

Academic Workload in Online Courses

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THE EVOLVING CLASSROOM

While distance education has been available in many forms for a long time, the technologies associated with the Internet are opening up new ways of delivering the educational product. In addition, the acceptance and use of these technologies are widespread, easing the transition from the traditional classroom in the eyes of university administrators, students, and academics—at least at first appearances. Coupled with this, the worldwide shortage of academic staff in the business schools, particularly in information intensive areas (Diamond & Wergin, 2002) and engineering (Thompson, 1999), and the general “graying of academia” (Hall, 2002) is encouraging school management to experiment with alternative forms of delivery. University administrations can see attractions in increasing numbers of students. Under what conditions will the Internet and its associated technologies provide an acceptable answer? While teaching in foreign parts and living at home may be attractive to some academics, what problems will be encountered by institution administrations in the use of these telecommuters?

In academic journals, research into online education is becoming part of mainstream literature, particularly the Information Systems literature (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001). The acceptance of such articles by leading journals is indicative of the serious view of the research within that discipline.

This article sets the professor’s workload against the student evaluations of an online distance class and a backdrop of relevant literature. It details the experiences associated with teaching a final year undergraduate class via the Web, with the students meeting face-to-face with the professor only once.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

There is a considerable body of literature outlining potential differences in the performance of students undertaking distance education courses as compared

to traditional classroom courses; see, for example, Neal (1998), Taylor (1998); Wetzel, Radtke, and Stern (1994), Storck and Sproull (1995), and Hara and Kling (1999). In general, these studies indicate that there are no significant differences in achievement and the satisfaction of students in distance education classes when compared to the more traditional modes of delivery. It should be noted, however, that finding empirically based research specifically related to online distance education is difficult, no doubt partly due to the recent nature of such delivery (see also, Schell, 2001). A number of studies do provide some indication of student perceptions of online distance education (Hara & Kling, 1999; Hiltz, 1997; Hornby & Anderson, 1995; Hsu and Backhouse 2001; Pear & Novak, 1996; Stahlman, 1996). In general, the benefits identified by students include convenience and flexibility, greater motivation to work, learning more and greater understanding of the course material, higher quality of education, better access to and communication with the professor, more communication with other students, and more active participation in discussion. Some also liked the unlimited access to self-assessment and immediate and extensive feedback. There has also been work done in relation to the Technology Acceptance Model (see, in particular, Cheung, Lee, & Chen, 2001), which indicated that perceived usefulness had the greatest effect on the behavioural intentions of students.

Against this, the following problems were identified (the overlap is intentional; different studies reported different findings): a high level of frustration and dissatisfaction, lower levels of satisfaction, technical and logistical problems, lack of interaction with the professor, difficulty in developing student friendships, more likely to stop “attending” and fall behind, lack of feedback and confusion about what was required, overwhelming amounts of reading from e-mail and online discussion, less interesting, and students less likely to ask questions. Recent work on collaborative technologies in education (Murthy, 2004) also draws attention to potential problems in the use of such technologies.

THE ACADEMIC'S PERSPECTIVE

From the academic's point of view, not all courses are suited to online distance education; there is often a concern expressed about the time taken to prepare and maintain such courses, motivate students, cope with an expected greater demand from students in online classes, and intellectual property issues. There is also a general worry about potential conflict between the administration expectation that such courses be provided cheaply and that they will be of high quality (see, for example, Hadidi, Sung, & Woken, 2001; Hara & Kling, 1999; Hiltz, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Ward & Newlands, 1998).

To some extent, online distance education can make the academic a telecommuter. The telecommuting literature lists many advantages and disadvantages for the telecommuter (see, for example, Ford & McLaughlin, 1995; Hiltz, 1997; Mokhtarian & Salomon, 1994; Turban & Wang, 1995). The advantages are mostly in travel, flexibility and convenience, transport costs, and control over one's working environment, while the disadvantages centre on isolation and lack of social and professional contact with one's colleagues, exploitation of the individual, and whether the home is suitable for working. In this case, a fairly extreme form of telecommuting was practiced with the class and the professor thousands of miles (and many time zones) apart. It might be expected that the professor would experience some of the disadvantages of telecommuting.

The key issue addressed in this article is what workload is required of the academic in order to set up and run an online course perceived as satisfactory by the students and university administration? Sub-issues include problems encountered, interaction and dependence on other staff and concerns for departmental administrations.

THE CLASS, SATISFACTION AND LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT

The data reported here relates to online distance students undertaking a senior-level Information Technology Management course for non-IS majors in a Business School at a university in the southern United States. The course is compulsory for Business School non-IS majors, and some 200 students take the course each semester. The online class had 38 participants, of

whom only one had any prior experience with distance education. Online distance education was not part of the regular delivery methods employed at that university, although most students were aware that this course would be run as a trial distance education class before it commenced. They were offered the opportunity to change to a traditional class if they felt uncomfortable with the online experiment—none did so; in fact, others asked to join. The course was run on WebCT and by the use of e-mail.

It was also relevant that the class selected for online distance delivery was a class scheduled to meet at 5 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays. This particular class was chosen for two reasons. First, it was intended to run "chat" sessions that would take place at one of the scheduled class times (5 p.m. in the relevant US time zone is early-mid morning the next day in Australia, where the professor resided). The time was seen as convenient to both students and professor. The second factor was that it was believed that a group of undergraduate students who enrolled in a 5 p.m. class would likely be attracted to this mode of delivery due to the likelihood of work, family, or other commitments. So it can be seen that, from a research perspective, there was some degree of self-selection involved here. This is perhaps an important issue in online education—prior research has indicated that online education is not for all, and certainly not for all, all the time (Dick, Case & Burns, 2002)

In terms of satisfaction, the students were very happy with the class and their learning experience. As a group, they found it enjoyable, would recommend it to others, would take another such class, and most felt they had learned as much as they did in other courses. Analysis of the departmental evaluations indicated that around 30% of students felt that they had learned more in the online class, that it was more intellectually challenging, and that it was more difficult. Against this, a small percentage (around 5%) felt that they had learned less, were less challenged, and that it was less difficult.

It is worthy of note that the students appreciated the flexibility of the class, the excitement of being involved in something new and experimental, and gaining experience in the technology (these were non-IS majors). It should be recognised that these perceptions and feelings may have also influenced the reported levels of satisfaction. As an aside, the area where most students had difficulty was time management—although,

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