Chapter 15

A Comparison of Student and Instructor Preferences for Design and Pedagogy Features in Postsecondary Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the preferences of instructors and students for design and pedagogy features of online instruction at the post-secondary level. Participants included 60 instructors and 200 students at a comprehensive research university. Correlation coefficients of .95 on the design item rankings and .87 on the pedagogy item rankings were found between instructors and students. An independent sample T-test was conducted, resulting in a finding of significant difference between the preferences of instructors and students on 19 of 63 features. Additional findings included the high level of agreement on design and pedagogy features among all students as a group and subgroups (e.g., students earning regular university credit and those pursuing professional development goals.) An interesting finding was the concurrence in the low preferences by instructors and students. Both groups rated low those features pertaining to social networking and collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Most postsecondary institutions today offer online courses. Many have established online degrees in a wide array of disciplines. This is true of public and private institutions as well as community colleges. Keeton (2004) predicts that the rapid growth of online instruction may become the largest source of ongoing higher education. Even with 4.6 million postsecondary students enrolled in online courses in 2008, representing a 17 percent increase over 2007 and 25.3 percent of total enrollment (Inside
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Higher Ed, 2010), much remains to be learned about how to best design and maximize the effectiveness of online instruction at the postsecondary level. Educators must also address such issues as 1) the value students and instructors place on online instruction versus face-to-face instruction when content is held constant, 2) the relative preferences of instructors and students for specific features embedded in online courses, and 3) the variability of preferred features across different student groups (e.g., students seeking academic credit or students earning credit for professional development only).

There is an emerging body of literature pertaining to online instruction at the postsecondary level. The primary criteria included a determination of whether a source identified in the literatures related to design and/or pedagogy features, e.g., a) studies that involved research on design and/or pedagogy features at the postsecondary level, b) meta-analysis studies that were not limited to research studies, but also included perspectives related to theories or principles and c) literature on standards governing quality online instruction at the postsecondary level. Eighty-two sources reported in the literature met these criteria and were included in the compilation and validation of the features targeted in this study. Among the eighty-two sources, the majority were informative and useful in identifying design and pedagogy features for this study (Glass & Sue, 2008; Kopcha & Sullivan, 2008; Chubb, 2006; Seok, 2006; Coleman, 2005; Ausburn, 2004; Madden, 1999). No sources were identified that empirically sought to determine the relationship between the preferences of students and instructors on specific design and pedagogy features in online instruction as this study did.

In reviewing the meta-analysis study by the United States Department of Education, Figlio, Rush, and Yin (2010) stated “none of the studies cited in the widely-publicized meta-analysis released by the U.S. Department of Education included randomly-assigned students taking a full-term course, with live versus online delivery mechanisms, in settings that could be directly compared (i.e., similar instructional materials delivered by the same instructor). The evidence base on the relative benefits of live versus online education is therefore tenuous at best.” For purposes of the study reported in this paper, the focus of the authors was on determining the design and pedagogy features of online instruction defined by the literature as being necessary conditions for researching learner outcomes. The intent was to conduct such inquiry as part of programmatic research to be done in the future. The variables of instructor and student preferences will be factored into that research. The area of motivation factors among postsecondary students enrolled in online instruction is another area that has not been sufficiently studied. It complements the focus on feature preferences of instructors and students in this research.

The online instructional model as known today at the postsecondary level has had a major presence nationally for a very short time; consequently the need for research is significant. Jaschik (2010) quoted Gold who commented on the importance of the growth in online and hybrid courses and also called for additional research. Much of the reported literature takes the form of principles and/or guidelines essential to ensuring quality in online courses at the postsecondary level. Quality Matters (n. d.) offers forty elements across eight broad standards. The Southern Regional Education Board (SCRB, 2006) has established standards to govern accreditation. Specific principles have been promulgated by a number of researchers to guide the development of online courses at the postsecondary level (Simonson et al., 2009; McGreal, 2005; Moore et al., 2008; Tu, 2005). The framing of principles and guidelines has been largely experience driven. A number of researchers have also suggested that instructional environments should allow students to have control over the