Environmental Factors of Distance Learning: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT
The widespread use of the Internet has opened new avenues for learning in higher education. Distance education through the Internet has had a large increase over the last decade. This study focuses on examining factors of the online course environment that affect student satisfaction. The results identify factors that affect students' satisfaction toward the class. These findings should help instructors teaching online classes concentrate more on factors that are important to students taking online classes.

Keywords: Course Satisfaction, Distance Education, Higher Education, Online Course, Student Perceptions

INTRODUCTION
Online courses have had a steady increase over the last decade with enrollment in online courses increasing between 9.3% and 36.5% every year from 2002 to 2011. Furthermore, enrollment in online courses currently is over 30% of total course enrollment (Lederman, 2013). Work and family commitments, increased course offerings, greater availability of technology, and the growth of an international online community are among the factors contributing to the growing popularity of online courses. Although the origins of distance learning can be traced to the postal service and correspondence courses, online classes take distance learning to an entirely new level. The instantaneous interaction capabilities of the Internet lower barriers to enrollment and participation. Instead of waiting for days or even weeks while correspondence travels through the postal system, today’s online learners have the opportunity to communicate much more rapidly using tools including email and real-time chats. Furthermore, streaming video and access to other resources allow for easy sharing of files including students submitting their work.

Advances in communication technologies, such as widespread use of the Internet, have opened new avenues for continuing higher education. These advances have allowed educators to provide for and satisfy individual variations in learning. Colleges and universities around the world now offer higher education courses.

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to students online. This capability can address certain issues students may develop in pursuit of their education goals, such as resolving issues with commuting to and from campus, and communicating with others.

The increase in online course offerings and enrollment can be tied to necessity. Higher education institutions have faced changes in their student demographics in recent years as more and more students no longer fit the traditional profile of a young, full-time, in-residence student. As the demographics change, so do the education needs. There is a higher demand for more flexible and convenient methods in obtaining a higher education. Also, there is a demand by organizations today for a more technologically savvy workforce. Even if traditional methods are preferred, there is a need to teach students to incorporate technological proficiency into their everyday education.

With these types of considerations, educational institutions are looking into incorporating online capabilities into their courses. However, there are questions regarding the ability of institutions to afford the cost of successfully implementing and coordinating online courses, and the appropriateness of online learning in meeting institutional goals. Furthermore, the benefits that online courses can provide may be dependent on the individual; what may be beneficial to one student may be a hindrance to another. For example, some students may not find online courses beneficial to their educational needs and prefer the person-to-person interaction of a traditional course. Others may find the convenience of online courses as an important factor in their course format decisions. These and other factors can be highly influential to decisions to provide a desirable online course.

Since students have perceptions about online courses that influence their subsequent decisions whether or not to take online courses, it is important to understand the factors that surround perceptions of benefit toward an online course setting. Designers of higher education courses can better create course options and curriculum for their students that address higher education needs. The purpose of this paper is to understand the factors that affect a student’s perception of online courses as well as the factors that are perceived as important for online courses. In pursuit of this objective, this paper first discusses prior studies that address issues related to online courses and students’ perceptions. This is followed by the study’s methodology. Next, the results of the factors correlated with satisfaction are identified and discussed. In conclusion, the usefulness of the significant factors which can be utilized by those in higher education is discussed as well as future research development in this area.

Although previous research has considered many factors influencing online student satisfaction, no prior studies revealed the specific factors which contribute to overall satisfaction. By identifying and studying such factors, this study strives to suggest areas on which educators may focus to improve the satisfaction levels of their online students and the success of their online programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online learning has been seen as a way to individualize the education process to a further degree, creating more self-reliant students and graduates. Online courses demand that students take more initiative in their learning, and as it is an individual determinant, this increases the individual learning experience level. The main concern of the higher learning institution is to ensure that they offer sound online courses so that students and faculty are best able to participate and gain an appropriate learning experience (Lam, 2005). While there are many tools available to an instructor through a course management system, the instructor’s role in facilitating the course remains important (Simon et al., 2013). Thus this paper examines the environmental factors that an instructor facilitates in an online course in order to determine which factors are significantly related to student satisfaction.
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