Chapter 17
An Investigation on Course Characteristics that Fit Well with Online Offering

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ABSTRACT

The number of online courses offered by universities as well as the number of students enrolled in these courses has increased greatly over the past few years. Technological advancements currently penetrate society, allowing online courses to be offered efficiently and effectively. However, it has become more apparent that all classes are not as adaptive to an online format as others. Since many institutions of higher education further incorporate online courses into their curriculum, it is important to understand the characteristics of courses that affect students’ preferences for either traditional classroom environments or online environments. Indications of this can be seen in the attrition and retention rates of classes offered online. This study explores the characteristics of courses that affect students’ preferences towards online and traditional classroom settings. These results should help providing guidelines to institutions considering courses for online offer.

INTRODUCTION

Online classes become more popular over the past decade as this class setting provides conveniences to students and allows them to study at their own pace. Online courses are growing in number, both in the number offered in universities and in the number of students participating in the classes (Lee, Tan, and Goh, 2004). Technology advancements are important drivers of such changes in demand. In particular, the advancement in technological tools and communication technologies has influenced the number of students taking online
courses. Much of this increase is due to changes occurring in student demographics and demands. As college demographics change and technological tools are available and widely adapted, the education needs are altered and there is a higher demand for more flexible and convenient methods in obtaining a higher education.

Online classes are becoming popular as alternatives or supplements to traditional on-campus courses (Rossin, Ro, Klein, & Guo, 2009). Higher education course curriculum has been altered in recent years to better fit some of the demands for online courses. One study reports that the number of students enrolled in at least one online course doubled to four million between the years 2003 and 2008 (Clark, 2009). The popularity of online courses can be attributed to the perceived benefits online learning can provide students along with its convenience. However, quite a few students still do not perceive that these benefits outweigh the downside of online courses and thus prefer traditional courses. In particular, some students do not feel that certain courses are suitable to be offered online. As such, adoption of online learning for certain subjects or course content has been slow. Instead, these subjects seem to be better fit for a traditional learning environment. Through an understanding of these perceptions of needs and student satisfaction, higher education institutions should be better able to offer appropriate courses in various formats for learning environments that best suit their student population.

It has become more apparent in higher education institutions that all classes are not as adaptive to an online format as others. Even though online courses can produce higher enrollment numbers, they also suffer from higher attrition and retention rates (Moody 2004). The rush to online education may come at a greater cost than educators suspect (Anonymous, 200For example, in one case study, a statistics course had an attrition rate of 43% for an online section versus the 13% of its traditional format counterpart, a managerial marketing course had a 24% attrition rate for the online format versus a 9% rate for the traditional format, and an international economics course had a 3% attrition rate for its online format versus a 2% attrition rate for its traditional format (Terry 2001). The results from these studies indicate the likelihood that course characteristics may affect students’ preferences towards online or traditional courses.

As institutions of higher education consider further incorporating online capabilities into course curriculum and formats, it is important to understand which courses students think are more suitable for a traditional classroom environment and which courses are more suitable for an online environment. To investigate this issue, this study examines the following research question: Which course criteria influence students’ preference for online courses? The purpose of this study is to explore course characteristics and its effect on students’ preference for online versus traditional courses since previous studies have not examined this issue. To accomplish this purpose, this study first examines the current literature related to online courses. The data collection methodology is then described followed by an analysis of the data. This study concludes by providing suggestions for future research and for institutions and instructors considering setting up online courses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online courses were first offered in the mid-1990s. However, around this time, the perception widely existed that online learning environments were sterile environments not much different from correspondence courses upgraded from a post-office to an e-mail box, and their educational value was suspect (Rudich 1998). However, the availability of the ubiquitous Internet and the advancements of technology have enabled students and educators to interact in a new environment. Many higher education institutions now offer a smorgasbord of courses in an online environment. As technology and its applications advance in the education sec-
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