Learning Business Law Online vs. Onland: A Mixed Method Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This is a follow-up study to “A Comparative Analysis of Online and Traditional Undergraduate Business Law Classes” (Shelley, Swartz & Cole, 2007) designed to further examine two critical areas of e-learning, that is, student satisfaction with, and student learning in, an online environment as compared with an onland, or traditional classroom environment. While the initial study found no significant difference between the two, the second study did find statistically significant differences between the online and the onland course formats with regard to two elements of student satisfaction: (1) student satisfaction with the instructor, and (2) student satisfaction with the course structure. The second study went further to look at the effects, if any, of gender, age and nationality on student satisfaction. There was no significant difference found with age or nationality. There was a significant difference between males and females with regard to two of the research questions.

Keywords: asynchronous education; e-learning; education research; learning outcomes; online teaching; online learning community; student satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

The course that was the subject of both studies is an undergraduate business law class required for all business students at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Legal Environment for Business (BLAW 1050) is designed to enable students to develop an understanding of the American legal system and to attain a working knowledge of
ethics, contract law and consumer protection to a degree sufficient to be useful in business and consumer transactions. At the conclusion of the course, students have learned their legal rights and responsibilities and have gained the ability to apply legal principles to help solve business and consumer problems.

Since the first online offerings in 1999, Robert Morris University has added 246 new online and partially online course offerings. In the academic year 2006-07, there were 145 totally online courses university-wide. Of these, fourteen were offered in the School of Business. In that year, there were an additional 136 courses partially online, forty-three of which were in the School of Business. As the University expands its offerings and more and more instructors and students become involved in online education, ensuring instructional quality and learning effectiveness assumes the central role in course planning.

Fundamental differences between teaching online and teaching in the traditional classroom pose major challenges and concerns for course instructors and educational institutions. Chief among these is student learning and perhaps to a lesser degree, student satisfaction as it affects learning in an online environment.

WHY THIS STUDY?
As the University and its School of Business in particular, expand online course offerings, measuring student learning is critical. The School of Business is entering its self-study year in 2007-2008 for Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation. Assurance of student learning is central to the review of current course offerings and to the development of new ones and is a critical component of the accreditation process. Student satisfaction with the learning environment not only contributes to student retention, but it also serves as a measure of faculty performance and teaching effectiveness.

In a follow-up study to one reported in 2006 comparing student satisfaction and learning in the online and traditional classroom environments (Shelley, Swartz & Cole, 2007), the authors replicated and expanded upon the first. The second study was conducted by the same instructor, using the same survey instrument as well as the same instructional materials, course outline and assignments for the Legal Environment of Business (BLAW 1050) which he taught in both formats in 2006-2007.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
This study looked at the same four research questions as the original study did and added nine more research questions:

Research question 1: Does student satisfaction with the course overall differ significantly between the online format and the traditional class format?

Research question 2: Does student satisfaction with the instructor differ
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