



Linkages between course status, perceived course value, and students' preference for traditional versus non-traditional learning environments

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed undergraduate and graduate students' preferences for course delivery via traditional classroom, hybrid, or wholly online learning format as influenced by the status of the course as a prerequisite, elective, or core offering and perceptions of its utility and importance. Students also were asked to justify their choice of learning format. Overall, students preferred traditional classes across all course statuses and justified their choices by citing them as engaging and interactive. Across all students, perceptions of the usefulness and importance of each course status did not significantly influence their selection of a specific learning environment. Collectively, these findings have ramifications for understanding factors that impact students' responses to online learning environments.

1. Introduction

Higher education continues to undergo transformations as e-learning becomes more prevalent at the undergraduate and graduate level (Allen & Seaman, 2016). For example, data from the Online College Student survey has shown a consistent increase in online enrollment by about one percent per year since 2012 (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2015). In 2015, of the 18.6 million students who were enrolled in higher education courses, approximately 5.5 million chose to take courses that were either partially or fully-online (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015). Similarly, Poulin and Straut (2016) found that one in four students was taking at least one distance course and that one in seven students chose to learn exclusively online.

Educational researchers have kept pace of this increase in online enrollment by examining factors contributing to students' comfort with and preference for e-learning as compared to more traditional face-to-face classroom learning (see Auld, Blumberg, & Clayton, 2010; Clayton, Blumberg, & Auld, 2010; Marshall, Greenberg, & Machun, 2012). Reasons why students consistently show preferences for e-learning include the convenience and flexibility that asynchronous and synchronous modes of instruction allow (Allen et al., 2004; Auld et al., 2010; Chiu & Wang, 2008; Clayton et al., 2010; Marshall et al., 2012). Reasons advanced against e-learning, particularly at the graduate level, include student factors such as their motivation, self-efficacy, and strategies needed to master course content (Auld et al., 2010; Clayton et al., 2010). Further, e-learning has been viewed as limiting opportunities for interpersonal interaction and engagement (Auld et al., 2010; Clayton et al., 2010) and supportive study environments (Lee & Choi, 2011; Perry, Boman, Care, Edwards, & Park, 2008), and as offering presumed inferior quality of courses with limited relevance to students' perceived educational needs (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lee & Choi, 2011).

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At present, little is known about student preferences for learning formats when given the opportunity to choose between traditional, online, or hybrid courses and how their attitudes towards e-learning might determine the type of courses they choose. However, findings concerning students' perception of course utility and value more generally allows for the making of inferences about linkages between course selection and students' perception of the importance of a course to their career goals and learning (Babad & Tayeb, 2003; Babad, 2001; Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008; Feather, 1988; Zocco, 2003). For example, Zocco (2003) found that graduates' and undergraduates' perception of a course as incidental to their career path was inversely related to their likelihood of taking it. Similarly, Babad and colleagues (Babad & Tayeb, 2003; Babad, 2001) found that students' course selection was influenced by how vital the course was seen to their learning and occupational goals. Further, the authors found that when choosing elective courses, students were more likely to select courses that they saw as high in learning value. Notably, Wladis, Wladis, and Hachey (2014) found that the drop-out rate for elective or distributional requirement courses taken online were high relative to those seen as more career relevant.

Students' selection of their learning environment also may be influenced by the perceived value of the course based on students' comfort with e-learning. This contention conforms to the expectations of expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). According to expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), individuals' choices largely reflect the outcomes they expect from engaging in certain activities and the value they ascribe to those activities. Thus, consistent with findings by Eccles and Wigfield (2002) and Meece, Wigfield, and Eccles (1990), students' ascribed values for a given course as important (attainment value) or useful (utility value) should affect their decision to take that course. Specifically, students should select a course seen as high in perceived value and useful to one's future goals. Indeed, research has found that perceived usefulness positively influences students' behavioral intentions to engage in e-learning (e.g., Chang & Tung, 2008; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lai, Wang, & Lei, 2012; Liu, Li, & Carlsson, 2010). For example, Wilhelm (2004) asked students to select from among two courses that varied in level of grading leniency, course usefulness, course workload, and teacher ratings. Findings showed that students were more likely to select a course with poor course evaluations, harsher grading, and a greater number of assignments if the course was deemed highly useful to their future career goals. Similarly, in one of the few studies to examine expectancy-value theory as applied to learning environment choices, Chiu and Wang (2008) found that the perceived value and utility of web-based learning were significant predictors of students' decisions to continue taking online classes.

We question whether students may extend a similar analysis to their selection of a learning environment such that the attainment and utility of a given course will impact that choice. Thus, for students who prefer traditional environments, they may take an online course deemed low in attainment and utility value, such as an elective that is needed to meet one's degree requirements (e.g. psychology) but not one's academic concentration requirements (e.g. developmental psychology). This study was designed to examine this expectation among undergraduate and graduate students. Specifically, our study addressed the extent to which course status (as prerequisite, elective, or core) was related to learning environment preferences and reasons for that choice; differences in perceived attainment and utility values of course offerings given that course's status; and how these perceived values predicted choice of learning environment.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 464 (352 = female; 111 = male; one student did not specify a gender) ethnically diverse students drawn from an urban university of which 44% were undergraduates and 56% were graduate students, aged 18–40 years old. Approximately 77% of the sample was enrolled full-time. Within this sample, 51% were between the ages of 18–24 and the remaining 49% between the ages of 25–40. Students identified primarily as Caucasian (70.30%). The remainder of the sample identified as Hispanics (11.40%), Asian (6.9%), African American/Black (5%), and other races (6.40%). At the time of data collection, online and hybrid classes were being offered at the institution. Over 67% of the students reported never having taken an online or hybrid class. Further, over 44% were unfamiliar with the demands of these types of courses. About 40% of the students were unemployed.

2.2. Measures

Learning environment preferences (traditional, online, or hybrid) based on course status and reasons for those preferences were assessed using a modified version of the Choice of Learning Environment Survey (CLES; Clayton et al., 2010). Specifically, students were asked to justify their choice of learning environment for hypothetical courses identified as a prerequisite, core, or elective class. These justifications, as based in the literature concerning students' perceptions of online learning, were: 1) engaged/interactive learning; 2) learner-instruction match; 3) familiarity with learning environment; 4) augmented learning; and 5) lifestyle fit (e.g., Auld et al., 2010; Clayton et al., 2010; Petrides, 2002; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006) (see Table 1 for characterizations of each justification). The CLES also prompted students to provide their own reason if inconsistent with one of the five provided. Two further questions were asked to determine whether participants had ever taken a hybrid course and the extent to when they were familiar with the demands of such a course. The version of the CLES we used is included in the Appendix.

Attainment and utility values were assessed via 15 items; nine items for attainment value and six items for utility value. Three items were posed to measure attainment and two for utility values for each of the course statuses. The items were adapted from Eccles and colleagues (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) expectancy-value scale and were measured on a 7-point Likert increasing scale of importance/usefulness whereby 7 = very important/useful. Sample items included "Compared to your other classes, how

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