

Chapter 63

Student Perceptions of Online vs. Face-to-Face Learning in Criminal Justice: Considering the Ethical Implications of Disparities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the findings from a study of students at a four-year university who were surveyed about their experiences learning in both online and face-to-face modalities. While some students reported perceived equitableness between their experiences in online and face-to-face classes, there were some findings that demonstrated the need for further inquiry. Of note, the majority (61%) of students indicated that they learned more or much more in face-to-face classes than online. Students in online classes were also much less likely to make use of faculty office hours or, in some cases, to even have contact with their professors at all. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical issues corresponding to the disparity between online and traditional learning modalities.

INTRODUCTION

The use of digital technologies in higher education has increased rapidly over the last decade, and this trend is likely to continue (Haas & Senjo, 2004). Indeed, the number of online education programs is growing at a rate faster than traditional campus-based programs (Cole, Shelley & Swartz, 2014). As of 2013, 6.7 million students in higher education had taken at least one course online. This equates to almost one-third (32%) of students of higher education in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

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There are many perceived benefits of online education from the perspective of students (Li & Irby, 2008), faculty (Haas & Senjo, 2004), and university administrators (Sitren & Smith, 2017). For students, particularly those who balance school with other responsibilities such as full-time jobs and childcare, the flexibility of online course offerings can be beneficial (Stack, 2013). Prior research indicates that many faculty members have positive perceptions of the use of new technologies in teaching and believe that they can enhance course pedagogy and even include student populations who have historically been neglected in traditional classroom-based learning. University administrators have expressed that the potential income generation from online courses is important, particularly during periods with limited or even lowered budgets for higher education (Sitren & Smith, 2017).

Within the discipline of criminal justice, the increase in the use of online learning systems, allowing for distance education, represents one of the most significant changes in the history of criminal justice pedagogy (Sitren & Smith, 2017). Yet research findings about the effectiveness of online education compared to traditional face-to-face learning environments are mixed. The study described in this chapter explored student perceptions of the differences between online and face-to-face learning environments, focusing on both how much students learn in each modality and also their level of interaction with both peers and professors. The findings have important implications for future online pedagogy. In this chapter, we consider the ethical implications of the disparities between experiences learning online versus face-to-face.

BACKGROUND

The Development and Function of Online Learning

The first courses offered completely online began in 1981 with noncredit “mini-courses” in an executive training program provided by the Western Behavior Sciences Institute (Harasim, 2000). The instructors who taught these classes reported that their strategies for teaching these particular courses involved a great deal of trial and error, and admittedly quite a bit of error. They quickly discovered that what worked in the traditional classroom did not work in an online environment. This process of trial and error would lead them to online teaching techniques such as discussion boards, which are still used in online learning today.

As the power of the World Wide Web has grown, so has the significance of online learning in higher education. As of 2013, approximately one-third of college students now take at least one course online and 90% of colleges utilized online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Even as overall higher education enrollments decline, distance education enrollments continue to grow (Allen et al., 2016). The opportunity to participate remotely in distance learning widens the net so that more people can participate in higher education (Nelson, 1998), including those for whom the commute to campus is inconvenient or even not feasible as a result of transportation concerns, geographic restraints, professional or family commitments, or physical disabilities (Mayzer & DeJong, 2003).

There are two basic arguments in the debate for and against online learning. On one hand, some argue that online and distance learning is not only as effective as face-to-face learning but it has enabled education to become more flexible, and able to reach people who may not have been able to obtain that same education otherwise. Additionally, it is also cost-effective in a time when many state-funded schools are facing budget cuts. Conversely, some have argued that the increase in online learning represents a

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