Chapter 1.6
Online or Traditional:
A Study to Examine Course Characteristics Contributing to Students' Preference for Classroom Settings

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ABSTRACT

Technological advancements currently penetrate society, changing the way that some courses are taught. It has become more apparent in higher education institutions that all classes are not as adaptive to an online format as others. Since many institutions of higher education further incorporate online courses into their curriculum, it is important to understand the characteristics of courses that affect students' preferences for either traditional classroom environments or online environments. Indications of this can be seen in the attrition and retention rates of classes offered online. This study explores the characteristics of courses that affect students' preferences towards online and traditional classroom settings. These results should help providing guidelines to institutions considering courses to offer online.

INTRODUCTION

Technology advancements are important drivers of societal change. In particular, the advancement in technological tools and communication technologies has influenced the number of students taking online courses. The increase is considerable, from 1.6 million students (9.6% of total enrollment) in 2002 to 3.9 million students (21.9% of total enrollment) in 2007 (Allen and Seaman, 2008). Much of this increase is due to changes occurring in student demographics and demands. For example, higher education institutions have faced changes in their student demographics in recent years as more students no longer fit the traditional profile of a young, full-time, in-residence student. As college demographics change and technological tools are available and widely adapted, the education needs are altered and there is a higher demand for more flexible and convenient methods in obtaining a higher education.

Higher education course curriculum has been altered in recent years to better fit some of the demands for online courses. The popularity of online courses can be attributed to the perceived benefits online learning can provide students along with its convenience. However, quite a few students still do not perceive that these benefits outweigh the downside of online courses and thus prefer traditional courses. In particular, some students do not feel that certain courses are suitable to be offered online. As such, adoption of online learning for certain subjects or course content has been slow (Allen and Seaman, 2008). Instead, these subjects seem to be better fit for a traditional learning environment. Through an understanding of these perceptions of needs and student satisfaction, higher education institutions should be better able to offer appropriate courses in various formats for learning environments that best suit their student population.

It has become more apparent in higher education institutions that all classes are not as adaptive to an online format as others. Even though online courses can produce higher enrollment numbers, they also suffer from higher attrition and retention rates (Moody 2004). Perhaps one reason for this is that students realize that the course format is not what is preferred and thus the online course is dropped in order to take the course in a traditional format. One case study examining attrition rates found a 43% attrition rate for an online section of a statistics course versus 13% for its traditional format counterpart. For a managerial marketing course the attrition rate was 24% for the online format versus a 9% rate for the traditional format, and an international economics course had a 3% attrition rate for its online format versus a 2% attrition rate for its traditional format (Terry 2001). The results from these studies indicate the likelihood that course characteristics may affect students' preferences towards online or traditional courses.

As institutions of higher education consider further incorporating online capabilities into course curriculum and formats, it is important to understand which courses students think are more suitable for a traditional classroom environment and which courses are more suitable for an online environment. To investigate this issue, this study examines the following research question: Which course criteria influence students' preference for online courses? The purpose of this study is to explore course characteristics and its effect on students' preference for online versus traditional courses since previous studies have not examined this issue. To accomplish this purpose, this study first examines the current literature related to online courses. This is followed by a description of the data collection methodology followed by an analysis of the data. This study concludes by providing suggestions for future research and for institutions and instructors considering setting up online courses.

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