ABSTRACT

The trend in academia to online learning has gained momentum in the past decade, due in part to the cost of higher education, a changing student profile, lack of traditional classroom space and the recognition that distance learning has created a new paradigm of instruction. Universities wishing to maintain or expand enrollments need to be able to respond effectively to the educational needs of working adults, students in the military and residents of rural communities as well as of other countries. Online (Internet-based) course offerings constitute a creative and increasingly popular response to these challenges. As more and more institutions of higher learning offer online courses, the question arises whether they are, or can be, as effective as courses offered in the traditional classroom format. Answering the question has been the focus of several studies. Our study compared students enrolled in both online and traditional classroom versions of one business law course where all elements were the same except for the instruction format. The study found no significant difference between the two formats with regard to student satisfaction and student learning. The findings support earlier comparisons of online and traditional instruction modes.

Keywords: online learning; eCollege platform; traditional/onland classroom

INTRODUCTION

Robert Morris University (RMU) in Pittsburgh, Pa., has continued to develop and offer an increasing number of online course offerings to meet the needs of working students, its traditional student base. In 1999, RMU offered 25 online courses. In 2006, the number of online courses grew to 220. With the elimination of the federal restriction on online education (the “50% rule”) in 2006, online course offerings can be expected to grow exponentially. Ensuring instructional quality and learning effectiveness while doing so will be the challenge.

RMU is a private university with an enrollment of approximately 6,000 students. Founded in 1921, the university has experienced rapid
growth in the last two decades. It supports six schools, with the School of Business being the largest. A large number of undergraduate and graduate course offerings in this school have had online course development as a focus for several years. A number of courses are available to the students in both traditional and online formats. For the past 3 years, the course Legal Environment of Business (BLAW 1050) has been popular in both formats.

**Overview of BLAW 1050**

The course is designed to enable students to develop an understanding of the American legal system and attain a working knowledge of ethics, contract law and consumer protection to a degree sufficient to be useful in business and consumer transactions. The course also helps students better comprehend the rules of conduct they can reasonably expect others to follow, as well as the conduct others may expect from them in various business situations. In this course, students acquire an awareness of their legal rights and responsibilities and gain the ability to apply legal principles to help solve business and consumer problems.

**Online vs. Traditional Instructional Issues**

In any discussion of online and traditional course delivery and development, some obvious and fundamental differences will be acknowledged by instructors. In general, the traditional course is taught in a structured classroom, the students are physically there, all instruction is in real time and the instructor is present for the class meetings. In the online format, the class is taught in a cybernetic environment, instruction does not have to be in real time, the students are not present in one place, and the instructor monitors most of the activity from a distance.

In defining distance education, Desmond Keegan (1996) identified six significant elements of online learning: separation of the teacher from the student; placement with an educational organization; use of technology to convey content and unite instructor with learner; two-way communication that facilitates student-initiated conversation; potential for face-to-face meetings for social as well as instructional purposes; and participation in an “industrialized form of education” (Keegan, 1996, p. 44).

The fundamental differences between online and traditional instruction pose some major challenges and concerns for course instructors and educational institutions. Online teaching forces the instructor to assume a new teaching role and necessitates reappraisal of the traditional teacher-student relationship. In fact, online teaching requires the instructor to rethink and reorganize the existing teaching paradigm. The institution must find different ways to monitor the quality of instruction.

In most cases, conveying the basic content to students in the online format is easy to accomplish. A greater challenge is getting the instructional quality of the online course to match, or exceed, the instructional level of the traditional class. It is not sufficient for the online instructor to have an understanding of the technological skills and course development tools alone. He or she must have a strong sense of course design and an understanding of good pedagogy, as well. Good pedagogy is generally accepted by educators to involve: 1) a high level of learner activity, 2) a high level of student interaction, 3) a format for motivation, and 4) a well-structured knowledge base.

As online instruction gains acceptance, researchers have begun to test the proposition that online instruction can indeed incorporate the principles of good pedagogy and effective course design. Schulman and Sims (1999) studied students enrolled in five separate courses, each offered in both the online and traditional formats. Both sections of each course were taught by the same instructor. In their sample, they found that students learned as well online as they did in the traditional classroom environment. This particular study compared the course assessments and final outcomes of both instructional scenarios.

In his 1999 book, The No Significant Difference Phenomenon, Thomas Russell reviewed 355 research reports, papers and summaries on the subject of online vs. traditional...
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