



Learner Satisfaction in Distance Education vs. On-Campus Education

By: Jennifer Funke

Learner Satisfaction in Distance Education vs. On-Campus Education

Jennifer Funke

Dakota State University

April 2017

The academic performance of traditional and distance education students has been examined in a number of studies and a comparison of the two instructional models have produced mixed results (Kim, 2012). These results are based on the findings of people surveyed and allows for interpretation and implications. Instructors need to be aware of the impact their behaviors and social presence or lack thereof may have on their students' satisfaction, motivation, and learning (Richardson, pg. 81, 2003). Everyone must take an active role in the development of collegial learning situations. The position of the paper is to prove that students and instructors can take an active part in distance education allowing for the learner satisfaction level to be equivalent, if not better than that of a face-to-face course. When a distance education course is set up, there are a number of factors that determine whether or not learners are receiving the best possible education and are satisfied with this education.

The first study was done by Don Kirk Macon in an article called, "Student Satisfaction with Online Courses versus Traditional Courses: A Meta-Analysis" and examined student satisfaction in online courses versus courses delivered in the face-to-face classroom format (Macon, 2011). A common positive for online classes is the fact that they are more convenient and flexible for students. In particular, online courses offer time and space flexibility that enable working adults to continue to keep their full-time jobs while earning college credits (Macon, 2011).

Students are so used to communicating through cell phones, Facebook, and Twitter that sometimes it is hard to tell if they even know how to talk in person. When it comes to learning however, more often than not, students need to have human interaction of some sort. Having an effective online community with a solid curriculum structure and design is a key component of online courses. The goal is to create an online community that engages all levels of learning. Not being able to see facial expressions and other non-verbal cues can make it more challenging, but in having a strong, well-set up class curriculum, online classes can be every bit as beneficial as face-to-face classrooms. In order to provide students with a feeling of community, instructors provide a variety of tools.

As instructors prepare to provide online students with the best possible education, they look to an assortment of tools to incorporate into their digital classrooms. Most schools are now well equipped and can easily integrate online education in their existing programs (Siddall, 2016). There is a large importance in using multiple tools in teaching to appeal to a variety of learners. Teachers have many different resources available to them and whether it is in the regular classroom setting or online, there is a learning curve. According to the article, "How Technology Supported Teacher Behaviors Impact Student Outcomes: Results from a 1:1 Computing Initiative" there are some challenges related to course materials, organization, discipline, group dynamics, and the level of feedback. These challenges however, seem to be ones that are not just for online classes, but also in the regular classroom. In order to prevent these problems, the instructor needs to have the class organized and ready before it even starts. They need to be able to set time aside to provide feedback and support, similar to what students would receive in a face-to-face classroom. Students taking online classes may need that personal connection with the instructor or other classmates in order to be beneficial.

Online education takes a shift away from traditional, classroom-based teaching activities typically associated with university education toward a technological goal where teaching requires the use of computers (Siddall, 2016). Utilizing these distance education classes, allows schools to enhance their offerings. The great thing about distance education is it makes learning accessible to students all day, every day, giving them immense control over their own learning schedules. The majority of college students today have grown up with the Internet, e-mail, and instant messaging, so it makes sense that the classroom settings would also utilize these resources. There has to be a certain amount of structure in distance education that fosters a certain amount of dialogue between the learner and instructor (Desai et al., p. 328). This also leads into the fact that instructors need to act as facilitators and not just teachers. Students need to be able to use clues and think on their own. Students aren't just a bunch of sheep being led to water, sometimes you need to be able to find your own way.

Another key component of online learning verses face-to-face learning is the reasoning behind quitting and dropping out or following through with a program. Persistence rates, viewed as indicators of the quality of the education being provided (Thompson, 1999), can thus be especially revealing for online program: the lower the persistence rate, the lower the perceived quality by prospective students and rating bodies (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007). Students who are more likely to be taking online classes are usually those who are already established in their lives and are looking to further their education without having to quit their job or be away from their family. In on-campus courses, students are beginning the next chapter of their lives and learning how to live on their own. This can be a very hard time in their lives and can lead to a more common drop out. As long as students are wanting to do the work and the college/instructor provides the best possible education, it is much less likely for colleges to see

high drop-out rates. Due to the complexity of student persistence in adult online programs, as well as the sudden growth in online learning, it is critical for administrators to understand more fully why a student chooses to persist or dropout. A narrow focused effort will not significantly increase persistence; instead, a multifaceted approach must be used to address challenges from many angles (Chase, 2014).

A distance education instructor is a huge part of the success level of an online class. The instructor of a course needs to consider the elements of technologies and their effect on students (Simonson, 2015, pg. 140). By starting with the instructor, it allows the online class to provide an excellent education. As an instructor, it is key to be well organized. When learning activities are designed, it is important that some expectations for students be identified in order to guide the selection of appropriate technologies (Simonson, 2015, pg. 99). Implementation of the course follows the set up and organization of the class by the instructor. An instructor sets up an online class to provide an equivalent if not better than face-to-face education. Once a course's content is organized, the next design requirement is to match learning experiences to technology-delivery strategies (Simonson, 2015, pg. 101). Course design is the beginning of implementation and in order to have a successful implementation, a systematic process of research-based principles is carried over into the educational practice. Once implementation of the course is set up and best teaching practices are applied, technology use has to be set up and organized. When it comes to the use of technology, instructors must be clear about their requirements when delivering distance courses (Simonson, 2015, pg. 184). In online classes, technology is always going to be a key component. This means that communication with students prior to the beginning of the course is a valuable measure to ensure they can prepare their technology for the learning experiences (Simonson, 2015, pg. 185). As a class begins and continues throughout a semester, it

is up to the student to ask questions, obtain answers, and push toward a beneficial education. Students need to know that they are able to function successfully within a course. They must be able to complete the requirements of the course without undue stress (Simonson, 2015, pg. 182).

Communication is a two-way road between instructors and students. Teaching and learning are jobs that both the instructor and students need to take part in. Students need to understand their responsibility to ensure a successful learning experience (Simonson, 2015, pg. 185). As an instructor it is important to receive, consider, and implement suggestions that can make a class more beneficial. Teaching at a distance can be a pleasurable experience for everyone involved, instructor and student alike (Simonson, 2015, pg. 186.) When the other five parts of an online class have been implemented it develops a community of learners. Even though students may not be meeting face-to-face, by following the other guidelines it opens the door to create a community of learners. Everyone must take an active role in the development of a collegian learning situation (Simonson, 2015, pg. 168). Communication is an integral part of having a successful distance education experience. By gaining knowledge about each member of the class, the opportunities for communications and collaborations are enhanced (Simonson, 2015, pg. 169).

This paper reflects the fact that technology is in the everyday lives of so many learners, this means that online courses are the way of the future. When a university and an instructor are well-prepared, the satisfaction level of the learners is going to be the positive outcome that schools want to see.

References

Chase, M. E. (2014). Priorities and Student Satisfaction as a Function of Student Persistence for Adult Online Learners. *Creighton University*.

Kim, D. S., Lee, H., & Skellenger, A. (2012). Comparison of Levels of Satisfaction with Distance Education and On-Campus Programs. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 275.

Macon, D. K. (2011). Student Satisfaction with Online Courses Verses Traditional Courses: A Meta-Analysis. *Dissertation Submitted to Northcentral University*, 1-88.

Siddall, J. (2016). How Technology Supported Teacher Behaviors Impact Student Outcomes: Results from a 1:1 Computing Initiative. *College of Arts and Sciences University of South Carolina*.

Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., & Zvacek, S. (2015). *Teaching and Learning at a Distance* (6th ed.). Information Age Publishing, Inc.