

Making Online Relevant, Up Close and Personal

R.A. Cooper

College of Education

Brenau University

3139 Campus Drive

Suite 300

Norcross, GA 30071

Email: rpenwell@brenau.edu

A.M. Wheeler

College of Education

3139 Campus Drive

Suite 300

Norcross, GA 30071

Email: awheeler@brenau.edu

L. Kern

Brenau University

500 Washington Street SE

Gainesville, GA 30501

Email: lkern@brenau.edu

Abstract

This study examined the preference and rationale for either online or on-ground classes as reported by master of education graduate students at a small university in Georgia. During 2011-2012, these students completed an anonymous survey in many of their online classes. The questions asked students about their preferences for online and on-ground classes and why they expressed the preference. The results of the study indicated some expected responses such as many students preferred the convenience of online classes, but missed the face-to-face interactions of on-ground classes. This study also disclosed behaviors that online instructors should exhibit and adopt for teaching in the online format in order to build a sense of community that is often lacking.

Keywords: online, on-ground, student preference, community

Introduction

Nearly three million students were enrolled in graduate programs across the United States in 2010. Of these students, 59% were women and 41% men; 55.5% were enrolled full time, and 44.5% attended part time. The majority were Caucasian (55%) or African-American (10.7%), but Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans were also represented (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). A master's student can be generalized as female, Caucasian, less than 30 years of age, unmarried with no dependents, and working fulltime. Almost as often, this student might be in her 30's or 40's and married with dependents, and again, working fulltime (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010; "Work: hours per week," 2008).

Despite juggling the obligations of disparate roles at work, home, and in the family, students elect to matriculate into a master's program, making their education the top priority (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Grube, Cedarholm, Jones, & Dunn, 2005). Students cited both personal and career-related reasons for entering a graduate program, including the acquisition of new knowledge, personal fulfillment, and career enhancement (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). These students, particularly the 50% who are in their 30's or older, face many obstacles to achieving their educational goals. In her classic literature review, Cross (1981) identified situational and institutional barriers to adult education. These barriers continue to deter students today. Situational barriers are related to the student's current life situation, such as financial, family, health, and transportation problems. Prioritizing and time management, balancing family, work, and student obligations outweighed other student concerns about their ability to participate in graduate education (Schlemper, 2011; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). The familial demands on mothers contributed significantly to student attrition as female students reported difficulty in reconciling the demands of their roles as both mother and student (Lynch, 2008). Affordable, reliable childcare while meeting academic obligations was a major concern for women with children (Lynch, 2008; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Additionally, financial concerns relating to the costs of graduate education were a significant situational barrier for the student and family (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Less significant logistical issues such as commuting (Schlemper, 2011) and parking (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011) also played a role. Cross (1981) identified a second group of barriers that are institutional in nature, arising from factors under the educational institution's control such as class scheduling (during traditional work days), location (on a central campus), fee structures (penalizing part-time enrollment), and curricular requirements (that did not facilitate timely degree completion). These traditional structures did not acknowledge the needs of many in the student population. While options available to students have grown in the last 30 years, institutional barriers were still cited in recent research as an obstacle to persistence (Lynch, 2008; Schlemper, 2011; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012).

The advent of distance education has given students considerable latitude in addressing some of these situational and institutional barriers, particularly the scheduling and location of classes. Today this mode of education is embraced worldwide by even the most highly regarded institutions (Casey, 2008). Colleges and universities have created over 11,000 online distance education programs to accommodate student demands for additional institutional flexibility and in response to the situational barriers experienced by students. Of these programs, 25% are graduate or first professional degree programs. Over 1.7 million graduate students were enrolled in these programs in 2008 (NCES, 2008).

Two relevant themes driving student choice for online classes have been identified: convenience and flexibility. Significant numbers of participants in multiple studies indicated that the convenience of being able to pursue work, family, and educational responsibilities concurrently enabled them to persist in their educational goals. Without this convenience, that would not have been possible. These participants also reported that flexibility of time and place was of great importance. The ability to attend to their education at

any time and from any location, without the problems of rescheduling work or family obligations, commuting time and cost, and parking, was essential to their academic progress (Lei & Govra, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Perreault, Waldman, Alexander, & Zhao, 2008; Serhan, 2010; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Walker & Kelly, 2007; Wyatt, 2005). Typical of these studies, Braun (2008) surveyed 90 students who took both on-ground and online classes while enrolled in a master's of education program. Individual respondents listed multiple considerations in their enrollment choices; 80% chose online courses for the flexibility in scheduling, and 74% for the ability to complete coursework without having to go to campus. In open-ended responses the students cited the ability to spend time with and to care for family without sacrificing their education as the motivation.

Although online classes resolve some of the barriers faced by graduate students, and most were satisfied with their educational experience and would reenroll in online classes (Braun, 2008; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Robertson, Grant, & Jackson, 2005), students often expressed a preference for the experiences of on-ground instruction (Beard, Harper, & Riley, 2004). Online students were often dissatisfied with the quantity and/or quality of interaction with instructors and with other students as compared to their on-ground experiences (Braun, 2008; Walker & Kelly, 2007). Effective communication became difficult due to a lack of person-to-person awareness and social context (Dow, 2008). Visual and auditory cues were missed as was eye contact (Serhan, 2010). Song, Singleton, Hill and Koh (2004) found 71% of the students surveyed felt a lack of community in online courses was a challenging aspect of attending classes online. While a variety of studies have identified student dissatisfaction with a lack of interaction among students and instructors, the levels of interaction have also been found not to be significantly different from on-ground classes (Wyatt, 2005). Additionally, students reported a lack of immediate response from the instructor as a detriment in the online environment (Serhan, 2010; Walker & Kelly, 2007).

Given the choice, graduate students may choose online classes for reasons of convenience and flexibility while bemoaning the loss of the on-ground face-to-face experience. Students often enroll in online classes for convenience in prioritizing and accommodating their concurrent roles and responsibilities as students, spouses, parents, and employees. They value the flexibility of choosing the time and place to attend to the demands of their education. At the same time, many feel a loss of a sense of community and social context created in an on-ground classroom, but perceived to be missing from the virtual environment. Researchers are in general agreement on these points. However, as seen in the studies cited in this review and others, the research tends to aggregate undergraduates with master's students or master's with doctoral candidates. Much research focuses solely on doctoral students. Less of the research addresses exclusively the perceptions of master's students. The present study is intended to add to this body of work.

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this study was to determine the preference and rationale for either online or on-ground master of education graduate classes at a small university in Georgia. Master of education graduate students were asked to complete an optional, anonymous 11 question survey in several of their online classes during the academic year of 2011-2012. The questions asked students about their preferences for online and on-ground classes. The student responses to each question were tallied and the most common answers were reported.

Results

Sixteen master of education graduate students responded to the survey. The students in the study have taken more on-ground than online classes (Tab. 1). The positive reasons for taking online classes were convenience and no travel time while the negative responses related to a lack of face-to-face interaction with

classmates and faculty and that online classes were more work than on-ground classes (Tab. 2). The positive responses for taking on-ground classes were the face-to-face interaction of the students and faculty and the negative responses stated that on-ground classes required travel time, long classes, and late nights (Tab. 3).

The students did not show a strong preference for online or on-ground classes (Tab. 4). The students who preferred on-ground classes did so because of the face-to-face interaction between classmates and the professor, the immediate responses to questions, the ability to immediately communicate lack of understanding, the professors' elaboration of concepts, and that there was less work in on-ground classes. Those who preferred online classes did so because the class was more efficient, convenient, and required no travel time. Those who enjoyed both online and on-ground classes did so based on the convenience and self-paced nature of online, but enjoyed the face-to-face interaction of on-ground classes and agreed that some classes such as methods classes should be on-ground because of the hands-on experience needed to learn the material.

Table 1: Number of Online and On-Ground Classes Taken

Number of Online Classes	Number of Students	Number of On-Ground Classes	Number of Students
1	4	1	2
2	4	2	2
4	3	3	1
5	1	6	2
6	2	7	1
7	1	9	1
>15	1	11	1
		13	3
		>15	3

Table 2: Online Positives and Negatives

Online Positives	Number of Times Mentioned	Online Negatives	Number of Times Mentioned
Can go to class anytime/convenient	14	No face-to-face interaction with classmates and instructor	11
No travel	7	More work	6
Self-paced	4	Unresponsive group members	5
Course of student clearly outlined	2	Have to wait for responses	4
Prompt feedback	2	Independent learning	3
Connection with students	1	Technology/computer issues	3
Access to instructor	1	Minimal feedback	2
Can think before respond	1	Must log in 5/7 days	2
		More expensive	2

Table 3: On-Ground Positives and Negatives

On-Ground Positives	Number of Times Mentioned	On-Ground Negatives	Number of Times Mentioned
Face-to-face interaction with students and faculty	19	Long Drive	10
Immediate responses	2	Long classes and late nights	10
Class is once a week	2	Class at a specific time	4
Real life examples	1	Long wait for assignment feedback	1
Learning is more meaningful	1	Have to turn in hard copy of assignments	1
Less Expensive	1	Class may be dropped for low enrollment	1
		Miss class if sick	1
		Time away from family	1

Table 4: Online Vs. On-Ground Preference

Preference	Number of Students
Online	4
On-ground	6
Both	6

Discussion

The students reported that their top reasons for taking online classes were the convenience of attending class on their time and that they did not have to travel. The convenience and flexibility of online classes allowed students to balance work, school, and family without the burden of sitting in a class for a set number of hours and requiring schedule changes to accommodate other obligations. It also freed students from the time and money spent on commutes and parking (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011, Lei & Govra, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Perreault, et al., 2008; Serhan, 2010; Schlemper, 2011, Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Walker & Kelly, 2007; Wyatt, 2005). Students missed the face-to-face interaction with their peers and the instructor that is often missing in online classes (Braun, 2008; Walker & Kelly, 2007). They also felt that the online classes were more work than their on-ground classes. The top reason for taking on-ground classes was the face-to-face interaction between the students and the instructor, but, on-ground classes involved travel time to get to class, long classes, and late nights.

Students did not strongly prefer online or on-ground classes (Beard, Harper, & Riley, 2004). The students who preferred on-ground classes stated that on-ground classes provided the face-to-face interaction that online classes did not and they valued the immediate responses to questions, the ability to tell the instructor in real time that they did not understand a concept, the ability of the professors to elaborate on concepts, and the lower work requirements. The students who preferred online classes did so because the class was efficient, offered time and participation flexibility, and they did not have to drive to class (Lei &

Govra, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Perreault, et al., 2008; Serhan, 2010; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Walker & Kelly, 2007; Wyatt, 2005). The students who preferred to take a mixture of online and on-ground classes echoed the likes and dislikes of the other students. They enjoyed the convenience of the online classes as well as the face-to-face interaction that on-ground classes provide. These students felt that some classes were more suited to on-ground, such as methods courses that require a more hands-on learning experience.

In order to make online classes more personal and provide the feedback that students desire, instructors have to consider several elements of the online delivery format. The discussion board provides asynchronous communication opportunities, both for creating social context and for learning experiences. To generate social context, a discussion forum can be created specifically for introductions, which gives classmates a sense of who their peers are. Many learning management systems accommodate pictures and individual student websites to further communicate appropriate professional and personal information. In learning forums, students read and react to others' posts. During this process students can analyze, summarize, and compare and contrast information depending on the purpose of the assignment (Thiede, R. (2012). The discussion board creates a venue for students to think critically and learn from the information posted by others. The assignments must be clear, meaningful, and provide an avenue for students to learn more in-depth knowledge of the concepts as a result of the exchange. With fewer time and physical constraints, more interaction can occur on a discussion board than in an on-ground environment. Video and text chats and wikis are additional tools that encourage interaction among students and with instructors in an online format. To provide the immediate feedback students value in the traditional classroom, instructors can conduct interactive lectures and entertain questions via video conferencing. Scheduled office hours can be held through video conferences or chat rooms. Announcements and emailed information can be communicated using audio recordings instead of written text.

Online courses must strive to provide as many interactive experiences as possible. Group participation is a powerful tool for strengthening person-to-person awareness and social presence. To achieve these desirable outcomes, the process of group work is valued in addition to the product. Defined purposes, expectations, and assessment rubrics reinforce this attitude. Groups should be small enough to necessitate participation by each of the members, and assignments should be crafted to encourage interaction. These activities can range from small short-term efforts to larger projects occurring over the course of the term. Video and written simulations, case studies, debates, and games, by the nature of their complexity, can lend themselves to collaborative activities. Explored in groups, these critical thinking experiences encourage learning and promote interactions and connections among the students. Group participation can also take the form of collaborative learning activities, where groups work together to master course content. Other activities which increase the sense of community in an online class include group research assignments and peer review tasks. A variety of interactive social and learning experiences throughout the course will encourage the experiences students value in on-ground instruction.

Conclusions

Online learning is the future of education and therefore faculty need to be able to adjust to a new way of teaching (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Although it is more difficult to create a sense of community and to attempt to replicate the face-to-face interactions of on-ground classes, there are strategies that instructors can use. Online groups create a sense of community among the students. Regular faculty interaction in the discussion board as well as email helps students feel that they are connected to the instructor. Faculty teaching online classes must make a concerted effort to be active in online classes including giving quick responses to course questions as well as being available to elaborate on concepts when needed. Virtual office hours can be a solution to many of the negatives for online classes. Seeing the professor even over an

online connection can mimic the face-to-face interaction and peer interaction of on-ground classes. It can also provide an opportunity for students to get immediate feedback on questions and allow instructors to elaborate on concepts. The demand for online learning is increasing exponentially, therefore online courses must strive to incorporate as many activities as possible to promote more student collaboration and interaction.

References

- Allen, E. and Seaman, J. (2010). *Learning on demand: Online education in the United States, 2009*. Babson Survey Research Group. Retrieved from <http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/pdf/learningondemand.pdf>
- Beard, L. A., Harper, C., & Riley, G. (2004). Online versus on-campus instruction: Student attitudes & perceptions. *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning*, 48(6), 29–31.
- Braun, T. (2008). Making a choice: The perceptions and attitudes of online graduate students. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 16(1), 63–92.
- Casey, D. M. (2008). A journey to legitimacy: The historical development of distance education through technology. *TechTrends: Linking Research and Practice to Improve Learning*, 52(2), 45–51.
- Cohen, M. A. O., & Greenberg, S. (2011). The struggle to succeed: Factors associated with the persistence of part-time adult students seeking a master's degree. *Continuing Higher Education Review*, 75, 101–112.
- Cross, K. P. (1981). Why adults participate - And why not. In *Adults as learners* (pp. 81–108). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dow, M. J. (2008). Implications of social presence for online learning: A case study of MLS students. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 49(4), 231–242.
- Grube, S. A., Cedarholm, K., Jones, C., & Dunn, M. (2005). Master's student life: The balance between student and professional. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 24(2), 152–161.
- Knapp, L. C., Kelly-Reid, J. E., & Ginder, S. A. (2012). *Enrollment in post secondary institutions, fall 2011; Financial statistics, fiscal year 2011, and graduation rates, selected cohorts, 2003-2008: first look (provisional data)* (No. NCES 2012-174rev). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012174rev>
- Lei, S. A., & Govra, R. K. (2010). College distance education courses: Evaluating benefits and costs from institutional, faculty and students' perspectives. *Education*, 130(4), 616–631.
- Lynch, K. D. (2008). Gender roles and the American academe: A case study of graduate student mothers. *Gender & Education*, 20, 585–605.

- Noel-Levitz. (2011). *National Online Learners Priorities Report*. Retrieved from https://www.noellevitz.com/upload/Papers_and_Research/2011/PSOL_report%202011.p df
- Perreault, H., Waldman, L., Alexander, M., & Zhao, J. (2008). Graduate business students' perceptions of online learning: A five year comparison. *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, 50(3), 164–179.
- QuickStats. (2008). *National Center for Education Statistics*. Retrieved March 25, 2013, from <http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/quickstats/createtable.aspx>
- Robertson, J. S., Grant, M. M., & Jackson, L. (2005). Is online instruction perceived as effective as campus instruction by graduate students in education? *The Internet and Higher Education*, 8(1), 73–86.
- Schlemper, M. B. (2011). Challenges and coping in graduate school. *Geographical Bulletin*, 52(2), 67–72.
- Serhan, D. (2010). Online learning: Through their eyes. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 37(1), 19–24.
- Shepherd, J., & Nelson, B. M. (2012). Balancing act: A phenomenological study of female adult learners who successfully persisted in graduate studies. *Qualitative Report*, 17(20), 1–21.
- Song, L., Singleton, E. S., Hill, J. R., & Koh, M. H. (2004). Improving online learning: Student perceptions of useful and challenging characteristics. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(1), 59–70.
- Thiede, R. (2012). Best practices with online courses. Online Submission, David.
- U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2008). *Distance education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions: 2006–07* (No. NCES 2009-044). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2009044>
- U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2010). *Profile of graduate and first-professional students: Trends from selected years, 1995-96 to 2007-08* (No. NCES 2011-219). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011219.pdf>
- Walker, C. E., & Kelly, E. (2007). Online instruction: Student satisfaction, kudos, and pet peeves. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 8(4), 309–319,408.
- Wyatt, G. (2005). Satisfaction, academic rigor and interaction: Perceptions of online instruction. *Education*, 125(3), 460–468.