



Comparing student and faculty perceptions of online and traditional courses



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ABSTRACT

The use of online courses on college campuses has grown substantially in recent years, despite limited information on how these courses are perceived by faculty and students, compared to traditional (classroom) classes. In this study, two separate, but equivalent, surveys were developed to compare the perceptions of faculty and students. Comparisons were made between the perceptions of faculty who have taught the same course using online and traditional formats to the perceptions of students who have taken online and traditional courses using a series of 7-point Likert scales. Both surveys measured: 1) perceptions of online versus traditional courses, 2) perceptions of students who take online courses and students' motivations for taking online courses, 3) perceptions of faculty members who teach online courses; and 4) demographic characteristics. Analysis of data included the comparison of mean values between faculty and students and Pearson correlation analysis to determine relationships between questions. Of the 25 questions investigated in this study, 12 showed significant differences in means between faculty and student perceptions ($p < 0.001$). Significant findings from this research showed that compared to faculty perceptions, students tend to see online courses as more self-directed and believe that online students must be more willing to teach themselves. Students in online courses feel more disconnected from professors and fellow students than professors believe them to be. In addition, faculty tend to see the role of the professor as more critical to the success of online courses than students do.

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1. Introduction

Many US colleges and universities have spent significant time and effort increasing the number of online course options available to their students (Adams & Eveland, 2007; Allen, 2010; Allen & Seaman, 2005; Allen, Seaman, Lederman, & Jaschik, 2012; Artino, 2010; Conceição, 2007). The growth rate of online enrollment in the US now exceeds that of traditional enrollment (Rich & Dereshiwsky, 2011) and is becoming more accepted by academic leaders in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2010). According to Allen and Seaman (2010) nearly 39% of students in higher education take at least one online course during their degree program. Online education and distance learning allows a university to reach a greater number of students who otherwise might not be able to attend classes or work toward a degree.

As technology continues to be integrated into higher education the perceptions of students and faculty members regarding online courses (as well as traditional courses) are important when determining future course offerings. But, what exactly are perceptions and how are they formed? According to Wood (2012), perception is the process of creating meaning by selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. Initial perception (first information) has been shown to influence the processing of new information and requires strong validity to change. Forming perceptions is a dynamic process that is influenced by a multitude of factors within one's learning environment. So what do perceptions have to do with online education? Most would acknowledge that in many cases 'perception is reality.' As such, a person's perceptions, and subsequently expectations, can significantly influence decisions and behaviors (Bhattacharya, 2012; Reimann & Bechara, 2010). Students and faculty members' course-related behaviors are driven by perceptions. Students' decisions to enroll in online courses are often guided by their perceptions of the quality of the learning experience, their perceptions of the faculty member teaching the online course, and their perceptions of other students taking online courses and the motivations

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of those students. Once formed, such perceptions can be difficult to change. Johnson (2013) claims that faculty perceptions of technology drive the implementation of technology in the classroom. In his analysis of faculty perceptions at research-intensive institutions, he finds that “faculty view technology is of limited or no functional relevance to instruction. When technology is used, it is rarely driven by expert knowledge and is more frequently employed either to attract the attention of students or to cope with constraints of large classes” (Johnson, 2013). As such, it is vital that faculty members and university administrators understand the perceptions of all groups involved in the delivery of online education.

With the growing emphasis placed on online and distance education come a number of questions dealing with the effectiveness of such education models. For example, how are online education courses viewed by students? Do students view online courses as educationally equivalent to traditional classes? Compared to traditional courses, do students view online courses as easier, better, more interactive, or less interactive? How do students view other students who take online courses and the motivations of those students for taking online courses? Do students perceive any differences in the faculty members who teach online courses versus those who teach traditional courses? How do students view synchronous versus asynchronous online instruction? How do faculty members view online courses compared to traditional courses? How do faculty members view the students who take online courses and the motivations of those students? And, how do faculty members view fellow faculty members who teach online courses? Answers to these questions can provide university administrators with important information for planning and managing the online courses that are offered. Previous research has addressed multiple of these questions, however, major gaps still exist in the literature (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Palmer & Holt, 2009; Sher, 2009; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004; Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010).

Unfortunately, previous research has not been able to provide us with answers to all of the above questions. Scant research has taken a holistic view by examining all of the above questions in a single study. The majority of previous research tends to focus on only one of the three core components of instruction when examining differences in online versus traditional courses: 1) perceptions of differences in the course content; 2) perceptions of the instructor; or 3) perceptions of students and students' motivations for taking online courses (Bristow, Shepherd, Humphreys, & Ziebell, 2011; Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Dobbs, Waid, & Carmen, 2009; Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis, & Lopez, 2011; May, Acquaviva, Dorfman, & Posey, 2009; Mortagy & Boghikian-Whitby, 2010; Overbaugh & Nickel, 2011; Palmer & Holt, 2008; Smart & Cappel, 2006; Tanner, Noser, & Totaro, 2009). For example, Bristow et al. (2011) studied student perception of online education in college and reported that approximately one-third of the students who had completed at least one online course expressed negative attitudes toward online education. Seok, DaCosta, Kinsell, and Chan (2010), in a survey about online instruction at community colleges found that instructors had more favorable perceptions of online course effectiveness compared to students and that positive instructor perception was linked to gender, number of years teaching online, and technology skill. Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killon (2009) evaluated the effectiveness of different components of online courses in building community and found that a variety of structural, procedural, and emotional factors contribute to (or detract from) community building in the online environment.

Obtaining a clear understanding of student and faculty perceptions of online education is essential if online education is going to be an effective component of higher education. Common approaches to measuring the effectiveness of on-line courses are to assess student performances after course completion (e.g., grade distribution; Rich & Dereshiwsky, 2011), and to assess student satisfaction with the online experience (Kromrey et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2011), or a combination of both (Fredericksen, Swan, Pelz, Pickett, & Shea, 2012). However, what these approaches

(and other post hoc approaches) fail to address is the question of student choice between online and traditional courses. Ferreira and Santos (2008) maintains that perceptions impact attitudes regarding learning, and subsequently; influence performance. Examining similarities and differences in student and faculty perceptions allows for the interpretation of factors that may directly or indirectly influence participation (taking/not taking online classes for students; teaching/not teaching online courses for faculty), effort, and learning.

As previously stated, past research investigating students' and faculty members' perceptions of online courses at universities has been relatively narrow in focus and aimed at addressing only one of the three core components of instruction. The purpose of the present study was to directly compare faculty members' and students' perceptions of online courses to traditional courses across and among all three core components: 1) course content; 2) students; and 3) professors. This is based on the assumption that differences in perceptions across these areas will affect a student's decision to participate in online instruction and faculty member's willingness to invest time and effort creating online instructional resources.

2. Methodology

To understand the differences in perceptions between faculty members and students, a survey was developed containing questions measuring perceptions of the three core components of instruction. Based on a review of previous research and discussions with students and faculty members, topics about each of these components and their impact on the online experience were identified. From this list of topics, specific items were generated and given to students and faculty members in a pretest. Items were subsequently eliminated due to redundancy, irrelevance, or their inability to apply to both populations under study. The specific language of the questions was then formulated such that the same phrasing (or a close equivalent) could be asked of students and faculty members without a change in interpretation. Two identical versions of the survey were developed — one for students and one for faculty members. The surveys measured: 1) perceptions of online versus traditional courses, 2) perceptions of students who take online courses and students' motivations for taking online courses, 3) perceptions of faculty members who teach online courses, and 4) demographics. The specific questions asked on the survey are shown in Table 1. Responses to these items were recorded using a 7-point scale, where 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree.”

2.1. Participants

The survey was administered to faculty members and students at a large public university in the southeastern United States. To obtain informed opinions about online courses versus traditional courses, only those faculty members and students who had recent experience with online courses were included in the sample.

To find faculty members with recent experience teaching online courses, a search was first conducted to identify those faculty members who had taught the exact same course in both online and traditional formats within the past two years. The purpose of this was to eliminate any effects of differences in courses. For example, if a faculty member teaches only certain courses online, and teaches different courses in traditional formats, differences in their perceptions of online versus traditional formats are confounded with differences in the courses themselves. Of the 1360 total tenured and tenure-track professors, instructors, and adjuncts at the university, 147 qualified for inclusion in the study (i.e., they taught the same course in both formats within the past two years).

Emails were sent to all 147 qualified faculty members. The email included a description of the study and its purpose, as well as a link to the online survey. To increase the response rate, eight \$20 grocery store gift cards were offered as incentives to be given to eight randomly selected faculty respondents. All identifying information used for the drawing

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