STUDENTS' POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES IN HYBRID AND ONLINE CLASSES

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As higher education institutions struggle to meet the growing demand for education from non-traditional students, many are turning to hybrid and online courses. These courses, free up classroom space, allow faculty to reach a wider audience using technology; and are therefore cost effective. But, what learning experiences do these courses provide students? Understanding the students' experiences in these courses has implications on the effectiveness of the teaching strategies. This study describes the characteristics of hybrid and online courses, the students' positive and negative experiences in hybrid and online courses, and what can be done to improve hybrid and online courses. Twelve students enrolled in a hybrid course and 41 students in an online course were interviewed for this qualitative study. Additional data was obtained from the class' online discussion forums. Flexibility in the class schedule and the instructor's availability were positive experiences for the hybrid course. Convenience, instructor availability, and online interactions were cited as positives for the online course while the negatives were technology hiccups and a sense of feeling lost in Cyberspace. Training faculty and familiarizing students with online course environments are recommended to improve online and hybrid courses.

Traditionally, learning has been assumed to take place in a classroom or face-to-face environment where the instructor and students are physically together. But, not all students learn the same way and therefore the traditional approach is not ideal for all students (Young, 2002). Therefore, the notion that learning only takes place in face-to-face environments has since been challenged and overtaken by the use of the Internet and network technologies to provide a means of communication to learners wherever they are located (Stacey et al, 2004). The current paradigm shift in higher education, from traditional classroom settings to distance education program delivery via the internet (Ryan et al, 1999), has ensured that every student is fully engaged in at least some class activities. In addition, instructors are using technology as part of instructional strategies to overcome limited budget constraints and serve the growing numbers of non-traditional students.

Today, hybrid and online courses are among the delivery strategies widely used.

In the traditional format, the teacher develops and transmits the content to the students who learn in a face-to-face environment (Knowles, 2005). Although during a set period of time, learners are frequently provided with activities that require them to be active rather than listen and or watch passively (Berg, 2003; Knowles, et al, 2005; Perry 2003), the instructional approach may generate productive interaction among all participants in the class. However, the face-to-face approach has a number of shortcomings, namely: 1) it requires the students and the instructor to be in the same room; 2) instruction can be inconsistent; and 3) lack of flexibility. In addition, the diverse skill levels of the students in the class presents another challenge. As each student comes to class with a different purpose, expectation, experience, and ability within a given topic, the normal "one-size-fits-all" course does not produce effective results in this situation. The pace of classroom instruction may only be applicable to a few students and may limit activities that can be performed in a classroom setting. The shortcomings of the face-to-face approach have paved the way for alternative approaches such as hybrid and web-based courses.

Characteristics of Hybrid Courses

A hybrid course, also known as web-enhanced/assisted, or blended course, is a course that combines elements of face-to-face instruction with elements of distance teaching (Lorenzetti, 2004). In most cases,

through the use of technology, hybrid courses allow students to first meet new information, concepts and procedures outside the classroom before the class physically meets. Furthermore, by allowing students to meet new information outside of the class discourages students from making major investments of their time during the face-to-face meeting (Lorenzetti, 2004).

According to Young (2002), Graham Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University, hails the convergence of online and resident instruction as "the [hybrid courses] single-greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today." Putting courses partially online can save a university some money without prompting students' protests (Carnevale, 2006). Furthermore, one advantage of this strategy is to move the first exposure to the course material to the online portion of the course. This practice, according to Debi Moon, the director of distance learning at Georgia Perimeter College, "frees the faculty member and encourages more in-depth processing activities when the class meets in person" (Lorenzetti, 2004 p.7). Besides, "a strong case is beginning to be made on the basis of research evidence that many students learn better online than face-to-face, and therefore, a mixture is the best way, according to Chris Dede, professor of learning technologies at Harvard University (Young, 2002).

Characteristics of online courses

Online courses are a type of distance education. The delivery format goes by a number of names: e-learning, Internet

learning, distributed learning, networked learning, tele-learning, virtual learning, or web-based learning. Online learning refers to an instructional strategy in which the learners are geographically separated from the instructor, and the instruction is delivered totally through the computer (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 2004). Among the distance learning tools, online learning is expanding rapidly (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). According to the Sloan Consortium Report (2005), overall online enrollment increased from 1.98 million in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004.

This delivery format combines audio, video, color, graphics, and animation to stimulate student interest. In most web-based courses, instructors and students do not interact simultaneously; instead students respond to messages that are posted on a forum or website at some convenient times. Overall, according to Wang and Newlin (2001), this process limits the amount and depth of interactions regarding course material and procedures. Furthermore, regardless of the exact method, asynchronous communication is slow and limits the type and amount of communication between instructor and student and tends to remove any feelings of connection between the student and the instructor (Wang & Newlin, 2001). Although many colleges have turned to online education, the cost of the technology often eats away any savings from holding class in cyberspace. In fact, online education can often be more expensive than its traditional counterpart (Carnevale, 2006).

Online learning offers several advantages over traditional classroom learning. Among these are the elimination of barriers of time and space. In online learning environments, learning takes place within a flexible timeframe that a student develops without the constraint of a pre-set classroom or organization's schedule (Beam, 1998; Micks, 2001). In addition, web environments offer flexibility of instructional pace, and more control over which learning activities are more appropriate to engage in (Alexandra, 1996). Besides, e-learning offers the same instructional material to each student every time they need it (Allen 2003; Bullen, 2003; Piskurich, 2003). However, e-learning may lack real interactions between instructors and students.

Just like face-to-face courses, online and hybrid courses are not ideal for everyone (Illinois Online Network, 2006). Therefore, to succeed in any learning environment, learners need to have appropriate learning styles and necessary competencies. Since the majority of students enroll in online courses based on the convenience and flexibility of scheduling (Ryan 2001), and not on their learning styles; the students need to have the appropriate learning styles and technical competencies to succeed. Therefore, to ensure effectiveness of the delivery strategies, there is a need to determine what works best in each learning environment.

Statement of the Problem

As many instructors continue to expand their traditional delivery methods (lecture, laboratory, face-to-face discussion) to include educational options ranging from

web-based course supplements to complete delivery of courses online (Freeman and Field, 2004), issues of instructional quality continue to be of concern (Terry, 2000). Many educators question whether students in online classes learn as much or receive the same quality of instruction as students in the face-to-face classroom (Cooper, 2001). Although students who enroll in online classes generally like the flexibility and convenience offered, they may not be beneficial to them. It becomes important to establish the students' experiences in the delivery formats to keep the positive components or make adjustments to the undesirable aspects.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to describe students' experiences in hybrid and online courses. Based on the review of literature and reflections from students who took hybrid and online courses, this article describes 1) the unique characteristics of hybrid and online classes; 2) the positive and negative aspects of hybrid and online courses as experienced by students; and 3) what instructors can do to improve the teaching of hybrid and online courses.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected through a case study of college students enrolled in a hybrid or blended course. The case study involved 41 undergraduate students at a four-year mid-western (US) college. The students surveyed were enrolled in a course that was delivered face-to-face and online. The same course material, audios of the face-to-face class and the PowerPoint slides used in the face-to-face classes, were posted on Blackboard, an online course management platform. Twelve students took the hybrid class and 34 students were strictly online. Every week the audio files recorded during the in-class session were streamed and posted on the course website. The course material posted on the Blackboard course site included: lesson content, assignments, and online discussions. The students had the same course assignments, including participation in online discussions. Students reflected on their experiences in online and blended courses through their qualitative responses. The students' responses were analyzed and are presented in the next section.

Results

The students' experiences in the courses varied with the delivery format. In the hybrid course, the students rated the option of scheduling the class face-to-face and online, and instructor availability as positive. On the negative, the rigid schedules for the face-to-face sessions and technical problems with computers and internet service were cited. For the online course, the positive aspects were grouped into: convenience, class expectations, and instructor availability. Technology hiccups and feeling lost in cyberspace were cited as negative experiences for the online class.

Among some positive statements by the students for the hybrid course were: "Ability to work both face-to-face and online when schedules did not permit" and "Physical presence of the instructor to provide additional input, explanations, etc". However, the idea of having scheduled meetings on campus was considered to interfere with

students social and work commitments. Positive statements for the online course included: "Being able to do your work online on your own schedule allows me to go back to school while working full time", "Ability to work on the course just about anywhere one has computer access", and "Online discussions allowed me more time to reflect and prepare well thought out responses". The main negative aspects of the online course were 'feeling lost in cyberspace', the technical problems with the computers and course management platforms. Issues related to delays in getting responses to communication from instructor and other students made them feel lost in the cyberspace. In addition, the students felt, "the teachers did not get to know the students personally" and that "there was no way of reading body language [from either fellow students or the instructor]" (see Table 1, for students' experiences).

Suggestions for improving hybrid and online courses

Lack of technical training and support, inadequate compensation and incentive structures, and lack of release time for planning have been cited as reasons why faculty resist participating in hybrid and online courses (Clark, 1993; Khan, 1995; Olcott and Wright, 1995). Therefore, providing training is one way to reduce resistance by faculty to participate in online courses. At Georgia Perimeter College, a Hybrid Fellowship has been created to encourage faculty to develop hybrid and online courses. The fellowship is a faculty development program for teaching and creating hybrid and online course; and providing the solid

pedagogical, technical and relevant legal skills (Lorenzetti, 2004). Among the courses covered during training are: How to build a Hybrid/Online Course, Training on course management platform (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard); Using the Exemplary Course Standards; Legal Issues and Copyright, ADA Compliance Training for Distance Education; Pedagogical Skills for Online Courses; Creating a Positive Online Tone; and Using Streaming Media (Lorenzetti, 2004).

When preparing to teach hybrid and online courses, it is helpful to dispel some of erroneous assumptions that students make about online learning. According to Online Classroom (2005), Tips from the Pros, the following are traits/perceptions of successful online learners: 1) students who succeed in online courses generally work during consistent times during the week; and 2) every online course is different and therefore students need to allow for time to adjust to the course design and course management strategies. It would also help if institutions provided students with an orientation to online learning that also includes familiarization with the course management platform.

Conclusion

The students in both the online and hybrid classes agreed that the classes met their expectations; however a larger percentage of students' negative experiences were expressed for online courses. Many students who tried the hybrid course said the model fits their learning style, attention spans and life styles. On the other hand, some students also felt the same for totally online courses. Therefore, it becomes a

Table 1: Positive and Negative Experiences in Hybrid and Online Courses

	Positives	Negatives
Hybrid Course	**Class Scheduling** • "The option to catch upon what I missed in class on the web" • "Ability to work both face-to-face and online when schedules did not permit" **Instructor Availability** • "Physical presence of the instructor to provide additional input, explanations, etc" • "Instructor input and answering of questions is available, in-class and online." • "Face-to-face sessions offered more personalized attention."	**Rigid Class Schedules** • "Less flexible compared to online classes... I had to be on campus on certain days" **Technology Hiccups** • "My Internet connections were bad during the online sessions." • "Confusing, especially the shifting from class sessions to web sessions"
Online Course	**Convenience and Flexibility** • "I was able to schedule a class when it suited my work schedule" • "Ability to work on the course just about anywhere one has computer access." • "Being able to do your work online, on your own schedule allows me to go back to school while working full time." • "Online courses allow me to be full time student and mommy at the same time." **Class Expectations** • "The class expectations were the same as the face-to-face class, i.e. grading scale and time frame for assignments was the same." • "The class audio tapes streamed to the web made it [the lesson] closer to face-to-face" **Instructor Availability** • "Instructor was available to respond to questions through discussion board or email" • "The Cyber Cafe' [forum on the discussion board for students to post questions] was an excellent opportunity to get responses from other students" **Online Interactions** • "Online discussions allowed me more time to reflect and prepare well thought out responses" • "The ability to work electronically in groups with students on campus. This was something new and neat." • "Web course is better for visual learners like myself. I learn through visual cues and experiential exercises; and those that require more time, are language-challenged, or introverted"	**Technology Hiccups** • "Unreliable Internet connections from my ISP [Internet Service Provider]" • "Too many technical problems with [college's] course management platform" *Communication*: • "Instructor feedback tended to be slow" **Feeling Lost in Cyberspace** • "I did not feel as part of the class" • "You cannot verbalize your thoughts and let other hear your ideas." • "You also lose the personal teacher student relationship." • "You are losing some civility that may be in a classroom discussion." • "Teachers do not get a chance to get to know the student the same as they would in on-line classes". • "You don't get to see the professor or class members face to face." • "With online classes, it is hard to be able to get that whole "personal" thing. • "Not the one-on-one, or personal rapport, and the personal attention many would like to get." • "The camaraderie of partaking in a class function and setting." • "No way to read body language." • "It is not possible to get immediate feedback as there are different time availabilities for the student and instructor." • "It takes more time to e-mail or post a question on the discussion board and wait for a response."

question of what a student finds matching his/her learning style and social commitments, that makes the best delivery strategy. Where possible, a blend of the delivery strategies may be ideal.

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