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Graduate Student Perceptions of an Effective Online Class

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Online learning is a growing trend within the higher education community. As more universities offer more graduate programs totally online for the convenience of the older student who often has a family and full-time job it is imperative that instructors give attention to what students believe constitutes an effective online class. This paper surveyed 36 graduate students to determine what they considered important in an online course. Students want a professor who uses multimedia effectively, who establishes social interaction among students, who has a well-designed online format, who has an online presence, and who is available to students.

Keywords: online learning, graduate, pedagogy, statistics

Research has found that students want their professors to use technology, but only if it is used well (Kvavik & Caruso, 2005). Some specific technology-use complaints expressed by students included professors filling PowerPoint slides with lots of verbiage and simply reading them verbatim; failing to moderate discussion boards; and not making good use of the learning management system, or LMS (King, 2007).

Student learning is supported by effective course design (Eastmond, 2000). The organization of an online course is very important and usually requires a considerable amount of time to design and develop (Smith, Ferguson, & Carris, 2003; Li & Akins, 2005). Course navigation is a concern expressed by students. Students appreciated instructors whose course was well organized, carefully structured in an easily-navigated manner, and contained a detailed syllabus (Brescia, Miller, Ibrahima, & Murry, 2004; Young, 2006). Simply converting lecture notes to a format that can be posted on the LMS may not constitute an effective course design.

Some suggest that perhaps the most important aspect of teaching an online course is for the instructor to establish an online presence by going online regularly. Quick response to student questions, timely evaluation of submitted work, and occasional contributions to student discussions help establish this presence. The goal is for the instructor to be perceived as a real person who is interested in teaching the student (Johnson & Aragon, 2003; Wallace, 2003). Students have a tendency to expect the instructor to be available 24/7 to provide feedback in an online environment (Hillstock, 2005).

Careful course design that ensures social interaction has been cited as essential to counteract the feelings of alienation and isolation (Li & Akins, 2005; Thurston, 2005). Several researchers have found that the greater the interactivity in an online course, the more the students were satisfied and the more they learn (Little, Titarenko, & Bergelson, 2005).

Methods

The Effective Online Class Survey instrument was developed based on the findings in the review of literature. Thirty-six graduate students in an online statistics course were surveyed using the instrument. The survey considered 20 components typically found in an online class and the respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance the component was to them personally. A Likert scale with 7 choices was used where 1 represented being very important and 7 being not important at all. For purposes of this study a choice of 1, 2, or 3 indicated the student felt the component was important and a 5, 6, or 7 indicated it was not important. A choice of 4 was considered neutral. Simple descriptive statistics were computed.

Findings and Discussion

Most of the students who completed the survey were older and held full-time jobs. A third listed their age as 36+ and only three listed their age as under 25. There were only six individuals who were in their first online class and five reported they had taken ten or more online classes.

All students reported they wanted a well-organized course that was easy to navigate and easy to find materials. In fact, 92% of the respondents chose 1 as their response. Likewise, they wanted a course syllabus with expectations laid out in meticulous detail and an easy to read textbook that explained the material well.

When asked how important it was to have optional supplemental materials on the site that covered the same material, 75% responded it was important but only 11% said very important.

Seventy-seven percent felt it was important that the instructor use relevant examples from newspapers, magazines, TV news reports, etc. to illustrate the concepts being presented.

Students were divided equally over the importance of having material presented in an audio format but 81% felt it was important to have the instructor to use video to explain the concepts. However, seeing the instructor on the video was very important to only 25% of the respondents. It was also important to have the ability to download the video material for viewing offline but not important to have it in a format to be used by MP3 players, iPods, etc.

Students preferred lessons to be presented in several relatively short chunks instead of one long session. They also preferred working independently instead of in groups with only 17% reporting it was somewhat important to work in groups. However, nearly two-thirds felt it was important to interact with other students via a discussion board. Likewise, two-thirds felt it was important to have a forum on the discussion board where they could post and respond to questions about issues without being graded on it. It was important to students that the instructor have a presence on the discussion board with 40% saying it was very important.

Prompt feedback within 72 hours on assignments was important to all students with 75% responding that it was very important. It was also important to 89% of the students that the instructor maintain "online office hours" to respond to questions and provide feedback. Likewise, students felt it was important for the instructor to use humor in the class and, especially, to show enthusiasm for teaching the class with 95% giving it a 1 or 2.

The results of this study mirrored many of the results of previous studies. Students like a well-organized class taught by an instructor who injects humor into the class and shows enthusiasm for teaching the class. They especially want quick feedback on assignments that have been submitted. One surprising response, at least to the author, was that students felt it was important that the instructor maintain online office hours to answer questions and provide feedback. The experience has generally been that students want immediate answers 24/7 and prefer not to wait for a certain time of the day or week.

In classes where video lessons are used students like to see their instructor but do not necessarily want just a "talking head". Students who responded to the survey in this class viewed numerous videos without seeing the instructor that demonstrated how to use the software to perform statistical tests. Students also like the idea of being able to download the video lessons so they can view them offline at their convenience.

The use of discussion boards was another interesting response to the author. Two out of three students responded that it was important to have interaction with other students in the class via discussion boards. Students apparently feel the need to have a social connection with other members of the class. They want to know the other students and become acquainted (Koontz, Li, & Compore, 2006). This topic, despite recent studies, might warrant further research into the types of interactions students want to have with one another.

While this study used a relatively small sample and did not reveal any significant deviations from previous findings it did confirm that students want a professor who uses multimedia effectively, who establishes social interaction among students, who has a well-designed online format, who has an online presence, and who is available to students. As more instructors migrate their courses to an online delivery format attention should be given to what students believe constitutes an effective online class.

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