

**Communication
Humor and
Personality:
Student's attitudes
to online learning**

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Abstract

Communication, Humor and Personality: Student's attitudes to online learning

This qualitative study of 400 responses from students enrolled in 72 online courses offered by 15 different institutions examined students' attitudes to online teaching and learning. Results suggest that students emphasized the importance of flexibility, good communication and interaction. Students tended to differ in their attitudes toward asynchronous communications with some highly appreciative of the time it offers for thoughtful communication and the ability for all to voice opinions; others miss the immediacy of face-to-face communication. Students in the virtual classroom responded positively to active learning, excellent interaction amongst students, and a knowledgeable faculty member who was actively involved with students and provided constructive and timely feedback to their work. The implications of this study involve faculty time management and the cost of delivering online courses.

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Introduction

A recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education (Carr, 2000) entitled, "Psych Students Learn More Through Distance Ed But Are Less Satisfied" became one more entry into the ongoing debate over the quality and efficacy of online learning. This debate escalated in 1999 with the publication of Russell's No Significant Difference and Merisotis and Phipps (1999) critique of Russell's findings. This qualitative study attempts to respond to at least one of Merisotis and Phipps' (1999) critiques of distance education research. It is not based on the analysis of one individual course, but of student evaluations from 72 courses offered by 15 colleges and universities who are members of the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium.

The Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (CTDLC) was founded in 1997 to promote online learning and teaching.

Currently 32 of Connecticut's institutions of higher education belong to the Consortium and in fall 2000 offered over 140 online courses to approximately 2,500 students.

Twenty-three online programs at the Associate's, Bachelor's, and Master's degree levels are either approved or under construction.

Since its first four courses were offered in the Spring of 1998, the CTDLC has asked faculty to have their students complete an online survey instrument which serves as a course evaluation, a means of tracking online student demographics, and an examination of students' reasons for taking and opinions about online classes. The survey also has an open-ended comment section providing a rich additional source of information about students' attitudes toward online teaching and learning. While students comment specifically on one class, when analyzed in the aggregate, these statements

cross institutions and courses and paint a more comprehensive picture of attitudes toward online courses, online learning, and online teaching. What these comments demonstrate is that teachers can and do create an online teaching environment which favors thoughtful communication, requires the active participation of teachers and students, and above all promotes learning.

This study is based on an analysis of 400 responses to the student survey for the Fall 2000 semester. This represents approximately 20% of the students who registered for online courses offered by CTDLIC members that semester. As the evaluation is given at the end of the class, those students who withdraw or fail to complete the class generally do not complete the evaluation, and therefore the actual return rate may be slightly larger than 20%. In the Fall 2000 survey students were asked to respond to three open-ended questions: 1) "Is there anything about the online classroom that has

made it easier for you to learn, achieve your academic goals, or participate in class discussions (as compared to in an on ground classroom)"; 2) "Is there anything that has made it harder?" 3) "We'd appreciate any other comments about your experience with this online course. Any observations, suggestions or criticisms about the strengths or weaknesses of online learning in particular would be welcome?" Their responses provide an insight into why they chose online courses, their opinions on the asynchronous conferencing used by most faculty, and their attitudes toward the role faculty play in online classes.

Discussion

In general, students respond very positively to their experience learning online. Over 90% of students stated they would take another online course and would recommend that others do so as well. Overwhelmingly, flexibility of time, "It is much more convenient scheduling than traditional day classes"

and place, "I enjoyed it because I could study either at home or work," are cited as the major reasons for taking online courses. Connecticut is a small state with many colleges, so "distance" isn't a real issue for most people, but the ability to study where and when they want is important to those who work shifts, whose work takes them away from home, and who have family responsibilities such as the "stay at home dad with a four month old." As a single mother wrote, "Online classes have given me the opportunity to achieve a college education without putting too much strain on my home and working life." Others appreciate not just the time shifting, but the ability to work at their own pace, "I can take the time to learn things in my own way and not worry about taking extra time out of class and away from classmates."

While initially flexibility may be what attracts students to online learning, over 70% cite "course quality" as an important or

very important reason to choose online learning over available classroom courses. The two aspects of course quality that are most often cited both positively and negatively are classroom interaction and the role of the faculty. Since in most classes, the major format for interacting with the professor and with other students is the asynchronous course conference (few if any faculty use synchronous chat rooms), students' attitudes toward the use of conferences or threaded discussions have a major impact on their attitudes toward online learning as a whole.

Students who react positively to this form of interaction single out specific aspects of asynchronous communication that they believe enhance their ability to learn. First, those students who are shy or less verbal in a classroom believe they are given an equal opportunity to be part of the class, "I feel that I was more inclined to participate and express myself in the online format, as opposed to the classroom situation, where I feel self-

conscious about raising my hand.” Others, who may not be reluctant to speak in a classroom, appreciate that they get to hear from everyone, “Everyone gets a chance to talk in a distance learning course. We get to post our comments and read everyone else’s while they read ours. It really helps build your self-esteem and confidence in not only your writing ability, but also your deeper understanding of the material.” Second, many people appreciate the time they have to think at depth about posted questions and comments rather than the need in a classroom to respond immediately, “Class discussions have the opportunity to be thought out in a posting whereas actual classroom discussions tend to be blurts of raw, not necessarily thought out ideas.” “I feel more at ease and can take time in forming my answers online. I feel put on the spot in the classroom.” In the conference as one student stated, I have, “more time to express myself without verbal interruption...greater time to ‘hear’ others express

themselves as well. Greater opportunity to hear and digest a variety of viewpoints on assignments.” Lastly, students believe that they and others are more open and honest online. “Our class seemed very willing to share some deeply felt emotions and personal experiences that I don’t think would have been possible in a traditional setting.” They also felt freer to state their own opinions, including disagreeing with others, “It’s easier to disagree with people you don’t see face to face in conference discussions.”

For these students, the depth, openness, and opportunity to think that asynchronous conferences allow contributed greatly toward their positive attitude to online courses.

Other students had more negative reactions to the asynchronous conferencing of their classes and this contributed to their more negative reaction to online learning overall. “Online classes are great, but not for me. You still haven’t captured the teacher-student interaction that I get in the class-

room.” One student very succinctly summed up problems that some students experience with the conferencing format. “I miss the classroom interaction and exchange of ideas. I think the online format is somewhat limited by typing ability, ability to express oneself in writing, and the frequency of online submissions.” The lack of writing skills or the inability to type rapidly may make communicating in the conference frustrating and unwieldy for students. Some students miss the immediacy of face-to-face communication, “I miss the personal interaction with the professor and fellow students. It would be nice to get immediate feedback from a group.” For some students, this is clearly a matter of personal preference, “It [the class] was harder, because I lost my interaction, physically with people. I am a big ‘people person’ and quite social.” For others the online format may not fit with their style of learning, “It’s difficult to just read an explanation, and not be able to ask questions immediately.” And lastly,

some of the negative reactions to the asynchronous conference may be a result of how the faculty used the conference as part of their course design, rather than the conference itself. A student who states that the weakness of the course is “lack of interaction” and that “more interaction with the students and the teacher would be helpful, seems to be finding fault with the course design and instruction rather than online asynchronous communication itself, something repeat online learners increasingly note.

The role faculty assume in the online class and how they conceive of and design their courses also affect students’ views of online learning. When the CTDLC first began offering online courses, students often conflated their negative view of a specific course design or an instructor’s method of teaching with a negative view of online learning. However, since over 50% of our students are repeat online learners, they have become more sophisticated at separating out

what happens in one course from what online learning can and does offer. While a student might have a specific reaction to an instructor, they can disconnect that experience from online learning as a whole, "I will take other online courses, but not from this instructor." One student, when commenting on a specific class, was able to pinpoint the importance of the role of the instructor, "This was far and away the best of the 5 online courses I have taken. The instruction quality made the biggest difference. In this particular course there were lively threaded discussions, thought-provoking comments by the teacher, interesting assignments, and fairly good reading material."

One student summed up what faculty must be aware of when bringing a course online, "If teachers are going to teach on line, they need to think through their curriculum. Obviously, they would need to revamp their teaching habits. Communication is really important. Accessibility is very important."

Students want their online faculty to be present, accessible, and available, "My teacher was great. He always seemed to be available if we needed him." Students are extremely critical of courses that have little faculty presence, "This course was too self-taught. Students are entitled to a professor who will teach and answer questions directly, just as in live classes." One idea about online learning is that the classes are "self-taught." And students comment very negatively when a course is seemingly designed without the active participation of the instructor. "There is no instructor, which means that all the motivation, organization and learning is up to you." On the other hand, most faculty design classes which require their active input and are regarded much more positively by students, "The professor was knowledgeable, upbeat, and very supportive of the entire classes' efforts; he made me want to have something to say, so I really took my assignments seriously." A student in a math class

agreed, "Flexibility, class discussion, real-life examples have all made distance learning more beneficial than being in a classroom environment."

While timely feedback, good communication, and accessibility are all viewed as necessary by online students, and emphasized as benchmarks of quality (Merisotis, J. & Phipps, R., 2000), courses that get the strongest evaluations from students have faculty, like good faculty in the classroom, who are completely present and bring their personality into the course in ways that enhance learning "The course content was wonderful and the professor did a wonderful job at including her life experiences as they relate to what we are learning—very powerful tool." Humor helps, "The professor was always available, encouraging and even made the lessons humorous by adding personal tidbits." Students in these classes felt that they knew their professors and more importantly their professors knew them, "I actually felt

that we had more time with the instructor in the online class, than others I've taken in the classroom." This was often true of the role the instructor played in the course conference, "She definitely went out of her way to make herself accessible to us all. She was always present in our discussions and added greatly to our understanding of the weekly topics."

Lastly, students are highly appreciative of course designs that are well organized, clear, and encourage active learning. Students commented favorably on "interesting assignments," "real life examples," "a variety of 'thought' questions," "thought provoking comments" in the conference, and a final exam which "was a welcomed challenge that truly required the application of newly learned skills." While some people believe that online courses are, at best, a second choice (Carnevale, 2000), two students reported how their online courses and professors had profoundly changed their lives pro-

professionally and academically. “The most exciting thing about this course is that it has confused my direction.... My life is changed forever because I’m forced to dig deep within myself and pull out skills, dreams, and plans that were just waiting to be cultivated.” And the person who grew from just attending college to becoming a student in the true sense of that word, “Speaking as someone who has never been really academically focused, this course was so interesting and fun that I want to keep going in school, even after I graduate.”

Conclusion

Palmer Parker (1998) describes the teacher’s job as creating the conditions for learning. These students indicate that teachers can successfully use the tools of the virtual classroom to create a stimulating, active, participatory learning environment for many, but not all, students. For some students this environment affords distinct advantages for

participation in discussions, one that allows all voices to speak and be heard, and facilitates discussions on difficult and contentious issues. For others, virtual conversations don’t provide the depth or speed that face-to-face interactions do. Students respond positively to what we understand as good pedagogy – active learning, excellent interaction amongst students, and a knowledgeable faculty member who is actively involved with students and provides constructive and timely feedback to their work. As Merisotis’ and Phipps’ (1999) concluded, and this study confirms, much of the research on distance learning ultimately returns to the issue of teaching. Just as in a classroom, on line learning can be a transforming experience for students. The technology can be used to help or hinder this transformation, but ultimately such transformations are a result of the combination of a student who appreciates and functions well in this environment, and above all a teacher who understands how to use the

technology to create a positive, learning experience. The teacher's ability to be present, to project a personality through cyberspace and to demonstrate a sense of humor are additional factors that help bring students fully into this virtual classroom.

There are several implications of this study for administrators and faculty of online courses and programs. For faculty, the students' emphasis of the importance of their virtual presence in the online classroom presents the challenge of time management. Timely feedback, active participation in the course conference, and quick responses to email require faculty to structure their "teaching" time in ways that are completely different from the usual blocks of preparation, class time, and office hours. While considering students attitudes toward quality online courses, further work is necessary in helping faculty best manage their time when teaching on line. These same requirements effectively limit class sizes, neither faculty

nor students can be expected to respond in this fashion to 50 students. Limiting class sizes may increase the cost of creating and delivering online courses and programs. Administrators must look at ways, other than increasing class sizes, to create economies of scale which do not compromise the factors that contribute to quality online learning.

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