Online Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Face-to-Face Classroom Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This article reports online graduate students’ perceptions of face-to-face classroom instruction in a doctoral program at a large public university in the eastern United States. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of graduate students returning to a face-to-face classroom after becoming accustomed to online learning. The students’ online course experiences impacted their subsequent return to the face-to-face classroom in terms of logistics (anxiety finding a physical classroom, budgeting time to make it there) and learning (including interactions with students and instructors). The primary impact was increased appreciation of face-to-face interactions. Instructors also gained experience applying some other strategies to improve their classes. These findings could inform course developers and instructors about student expectations in face-to-face classrooms as well as stimulate reflections on recommendations for instructional improvements to enhance student learning.

Keywords: Connectedness, Face-to-Face Instruction, Graduate Students, Learning Community, Online Learning, Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

The Sloan Consortium reported that in their sample of all active, degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States that are open to the public, “over 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2008 term; a 17% increase over the number reported the previous year” (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 1). This number increased at a higher rate than the growth of overall higher education enrollments for a sixth consecutive year (Allen & Seaman, 2010). While there is now a considerable literature on the characteristics of successful online courses and on how to bring good pedagogy into the online learning environment, little research exists on the effect of teaching online on teachers and on how teaching online could shape teaching in the face-to-face classroom (Lowes, 2008).

A few researchers have investigated the effects of instructors’ online teaching on their face-to-face teaching (Roblyer, Porter, Bielefeldt, & Donaldson, 2009; Scagnoli, Buki, & Johnson, 2009). Following in the footsteps of Lowes (2005) study, these studies set out to...
empirically validate anecdotal reports of benefits that previous online teaching brings to the instructor’s subsequent face-to-face classroom. This subject is worthy of investigation since more students are now simultaneously taking online and face-to-face classes. Moving from the face-to-face to the online environment and back requires a transformation not only of course design, but also of instructors (Lowes, 2008) and students.

Lowes (2005, 2008) and Roblyer et al. (2009) examined the population of trans-classroom (migrating between face-to-face and online teaching) virtual high school teachers, whereas Scagnoli et al. (2009) focused on the university setting. Approximately 75% of the samples of teachers in each of these studies reported their online teaching impacted their face-to-face teaching. Some of the instructor’s shifts in viewpoints reported by all three studies included increased uses of technology in the face-to-face classroom, such as electronic assignment submissions (Roblyer et al., 2009; Scagnoli et al., 2009) or online discussion forums (Lowes 2005; Scagnoli et al., 2009); and improved teaching strategies, such as redesigning lessons (Lowes 2005), improving student engagement (Roblyer et al., 2009) or inclusion of student work in class lectures or presentations (Scagnoli et al., 2009).

According to one 2004 end-of-year survey of virtual high school teachers, “79% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they have used some of the pedagogy learned in the virtual high school setting (through teaching experiences and professional development) in their face-to-face classroom” (Lowes, 2005, p. 17). A case study examining the population of college instructors confirmed these results. In this case study, a community college instructor who enrolled in online classes to improve her instruction was easily able to transfer the knowledge she learned online to her own face-to-face classes (Varvel, n.d.). Furthermore, there was evidence that the instructor had not only applied the knowledge she had gained but also had come up with new and beneficial uses of technology in her face-to-face class, such as, recording audio feedback for ESL students instead of just providing it in writing (Varvel, n.d.).

FACE-TO-FACE VERSUS ONLINE STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Some studies have alleged that student perceptions of the quality of courses, satisfaction, and learning in courses offered face-to-face vs. those offered online are comparable (Topper, 2007; Tucker, 2000) but agreement is not unanimous. For example, Castle and McGuire (2010) concluded that students in face-to-face classes generally agreed with the statement “I gained significant knowledge about this subject” more often than students in online classes (p. 37). The researchers generalized the results to statements about student preferences of face-to-face, online, hybrid and other mediums of course delivery, but these generalizations were not well defended in the research. Multiple barriers to online learning include time management, personal need for the immediacy of face-to-face communication, student-to-student and student-instructor connectedness, and problems with technology (Reisetter & Boris, 2004).

Researchers have often examined the sense of community and connectedness among students with a focus on a comparison of interactions in face-to-face and online learning (Glisan & Trainin, 2006; Laffey, Lin, & Lin, 2006). Connectedness can be defined as “the feeling of belonging and acceptance and the creation of bonding relationships” (Rovai, 2002, as cited in Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009, p. 113). Contrary to similar studies, Jung, Choi, Lim, and Leem (2002) concluded that among undergraduate students in online classes in Korea, “social interaction is related more to learning outcomes than to learner satisfaction, whereas collaboration among the learners is related more to learner satisfaction than to learning outcomes” (p. 159). However, this study confirmed other findings that teacher-student and student-student interactions in online learning.
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