

Chapter 5.11

Classroom Preferences: What Factors can Affect Students' Attitudes on Different Classroom Settings?

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ABSTRACT

Advances in technology have enabled instructors to design online courses that better meet the needs of students. Online courses generally are adaptations of traditional courses; some courses are more suitable for such online instruction. As the trend of online course offerings continues, universities must understand factors that lead to students' preferences since online courses can be costly to develop and implement and inappropriate online courses can lead to lower student retention rates. This study focuses on students' perceptions of online courses. The results identify issues that affect students' perceptions and this study concludes by suggesting ways for universities to design online programs that better suit the desires of students.

INTRODUCTION

A significant interdisciplinary body of literature exists describing the field of online learning. Distance learning can be traced to the origin of postal service and correspondence courses, but online classes provide many new features unavailable in traditional distance learning. A student enrolled in an online course may live thousands of miles away from the university offering the class, or he or she may live in the same city. Instead of waiting for days or even weeks while correspondence travels through the postal system, some of the common tools available for today's online learners include e-mail, chat in real-time, online discussion boards, videos, whiteboards, and postings of files. In spite of the increased publicity regarding online education,

one may still wonder what exactly comprises an online classroom.

Advances in communication technologies, such as the widespread use of the Internet, have opened new avenues for continuing higher education. These advances have allowed educators to provide individuals with the ability to satisfy varying learning requirements. With regard to higher education, colleges and universities around the world are now able to address students with varying needs to meet their education goals, such as resolving issues with commuting to and from campus and with communicating with others. Because of the advantages to both students and the university, enrollment in online courses grew from 1.98 million in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004 (Allen & Seaman, 2005).

In recent years, higher education institutions have faced changes in their student demographics as more and more students no longer fit into the traditional young, full-time, in-residence profile. As the demographics change, so do the education needs. There is a higher demand for more flexible and convenient methods in obtaining a higher education. Also, there is the need to teach students to incorporate technological proficiency into their everyday education to meet the demands of many jobs today which require a more technologically savvy workforce.

Educational institutions are looking into incorporating online capabilities into their courses. Yet questions remain regarding the ability of institutions to afford the cost of successfully implementing and coordinating online courses and the appropriateness of online learning in meeting the institutional goals. Furthermore, benefits that online courses provide may be dependent on the individual, beneficial to one student while being a hindrance to another. For example, some students may not find online courses beneficial to their education needs and prefer the person-to-person interaction of a traditional course as an influential factor. Others may find the convenience of online courses as an important factor in their course

format decisions. These and other factors can be highly influential to decisions.

Since students have perceptions about online courses that influence their subsequent decisions whether or not to take online courses, it is important to understand the factors that surround perceptions of benefit towards an online course setting. Designers for higher education courses can better create course options and curricula for their students so that higher education needs can be addressed. The purpose of this article is to understand the factors that affect a student's perception of online courses as well as the factors that are important for online courses. In pursuit of this objective, this article first discusses prior studies that address issues related to online courses and students' perceptions. This is followed by the study's methodology. Next, an analysis of the factors that were found to be significantly different between subjects who prefer online and those who prefer traditional class settings are discussed. In conclusion, the usefulness of the significant factors which can be utilized by those in higher education is discussed as well as future research development in this area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Courses

Online courses have been seen as a way to individualize the education process by creating more self-reliant students and graduates when they successfully complete an online course. Students that take more control of their learning end up increasing their level of learning. One of the important concerns of higher learning institutions is to ensure that they offer sound online courses so that students and faculty are best able to participate and gain an appropriate learning experience (Lam, 2005).

Online courses are growing in number, both in the number offered in universities and the number

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