The Distance Learning Dilemma—
What Do Students Really Want?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine students' preferences concerning distance learning. For this study, distance learning refers to online and/or hybrid courses. "Online" is where 100 percent of the course is taught online; "hybrid" is where 50 percent to 99 percent is taught online. Face-to-face is defined as the traditional, physical classroom setting or in person, not digital meetings. The results of a survey in which 154 college students responded indicated that students prefer the convenience and the autonomy afforded by distance learning. However, an issue of quality education arose since students also stated that they retained less information and were able to apply less of the information when they take an online and/or a hybrid course in the place of a course taught in the in person, traditional, physical classroom. Face-to-face meetings and emails were the most preferred methods of communication with peers and instructors.

Purpose

Do students have a dilemma with distance education? With increased publicity and availability of online courses and programs, studies have emerged in search of meaningful, well structured, quality online education. The focus of these studies has been mostly on the delivery method and the curriculum. On the other hand, studies have been limited in the area of examining the relationships between students' preferences for online courses and students' preferences for traditional learning or face-to-face practices in a physical classroom. An alternative to strictly online courses is a mix in delivery methods or a hybrid approach where the courses are taught partially online and partially in the classroom.

For this study the terms, online courses and/or hybrid courses, are used to refer to distance learning. An "online course" is where 100 percent of the course is taught online, and a "hybrid course" is where 50 percent to 99 percent of the course is taught online. Face-to-face is defined as the traditional, physical classroom setting which meets in person, and it is not any type of digital meetings—such as Skype or another video/audio transmission.

Therefore, the questions that this study attempts to answer include (a) do students who enroll in online/hybrid courses truly prefer distance learning, (b) do the students' reasons for enrolling in an online/hybrid course align with their learning preferences, (c) do students perceive that they receive a quality learning experience from online/hybrid courses, and (d) do students prefer some communication channels over others when communicating with instructors and peers in an online or hybrid course.

Background

Distance education has been described as a process that provides learning opportunities to learners when the instructor of the information and the learner who is receiving the information are separated by time and space (Honeyman & Miller, 1993). The origins of modern distance education date back to the 19th and 20th century when the primary mode for distance courses was through the post office (White, 1982). Today, as the Internet develops, technology has brought new meaning to distance education. Online curricula utilizing the Internet, audio/video recordings and social media have become the primary delivery channels for distance education.

In 1993, Jones International University became the first accredited college to be accessible completely online. Since then, the demand for and development of online education have grown exponentially. In 2006, approximately 3.5 million students in the United States enrolled in at least one online course at their institution (Allen & Seaman, 2008). At the end of 2009, this number had risen to about 5.6 million (Allen & Seaman, 2010). According to the latest Online Learning Survey Report by Babson College, 6.1 million students participated in at least one online course during the fall semester of 2010. This number accounts for 31.3% of the total enrollment in higher education in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Education consists of two primary delivery methods: asynchronous and synchronous (Graziadei, Gallagher, Brown & Sasiadek, 1997). With the asynchronous method, teaching and learning do not occur at the same time. This format engages participation and exchange of information without depending on the students' simultaneous responses, thus giving students flexibility to work at their paces within their time frames. Therefore, asynchronous communication media includes emails, discussion boards, and blogs. On the other hand, when using a synchronous method, teaching and learning require simultaneous engagement and the immediate exchange of information by the students and the instructor. Examples of synchronous communication include in person face-to-face, virtual classrooms and chat rooms.

Studies have revealed meaningful and well structured, quality online education through the reflections of students and faculty in recent years. Thus, one study found that student learning is consistent with Constructivism Theory—that knowledge is constructed by the learner and not by transmission (Ali, Hodson-Carlton & Ryan 2004). Therefore, the method that is used to deliver the knowledge is not the primary determinant of student's learning success.

Despite the rapid increase in enrollment in online courses, there seems to be a lack of a consistent operational definition of online courses among educators and students. The Sloan Consortium defines an online course as a course where more than 80% of the content is delivered online and defines a hybrid course as a course where 30% to 79% of the content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). However, an online course has been defined where 100% of the information and activities are delivered online, and a hybrid course is where 50-99% of the information is taught online. The hybrid course, also, requires some physical presence (Tabor, 2007) or face-to-face classroom meetings.

On the contrary, research also found that "dependent learners" may lack self-discipline and maturity and, therefore, need external guidance through defined structure and organization including previously specified learning goals. These students prefer social, interpersonal, and cooperative learning environments. However, "independent learners" who can self-structure situations and set self-defined learning goals, prefer individualistic, impersonal, lecture-style learning environments (Jonassen &

Grabowski, 1993), or an environment that is well suited for distance education programs (Thompson, 1984). In other words, distance education is considered a viable teaching method for mass learning by some students (Isman, Gazi & Aksal, 2010). It has been reported by students that online education does not improve students' learning experience; its most prominent advantage is flexibility (Dobbs, Waid & Carmen, 2009).

Students also pointed out that the factors that contribute to a successful online course are student-faculty interaction, active learning, time on task, and cooperation among students (Bangert, 2005)—these satisfaction factors are less correlated with online education, but more commonly expected in traditional face-to-face courses. An online social presence of both faculty and peers significantly increased students' satisfaction with online learning experience (Bangert, 2008).

Regardless of their academic disciplines, students revealed that learning online means learning through reflection, exploration, introspection, and interaction. Although learning online translates to freedom and flexibility for students, factors including technical problems, course changes, testing issues, social isolation, and teamwork have presented challenging issues for many students (Ali et al., 2004). Students must understand that although online learning comes with much freedom and flexibility, the process requires a tremendous amount of self-discipline and time management (Britt, 2006).

The fundamental purpose of an online course is to (a) provide learners with access to information at any time and any place, (b) allow students to complete assignments and communicate with instructors and peers from anywhere, and (c) give students the opportunity to learn at their own pace. Because students enroll in online courses with diverse expectations, a more uniformed definition or instructional design and delivery becomes necessary. A common definition of distance education and a clearly stated purpose for the course is extremely important when trying to define the instructors' and students' expectations before designing an online course (Baker & Woods, 2004; The Quality Matters Rubric, 2011).

As online education and degree market opportunities grow (Folkers, 2005), three very important issues for higher-education institutions when considering online courses are accreditation, assessment, and reputation (Eisenbarth, 2003)—perceived administrative advantages. However, as traditional universities attempt to determine which delivery approach to adopt, it is important to look beyond the perceived administrative benefits of online education and pay close attention to the preferred learning practices of the students of the 21st century, the skill needs for future job markets, and the impact of instructional learning methods.

Thus, this study was designed to look beyond administrative reasons behind the advancement of online curricula and students' self-reported perceptions of a quality online education. The purpose of this study was to determine if (a) students who have enrolled in online or hybrid courses truly prefer distance learning, (b) students' reasons for enrolling in online or hybrid courses align with their learning preferences, (c) students perceive that they would receive a quality learning experience from online or hybrid courses, and (d) students prefer some communication channels over others when communicating with instructors and peers in an online or hybrid course. Therefore, this study links students' traditional learning practices and their self-perceived preference or lack of preference for online education.

Sample, Demographics, and Methodology

The convenience sample consisted of 154 upper-level undergraduate students at a Midwestern, AACSB—International Association to Advance the Collegiate Schools of Business accredited university. The students had completed online course(s) and/or hybrid course(s). For this study an online course is where 100 percent of the course is taught online, and a hybrid course is where 50-99 percent is taught online. Face-to-face is defined as the traditional, physical classroom setting or meeting in person, and not any type of digital meetings—such as Skype or another video/audio transmission.

Students who were enrolled in business courses filled out the survey in the Appendix. Students who had not completed an online/hybrid course where asked not to fill out the survey and thus eliminated themselves from the study. Approximately 70 percent of the students were business majors, and of those, 19 percent were accounting majors and 20 percent were management majors. Eighty-two percent had completed one or more online courses. Seventy-eight percent had completed one or more hybrid courses.

A little more than one-half of the students were male. Two-thirds of the students were under 24 years old, and one-fourth of the students were between 24-34 years old. The findings are only representative of the convenience sample, therefore, cannot be generalized to a different population.

Findings

The students ranked these reasons for taking an online/hybrid course: Convenient, retention, autonomy, interaction, economical, and easy. Convenience (convenient) seems to be the overriding reason that students take online/hybrid courses with 86.5 percent of the students ranking it in the top two rankings. The students valued the convenience of doing the work when they wanted to or when it was convenient for them.

Also, more than 60 percent of the students indicated that they liked the "autonomy" (or the independence or freedom to work at their own speed) that the online/hybrid courses provided. The rankings of the students were split almost equally when they considered expenses, such as paying for gasoline when choosing to enroll in an online/hybrid course. Also, more than 50 percent of the students reported that when they take an online course, they do the work off campus; on the other hand, more than 40 percent reported that they do some of the work off campus and some on campus.

More than fifty percent of the students indicated that retention of information was not a reason why they took online/hybrid courses. Apparently, students take online/hybrid courses because they can do the work in their time frame, they can work at their own speed, and they can save money on expenses as shown in Table 1.

Table 2 shows that more than 50 percent of the students reported that they remembered and applied less from online than from face-to-face courses; on the other hand, approximately 40 percent of the students indicated that they learned equally from online and face-to-face courses. However, when students ranked "Retention" with other reasons, as in Table 1, approximately 75 percent of the students ranked "Retention" lower than they ranked other reasons.

Students prefer to interact with professors and classmates either by email or face-to-face as shown in Table 3. Additionally, nearly 14 percent of the students preferred to interact with their peers by text

messaging. Communication and interaction by phone and online chats were preferred the least by students.

Table 1.
Student Rankings by Percentages of Reasons They Take Online/Hybrid Courses

	Percentage of Rankings					
Reasons for taking online/hybrid courses	1	2	3	4	5	6
Convenient. I can do the work when I want to. N=140	72.86	13.57	6.43	2.14	1.43	3.5
Retention. I retain more of the information. N=130	4.62	6.15	13.08	26.15	26.15	23.85
Autonomy. I can work at my own speed. N=135	14.07	47.41	17.04	9.63	8.89	2.96
Interaction. I can work with other students. N=132	6.06	6.06	9.09	19.70	31.06	28.03
Economical. I can save money on expenses, such as gasoline. N=134	9.70	12.96	28.36	19.40	17.91	11.94
Easy. I think online courses are easier to complete. N=133	3.76	21.05	19.55	16.54	13.53	25.56

Note: Ranking: Most important reason "1," next most important reason "2," etc.

When asked their preferences, 58 percent of the students prefer both online and face-to-face courses, 38 percent prefer only face-to-face, and 4 percent prefer only online courses as indicated in Table 4. Interestingly, sixty-eight percent of the students indicated that they would probably enroll in an online course in the future.

Discussion and Summary

For some time students have had available to them entire degrees that can be earned from taking the majority of the courses online; students who enroll in these programs usually do not set foot on a brick-and-mortar campus or sit in a traditional classroom. On the contrary, students may live on or close to a campus, but, they may enroll in mostly online courses. Here are the results to the four questions that were posed in the purpose of this study.

Table 2.
Student Responses to Statements about Retention of Information from Online and Face-to-face Courses

Statements	Percentages
I remember	
More from online courses than from face-to-face courses	4.55%
Equally from online and face-to-face courses	41.56%
Less from online courses than from face-to-face courses	53.90%
N=154	
I apply	
More from online courses than from face-to-face courses	9.87%
Equally from online and face-to-face courses	41.45%
Less from online courses than from face-to-face courses	48.68%
N=152	

Table 3.
Student Responses to Statements about Interaction with Professors and Classmates

Statements	Percentages
I prefer to interact with my professor by	
Phone	2.70%
Email	54.05%
Text messaging	3.38%
Online chat	2.03%
Face-to-face	37.84%
N=148	
I prefer to interact with classmates by	
Phone	4.14%
Email	34.48%
Text messaging	13.79%
Online chat	4.14%
Face-to-face	43.45%
N=145	

Table 4.
Students Responses to Where They do the Work for Online Courses and Preferences for Online or Face-to-Face Courses

Statements	Percentages
When I complete an online course, I	
a. Do all the work off campus	53.64%
b. Do some of the work off campus and some on campus	41.72%
c. Do all the work on campus	4.64%
N=151	
I prefer courses that are taught	
a. Only online	3.97%
b. Both online and face-to-face	58.28%
c. Only face-to-face	37.75%
N=151	

First, do students truly prefer distance learning? Certainly, students prefer distance learning, and they will be taking online courses in the future at colleges and universities and even possibly through training at their places of employment. Unquestionably, this trend of wanting education/instruction when it is "convenient," and when the student can work at his/her own speed will probably continue and become even more desirable than it has been in the past.

Second, do the students' reasons for enrolling in online or hybrid courses align with their learning preferences? Not really, there appears to be a conflict among the preferences because students want the convenience afforded by online courses; however, at the same time, they prefer face-to-face interaction in person with instructors and peers that is representative of their traditional learning practices. A hybrid course structure has been part of the answer to this conflict since a hybrid course structure offers some in person face-to-face time and interaction; whereas, a course that is strictly taught online does not offer the personal interaction that students desire.

One development that possibility resolves the conflict preferences between online and face-to-face is learning communities. Virtual learning could probably be improved through learning communities (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Learning communities of approximately 25-30 students can be formed, and these students who are enrolled in the same online courses would support each other through regularly scheduled traditional face-to-face study sessions. Learning communities could improve transfer and retention of information and partially satisfy the need for face-to-face interaction; thus, somewhat fulfilling students' preferences for traditional learning practices while taking online courses. A future study could be conducted to determine if students retain more information when they are taking an online class and involved in a learning community that was organized and designed for students who are in the same online class.

Advances in technology and the advent of new and improved channels of communication have presented unprecedented challenges to educators as they attempt to meet the instructional needs of students on students' terms. Avatars, holograms, and other futuristic designs bring us closer to the face-to-face interaction and the active learning that continues to be desired. These tools attempt to simulate

the social presence offered through interaction with faculty and students, and in active learning from face-to-face classes.

Third, do students perceive that they receive a quality learning experience from online or hybrid courses? The students' perceptions of the amount of information that they retain and apply remain a concern when the course is taught online. Thus, retention of information and the quality of the online instruction appear to be interrelated. A course review process should be in place to assure accountability (The Quality Matters Rubric, 2011). If the quality of the instruction and the retention of the information are not improved, the cost in intellect to society in the future may very well be unrecoverable.

Fourth, do students prefer some communication channels over others when communicating with instructors and peers in an online or hybrid course? Students prefer email and face-to-face when interacting with peers and professors.

Finally, the distance learning dilemma continues as instructors and students face the challenges of the future. How will future technology not only satisfy but also enhance the future needs of student learning?

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Appendix

Survey

Would you please give us your advice about the value of online and/or hybrid courses. Your responses will be completely anonymous with results reported only as a total figure. The questionnaires will be destroyed at the completion of the research, which will probably be presented and/or published in a national medium reaching business educators and others. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may stop at any time. (If you are less than 18 years old, please do not complete the survey.)

Definition: An online course is where 100 percent of the course is taught online. A hybrid is where 50-99 percent is taught online.

1.   How many online courses have you completed?
         a. 0 courses   b. 1-2 courses   c. 3-4 courses   d. 5 or more courses
2.   How many hybrid courses have you completed?
         a. 0 courses   b. 1-2 courses   c. 3-4 courses   d. 5 or more courses
3.   Do you see yourself enrolling in an online course in the future? a. Probably   b. Probably not
4.   Major: a. Accounting,   b. Entrepreneur/Social Enterprise, c. CIS,   d. Economics e. Finance,
            f. Management,   g. Marketing   h. Other major
5.   Sex: a. M b. F
6.   Age: a. under 24 years   b. 24-34 years   c. 35 years and over
7.   CUM GPA: a. 3.5 and above   b. 3.0 to 3.4   c. 2.5 to 2.9   d. Less than 2.5
         8.   Rank your reasons for taking an online course? Rank your most important reason "1," next
         most important "2," etc.
_____Convenient. I can do the work when I want to.
_____Retention.   I retain more of the information.
_____Autonomy. I can work at my own speed.
_____Interaction. I can work with other students.
_____Economical. I can save money on expenses, such as gasoline.
_____Easy.   I think online courses are easier to complete.
9.   I remember
a.   More from online courses than from face-to-face courses

b. Equally from online and face-to-face courses

c. Less from online courses than from face-to-face courses

10. I apply

a. More from online courses than from face-to-face courses

b. Equally from online and face-to-face courses

c. Less from online courses than from face-to-face courses

11. When I complete an online course, I

a. Do all the work off campus

b. Do some of the work off campus and some on campus

c. Do all the work on campus

12. I prefer to interact with my professor by

a. Phone   b. Email   c. Text messaging   d. Online chat   e. face-to-face

13. I prefer to interact with classmates by

a. Phone   b. Email   c. Text messaging   d. Online chat   e. face-to-face

14. I prefer courses that are taught   a. Only online   b. Both online and face-to-face   c. Only face-to-face

15. What specific concerns and/or suggestions do you have about online and/or hybrid courses?