

Chapter 16

Online Course Activities: A Case Study of Assignments and Assessment Types

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ABSTRACT

In this case study research, data were gathered from faculty and students who have online teaching or learning experience to determine the types of assignments, activities, and assessments that are used in the online classroom. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered on diverse facets of the online classroom experience from level of education, to field of study, and Learning Management System experience. This study filled a gap in the literature of types of course activities required in online classes. This case study includes details about assignments, assessments, activities, discussions, and live sessions that instructors can use in the development of online classes.

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of the internet, courses offered in distance learning formats exponentially increased in popularity. The Department of Education formally defined distance education as the education delivered when the instructor is not in the same location as the student. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous and communication is through a variety of video, audio, or computer

technologies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Currently, over 15 million students are enrolled in distance education courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Because of the popularity of distance learning courses, even traditional, brick and mortar institutions now provide students the option of enrolling in online courses at an increasing rate.

Effective learning activities are critical for relevant, scholarly knowledge acquisition. Online instructors are challenged to implement meaningful course activities to help students acquire new

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skills and demonstrate mastery of course content. Many instructors have flexibility in creating unique course activities for each course, while others adopt a generic syllabus with prescribed activities students must complete to successfully pass the class.

For this case study, the researchers surveyed students and instructors about diverse course activities, assessments, and assignments required in the online classroom. In addition, data were gathered regarding the level of study, Learning Management Systems used, and field of study. A case study approach was chosen for this research because “case study research excels at bringing us to an understanding of a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research” (Soy, 2012). Yin (2008) identified case study research methods as empirical inquiries that allow researchers to investigate contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, even when multiple evidence sources are utilized. This methodology was selected so that the researchers could complete a detailed contextual analysis (Wiersma & Jurs, 2008) of a selected number of data points to compare the diverse activities required in online courses. Data were tabulated to indicate the different learning management systems (LMS) utilized by survey participants, the format in which courses were offered, semester length, as well as the indicated frequency and enjoyment level of assigned activities for instructors and students.

Purpose of the Study

This case study was designed to provide data on diverse course activities, assessments, and assignments in online classes across the nation. There is little literature regarding the types of applications required in online classrooms. This study fills the void by including the findings from a case study of students enrolled in online classes and instructors of online courses about the types

of course activities and assessments assigned. Recommendations were made for instructors and curriculum decision-makers hoping to adopt diverse instructional activities in the online class environment.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. What is the typical format and length for an online course?
2. What types of activities and assessments are assigned in online courses?
3. How do participants rate enjoyment of assigned activities?
4. How do assignments and assessment vary between fields of study and level of students?
5. How does the type of Learning Management System (LMS) utilized, affect what types of assignments and assessments are used?
6. How does the type of Learning Management System (LMS) utilized, affect how students perceive course activities?

BACKGROUND

In an online course, students may be assigned a variety of learning tasks to assess course content knowledge. For example, papers, multimedia presentations, research, journaling, group activities, course discussions, class readings, and examinations may be required (Oliver, n.d.; Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008). Wild and Quinn (1997) indicated that learning activities in the online environment are fundamentally linked with learning outcomes. Course assignments determine the ways students engage with course content and construct knowledge.

Liao (2006) and Jonassen (2010) suggested course assignments be designed to build upon

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