

Chapter 9

Need We Train Online Instructors?

A Cautionary Study of Learning Outcomes and Student Satisfaction in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In an online setting, it is critical to understand the factors that influence learning outcomes and student satisfaction. Group work or collaborative learning is frequently prescribed as a vital part of online classes. Learning outcomes and student satisfaction in both research and anecdotal evidence show mixed results. A qualitative, multi-case study was undertaken to determine the role of instructor training on student learning outcomes and student satisfaction within the online class using group work. Data were collected via an online survey, personal interviews, and document examination. Analysis of those data revealed that those instructors using group work who had the most training and assistance in the design and facilitation of classes had the highest level of student satisfaction as well as the highest student perception of good learning outcomes. The data show that the amount of instructor training undertaken had a major impact on how students reacted to the classes.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is now an accepted method of teaching at all levels of education. University faculty and administrations strive to provide excellent learning outcomes and high student satisfaction (Norton, 2013; Sampson, Leonard, Ballenger, & Coleman, 2010). Research suggests that instructional design and

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instructor training are two areas that may affect learning outcomes and student satisfaction especially in those classes where group work or collaborative learning are used (Koh, Barbour, & Hill, 2010; Ossiannilsson, Williams, Camilleri, & Brown, 2015; Roman, Kelsey, & Lin, 2010; Scherling, 2011). Understanding the role of instructor training and instructional design in promoting satisfactory learning outcomes and high student satisfaction in these classes is essential for the future development of the field (Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010; Dron, 2012).

We examined online classes at a state supported university in the southwestern United States. Using four upper division classes, the students' opinion of their learning in the class and their satisfaction with the class was sought using an open-ended online survey. We interviewed the class instructors and examined the documents created for the classes. This study of instructor training as it effects online group work design and use attempts to fill a gap in the research by examining aspects of online learning, admittedly a complex problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Teaching Techniques

A 2004 meta-analysis of research done between 1985 and 2002 on meeting learning goals in face-to-face classes as compared to meeting learning goals in online classes found no significant differences between face-to-face and online classes (Bernard et al., 2004). Johnson's (2008) reevaluation of this data revealed that the techniques employed by the instructor rather than the medium in which the course was offered determined how well the instructional goals of the course were met. An analysis of more than 100 research articles resulted in the definition of three types of interaction, student-content interaction, student-instructor interaction, and student-student interaction (Lou, Bernard, & Abrami, 2006). Research into the interaction of the instructor with the students shows this as the most important pedagogy of the online class (Bailey & Card, 2009; Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006; Wagner, Vanevenhoven, & Bronson, 2010). Research that resulted in no significant difference in the learning outcomes between face-to-face and online avoids the issue of pedagogy (Dron, 2012). Most research concentrates of the perceived environment of the class and the students' perception of the learning outcomes rather than how the instructor uses the tools and techniques (Dron, 2012).

Instructional Design

The most common definition of instructional design is the systematic development of those methods used to facilitate knowledge transfer in an educational setting (MacLean & Scott, 2011). Instructional design for online learning is primarily the development of activities within a learning management system (LMS) that facilitate the operation and teaching of an online class (MacLean & Scott, 2011; Merrill, Barclay, & van Schaak, 2008). Good instructional design has been shown to help overcome some of the problems seen in early online learning, high attrition rates, unmet learning outcomes, and learner dissatisfaction (Koh et al., 2010; Siemens, 2002). Furthermore, recent longitudinal studies of the use of technology in post-secondary education concluded that the instructional design of the course is far more important than the technology employed (Tamim, Lowerison, Schmid, Bernard, & Abrami, 2011).

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