Are Students Ready for Online Learning?

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ABSTRACT

This article advances knowledge by trying to understand online courses from student behavior. This article analyzed student participation in 15 online courses during the years 2012–2015. The sample includes 106 students and their detailed log-on minutes and grades. The author applied a descriptive analysis, a one-way ANOVA, and a simple regression model. The empirical evidence suggests that student attention is substantially discounted in an online learning environment as evidenced by the much lower-than-expected log-on minutes. Students do not seem to treat online courses as equivalent to their traditional on-site counterparts. They tend to “review for assignments.” It is doubtful that students would achieve the same level of learning outcomes as in a conventional face-to-face instruction. The results help to understand how college instruction can best use the Internet.

KEYWORDS

Discipline, Higher Education, Online Instruction, Web-Based Environment

INTRODUCTION

Online course delivery has been gaining popularity over the past ten to fifteen years. According to Allen and Seaman (2014), in 2002, less than one-half of all higher education institutions reported that online education was critical to their long-term strategy. However, in 2013, that number was at an all-time high of close to 70%. In the same year, the proportion of higher education students taking at least one online course was at a historical high of 33.5%. According to the same study, less than one-third of academic leaders believe that there will no longer be concerns about the relative quality of online courses, although over 90% of those leaders believe that a majority of all higher education students will be taking at least one online course in five years’ time.

The most quoted favorable reason for this from many online instruction satisfaction studies is flexibility. Without the requirement of presenting in a classroom, flexibility indeed is a very appealing feature of online learning. Taking courses has become a flexible way of studying for the current generation of students compared to the previous one. Regarding higher education institutions, online delivery also allows them to expand the recruitment territory.

While most of the stakeholders in the higher education sector seem to support the concept of online instruction, there are some un-ignorable prices attached to it. For instance, in his 2014 book, Deresiewicz pointed out that online delivery promotes a range of practices and behaviors that higher education ought to fight against such as passive learning, diminished attention, the displacement of reading by watching, teaching as showmanship, and the professorial star system. By comparing distance education to a mass-production assembly line process, Peters (1993) criticized distance
education, saying that it reduces education to a kind of industrial production process, lacking the human dimension of group interaction, and even alienating learners from teachers.

While online courses have become a critical component in the strategy of higher education institutions and have gained popularity among students, there seems to be a lack of deeper understanding of this new delivery method. In particular, as will be discussed in the following section, a majority of the current academic discussions and evidence are from the institutional side rather than the student side. An understanding of how students behave when studying an online course can provide great insight into the effectiveness of online delivery, which is the task we embark upon in this study. We carried out the study by analyzing 15 online courses with a total enrollment of 106 students. This article is organized as follows: Section 2 covers literature review, Section 3 introduces our data and empirical results, and Section 4 concludes, discusses study limitations, and makes suggestions on moving forward with online learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the increasing usage of the Internet, distance or online learning has become more and more popular in recent years. Since its first introduction in 2008 and emerging as a popular mode of learning thereafter, Massive Open Online Courses (hereafter: MOOCs) are a recent and widely researched development in online learning. A MOOC is an online course aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the web. The intense publicity about MOOCs has led almost every university toward developing an Internet strategy. As a result, an increasing number of higher education institutions have started to offer online courses and online degrees.

While online courses/degrees are advocated by higher education institutions for the purpose of improving access for students in underserved communities in the U.S. and around the globe, there are a number of other benefits as well. For instance, consider that for the sponsoring institutions, online courses can help to enhance institutional visibility and prestige. For students, there is improved pedagogy and flexibility. Indeed, according to Cole, Shelley, and Swartz (2014), “Convenience” was the most cited reason for the favorable satisfaction of online instruction.

According to Allen and Seaman (2014), 7.1 million higher education students—or about 30% of U.S. higher education students—are now taking at least one online course. Although the rate of increase has slowed in recent years, the 2013 number represents a 6.1% increase from 2012. With this degree of penetration, it is not surprising that two out of three chief academic officers responding to the survey reported that online education is a critical long-term strategic issue for their institutions. Nine out of 10 responding chief academic officers believe that online courses will continue to grow in numbers and that more students will take online courses in the future. Online programs appear to be an enduring part of U.S. higher education in the near future.

However, there appears to be a diverse yet seemingly biased opinion toward online delivery as well. According to a survey of higher education leaders on the benefits of MOOCs (2014) conducted by the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (hereafter: What’s “AHEAD” survey), leaders of the institutions that offer MOOCs tend to be more positive than other institution leaders about the potential benefits of MOOCs. For example, about half of the respondents at institutions that offer MOOCs strongly agree that MOOCs may be a potentially effective mechanism for improving access to students in underserved communities in the U.S. and around the globe, compared with about only a fifth of respondents at institutions that do not offer MOOCs. The survey also found that the institutions offering MOOCs are those which talk the most about MOOCs. Moreover, according to Allen and Seaman (2014), the largest institutions (as measured by their overall enrollment) are those which are most likely to offer online courses and have consistently held the most positive views on the relative quality of online instruction. Running through these statistics, one can immediately observe that there is an opinion bias toward online delivery. The institutions offering online instruction tend to be more positive and favorable on this new delivery method than others that are more skeptical.
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