one of her students reported that online courses may have encouraged her to be more frank and open than she would have been in a classroom. On the other hand, another student had to overcome insecurities about chat communication. For her, lack of immediate, visual, affective feedback denied her reassurance that she had been understood.

Technological considerations are vital in the preparation of learning materials, and frequently in the choice of delivery modes as well. However, many institutions that rely upon distance learning technology lack a research-based framework to guide the conception and implementation and to measure the results of their programs (McCombs Vakili, 2005). That is, many practitioners lack the theoretical and technological training needed to apply and then transform the principles of traditional knowledge delivery into an online environment that can achieve the same or better results as campus-based instruction.

Some authors, among them Murphy and Loveless (2005), theorize that online learning, and particularly the online discussion forums, offer opportunities for enhancements in "disseminating, evaluating and discussing information and options, solving problems, thinking critically, co-constructing knowledge, and scaffolding by more able peers" (n.p.). Despite such claims, however, little research has been conducted on how students perform in online versus classroom environments. The results of one study (Harley et al., 2003) showed that "students who reported using lecture webcasts as a replacement for the in-person lecture had lower scores in the course overall" (p. 35), a phenomenon the authors speculated might have been due to low-performing students relying on webcasts as a backup. Webcast use for reasons other than replacement purposes did not affect student performance. In fact, high usage of the course website correlated with higher course grades. A large study conducted in 2005 on learning value added through the use of information technology revealed that 40.6% of students preferred a

moderate amount of technology in courses, while 29.5% preferred limited or no technology, a number that may have changed since then. Surprisingly, senior students tended to prefer more technology in their courses than did freshmen students; the same was true for older students in comparison with students of traditional college age. Furthermore, the perceived primary benefit of technology use in courses was convenience, followed (in descending order) by communication with the instructor and other students, management of course activities, and improved student learning (Kvavik Caruso, 2005).

Method.The MLIS degree at the University of Arizona requires 36 credit hours earned in 12 three credit-hour courses. Required are 12 credit hours of core courses, 12 credit hours of elective courses, 6 credit hours of free choice SIRLS electives, and 6 credit hours of other curriculum options that can be taken outside SIRLS (SIRLS Master's Degree Requirements, 2010).

The program offers three delivery modes, two of which are distance-friendly. One is campus-based courses (SIRLS calls them "face-to-face courses"), typically carried out in a classroom environment with some use of technology. A second mode is online courses ("virtual courses"), taught in an online course environment without campus-based meetings and independent of location and time. The third delivery mode is a combination of campus-based and online courses ("hybrid courses") that feature on-campus classes accompanied by assignments to be completed online either before or after the class meeting(s). In rare cases campus-based and online modes of instruction occur in the same course.

Between 2005 and 2009, a survey instrument was sent to the SIRLS listserv. Of the 27 respondents, 17 had completed at least one online and one campus-based course. The survey consisted of one demographic question followed by 20 items designed to elicit information about specific aspects of each participant's experience with the SIRLS program. The response mode was closed for some items (i.e., a range of responses was presented in a "forced choice" format) and open for others (see Appendix for a copy of the survey instrument).

The survey data were collected and processed by November 2009. Data collected from closed-ended response mode items were coded and tabulated. The accuracy of the open-ended responses was verified through face-to-face interviews with six of the respondents. Finally, the authors categorized the open-ended responses in collaboration with an experienced outside researcher, who read the responses and discussed possible categories with the authors.

Results.The 17 respondents had taken a mean of 5.53 online courses, 1.59 campus-based courses, and 0.35 hybrid courses. Some students had taken more than the required minimum number of courses (12), while others had not completed all their courses at the time of their participation in the survey (Table 1).

Table 1
Number of Courses Taken, by Student

Online courses		Campus-based courses		Hybrid courses	
No. of students	No. of courses	No. of students	No. of courses	No. of students	No. of courses
1	1	7	1	7	0
1	3	4	2	8	1
2	4	2	3	1	2
1	5	2	4	1	3
2	6	1	6	-	-
5	8	1	11	-	-

2	10	-	-	-	-
1	16	-	-	-	-
1	18	-	-	-	-
1	23	-	-	-	-
Total 17	Total 94	Total 17	Total 27	Total 17	Total 6

Students who took classes prior to 2005 had used WebCT course management software for their courses. Those who took classes after 2004 used the WebCT software, Desire2Learn course management software, or both. Both types of software allow for content delivery, interaction (e.g., online discussion forums), and assessment.

Campus-Based Courses

Positive Aspects. Sixteen of the 17 respondents reported face-to-face communication with teachers and students as a positive aspect of their campus-based courses. Some respondents also mentioned related benefits such as the ability to connect faces with names, the establishment and maintenance of eye contact, and issues related to mood, humor, and personality. Other advantages mentioned were clarity regarding assignments and expectations of the instructors; immediate discussion and response from instructors and classmates, including the ability to ask questions and receive an immediate response; vibrant class discussions; and better overall communication. In the context of social interaction, several respondents maintained that campus-based classes make students feel part of the university and community. Some respondents reported gaining greater overall awareness of issues that tend to arise only during conversations or merely by accident. Other participants mentioned that face-to-face relationships are beneficial for obtaining certain types of information, such as information about future careers.

Perceived social benefits were reflected in responses about meeting, socializing, and camaraderie with other students, as well as a distinct feeling of belonging to a larger community of learners and the effects of that on lifelong learning. One respondent mentioned the appeal of having a “campus feeling” in a beautiful, lively environment. Several respondents concluded that the academic and professional benefits of campus-based classes include learning from fellow students about classes, instructors, and potential and actual professional positions.

The findings support Dow’s (2008) study, which suggests that social presence is a predictor of satisfaction in online learning. That is, person-to-person awareness without social context is a struggle in the online course environment.

Negative Aspects. Inconvenience, limited time flexibility, and overall time limitations are the negative aspects of campus-based courses that the respondents seemed to feel strongly about. Most agreed that campus-based courses are more time-consuming, and the inflexible scheduled times create hardship for students with work and/or family commitments. The situation is more difficult for students who live far from campus because they have to arrange and pay for travel, parking, and lodging. All these factors add significantly to the overall cost of their education according to some respondents. One respondent mentioned limited time in class for student interaction, while two respondents opined that students’ personal matters as well as their expressed opinions take too much time in campus-based classes. Finally, one respondent lamented that lack of student preparation is more obvious in campus-based classes, something she saw as a negative feature of such classes.

Online Courses

Positive Aspects. Convenience, working at one’s own pace, and flexibility of time, top the list of perceived positive features of online courses. Two respondents contended that these courses have

important social qualities in that they benefit shy people by allowing them to open up, and by bringing a sense of community to small group projects.

Two respondents opined that in the online environment students can easily manage multiple tasks. The online discussion forums, whether synchronous or asynchronous, contribute significantly to the process of learning, according to some respondents. The results of a study completed in 2002 on student satisfaction in online learning show that most students prefer synchronous (interactive chat) to asynchronous (discussion boards) communication (Burnett, Bonnici, Miksa, & Kim, 2007).

There is a consensus among the respondents in this study that online courses allow students to manage their time more efficiently. Finally, self-motivation can hasten completion of the degree.

Negative Aspects. The negative aspects of the online courses can be divided into two categories. One category has to do with instructors' knowledge about technology and with technical delivery. The second category of criticisms relates to perceived lack of communication in online environments.

Respondents generally agreed that online courses depend to a large extent on instructors' ability to teach them. Unfortunately, they reported that the instructors' limited technological backgrounds and online delivery skills sometimes impeded their teaching. Some respondents suggested that the successful implementation of online courses requires adequate training of instructors in online teaching techniques. Problems with technical delivery and training, and lack of computer experience of some students, may limit the success of this delivery mode also.

Insufficient social interaction is the main negative aspect reported by most of the respondents, including inadequate communication, lack of social momentum, lessened sense of community, and lack of responses from instructors or participants in group projects. Some participants believe that it is easy to disengage and go unnoticed by the instructor and/or classmates in an online environment, and that instructors can also disengage, or "hide out." Similar findings were reported from a case study in which students reported that more effort is needed to maintain a suitable presence and image in an online environment than in an on-campus setting (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000).

Some other respondents in the present study mentioned the propensity for misunderstanding and lack of clarity regarding projects and assignments. Three respondents stated that online courses require more time than campus-based courses.

Hybrid Courses. Ten of the 17 respondents had taken hybrid courses (Table 1). They listed face-to-face interaction between students and instructor as a primary advantage, together with meeting classmates and associating people with names, and the ability to clarify issues with the instructor related to online components. The main disadvantages were travel and lodging arrangements for the on-campus meetings, and spending weekends or even entire weeks away from home.

Course Content, Technical Delivery and Benefits of Online Discussion Forums. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 = excellent, 4 = good, 3 = average, 2 = fair, and 1 = poor, 3 respondents rated online course content as excellent, 10 as good, 3 as average, 1 as fair, and none as poor (Table 2). A statistically significant majority of respondents rated the online course content as excellent or good, as opposed to an aggregate of the "Average," "Fair," or "Poor" categories ($\chi^2 = 4.76$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). Using the same scale, 2 respondents rated online technical delivery as excellent, 9 as good, 6 as average, and none as fair or poor. This was a non-significant difference between the aggregate high and average/fair/poor categories ($\chi^2 = 1.47$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$).

Similarly, 3 respondents rated the online discussion forums with students as excellent, 6 as good, 6 as average, two as fair, and none as poor (Table 2). This was a non-significant difference between the aggregate high and other aggregate categories ($\chi^2 = .06$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$). The results were somewhat more positive for the online discussion forums with instructor: 5 respondents rated the quality as excellent, 8 as good, 2 as average, while 2 rated it as fair, and none as poor. These results were significantly higher for the excellent and good categories than for the other aggregate categories ($\chi^2 = 4.76$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

The size of the standard deviations relative to the size of the respective means indicates a moderate degree of diversity of opinion for these four questions (Table 2). However, the non-significant differences between the relatively high ratings and relatively low ratings occurred at only chance levels for two of the four aspects of the classes. Only for the questions about online course content and instructor discussion forums were there significant levels of agreement, in this case favorable opinions, above the level of chance (95%). These two aspects of the courses also had the highest mean ratings of the four.

Comparison: Campus-based vs. Online Courses. Of the eleven respondents who responded to the question about the overall quality of the campus-based and online portions of the program, six replied that their campus-based courses were of higher quality than the online courses, two contended that their online courses were of better quality, and one thought they are of equal quality. The other two respondents maintained that instructors are the key to the success of all types of courses.

According to the Sloan-C survey from fall 2005, “Many . . . academic leaders are very positive about a number of aspects of online education, including a belief that students are at least as satisfied with online instruction as they are with face-to-face classes, evaluating the quality of online instruction is no more difficult than for face-to-face, and an increasing majority view the quality of online education as the same or better than face-to-face instruction” (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p. 18).

Table 2
Quantitative Ratings of Online Course Content, Technical Delivery and Discussion Forums (N = 17)

	Excellent (5)	Good (4)	Average (3)	Fair (2)	Poor (1)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Online course content	3	10	3	1	0	3.88	.78
Online technical delivery	2	9	6	0	0	3.76	.66
Discussion forums: students	3	6	6	2	0	3.59	.94
Discussion forums: instructor	5	8	2	2	0	3.94	.97

One participant in the present study implied that the best campus-based courses were better than the best online courses she took. Another said that “humans are visual creatures that thrive on information gathered through our eyes. . .we look for facial expressions; we want to connect.” One respondent mentioned that the online instructors were far from memorable, as opposed to her campus-based instructors. Two respondents who stated that the quality of the campus-based courses was higher expressed satisfaction with the quality of the online portion of the program.

Although online group projects were often perceived as highly successful, respondents believed that the projects did not compare in quality with projects completed via campus-based group interaction. One participant thought the quality of online courses *per se* was equal to the quality of campus-based courses, but she said that sharing professional experiences with students adds value to on-campus courses, a feature not found in her online courses. The remark that instructors can hide behind their technical skills, using exciting gimmicky tools, is worthy of consideration.

Additional Comments. According to Anderson (2008), the major motivation for enrolling in distance education "...is not physical access per se, but the temporal freedom that allows students to move through the course of studies at a time and pace of their choice" (p. 52). This may be the case for students who are physically present at a given university and take only a limited number of online courses, but several participants in the present study who did not live in Tucson stated that they would not have been able to enroll in a program with no online component. Thus, it appears that the main motivation to enroll to an online program for at least some students who lived far from campus was the ability to enroll in that particular program, more so than convenience of the course delivery mode.

Conclusion. In this study most students who reported their views about quality considered the online courses inferior to the campus-based courses. The belief voiced by some respondents that online classes required more time indirectly supports previous research findings to the effect that online teaching is more time consuming than campus-based teaching mainly because of the increased interaction with students (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Cavanaugh, 2005; Coleman, 1996). That is, since instructors take more time to administer these courses, the question is whether the time requirements influence the overall quality of the courses and could make them of lesser quality than campus-based courses. There is little comparative research on the quality of courses produced by these two delivery modes. More research is needed on ways to improve the quality of online instruction.

Duderstadt, Wulf, and Zemsky (2005) believe that as the power of digital technology continues to evolve, "the capacity to reproduce all aspects of human interactions at a distance could well eliminate the classroom and perhaps even the campus as the location of learning" p. 36). On the other hand, Coleman's (1996) survey suggests that faculty members find it difficult to do quality teaching through online courses, since they lack the professional teaching skills and expertise needed to impart the basis of successful life-long learning. Instructors' technological skills and their willingness to update those skills regularly may prove crucial to the future of online teaching. Probably most important will be the ability of instructors to integrate new technologies with traditional instructional methods in ways that lead to genuine improvement in learning for their students.

Considerable research has been conducted on the social aspects of online versus campus-based learning. The results of this study show that social characteristics of online and campus-based learning depend on the personalities of the students, as well as their perceptions and attitudes. On one hand, a number of participants indicated that online courses are helpful for shy and withdrawn students; on the other hand, some participants opined that campus attendance and face-to-face student and instructor interaction enhances the feeling of belonging to a community. Follow-up studies should examine social aspects and academic quality of online versus campus-based learning.

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