

Online Learner Expectations

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of online courses presents new opportunities and challenges for educational institutions. Thanks to online learning, increasing numbers of students can enroll in online educational programs without the institution needing additional classrooms or dormitories and such online instruction offers many students the opportunity to take courses who might otherwise have been unable to participate. This sudden shift to online learning, however, comes without a shared experience for either the learner or instructor. In other words, while most learners and instructors have had years of formal and informal experience in the face-to-face classroom, few have had similar breadth of online educational experience. Accordingly, there would appear to be a divergent array of expectations regarding the online learning experience. Failure to understand and address these expectations will likely result in a disappointed educational experience for learners and instructors alike.

TYPES OF EXPECTATIONS

In their discussion of providing library and reference support services to distance learners, Cooper, Dempsey, Menon, and Millson-Martula (1998) differentiate between student needs and expectations. Needs are instrumental elements which students require to achieve their goal. Expectations are the assumptions regarding the likelihood of something occurring and which the authors note “are the standards against which a vendor’s or service provider’s performance should be judged” (p. 43). Perceptions of quality involve the discrepancy between the customers’ expectations or desires and their attitudes of the actual experiences. Steyn and Schulze (2003) observe that to be quality-minded in education is to give attention to the needs and expectations of

learners and make sure that they are met. Learners’ perceptions provide important information for addressing these expectations (Cooper et al., 1998).

Students’ expectations largely come from past experiences, either face-to-face classes on campus or other traditional educational activities. It is therefore likely that the degree of satisfaction that students have with prior courses will likely determine the attitudes and expectations that they bring to subsequent classes. Such expectations are often shaped based on students’ experiences in the areas of academic preparation, learning support, communication systems, and perceptions of their readiness to progress to the next level of learning (Steyn & Schulze, 2003). Expectations may also be developed based on students’ degrees of trust and confidence in the institution, faculty responsiveness to questions, perceptions of empathy toward learner concerns and needs, delivery of content material, or effective communication during the learning process (Cooper et al., 1998; Phillips & Peters, 1999).

Although the student may have selected online learning because of personal benefits such as eliminating a commute to class, fitting the learning into a busy schedule, or being able to attend classes from home, the expectation remains that adequate guidelines and structure will be clearly provided by the instructor (Bickle & Carroll, 2003; Swan, 2001). Without sufficient guidance, the new online student has the potential for heightened levels of uncertainty (Brown, 2003; Porras-Hernandez, 2000; Swan, 2001). How will this experience differ from my other classes? Will I be able to navigate the online classroom? How will I understand the material if I never actually see my instructor? Where will I go for help if I’m confused? A recent study of online learner expectations in Australia found that the top five most expected instructional services were clear statements of learning expectations, helpful feedback from teachers, clear requirements for assessment, a variety of communication opportunities with

teachers (e.g., email, online chat, face-to-face, etc.), and timely feedback from teachers (Choy, McNickle, & Clayton, 2002).

In addition to content assistance, online learners are likely to expect that instructors and support staff will be empathic to student needs and concerns (Cooper et al., 1998). Such concerns may include technical assistance, academic services, reference support, and perhaps even relational support. For example, the first-time online student requires clear directions as how to access the virtual classroom and engage in the practice of online learning. They need to know which books and resources are required for their courses, preferably well before the course begins, and what procedures to follow to purchase such materials. Accordingly, online learners may expect earlier access to the syllabus, reading list, and assignment descriptions than their campus counterparts as well as a more overt awareness of the course structure, pacing of content, and timetable of assignments (Moallem, 2003).

Communication and interaction with online instructors and fellow distance learners is another area of expectations to manage (Brace-Govan & Clulow, 2000). Because the instructor and learners do not regularly meet in the same physical location nor are they usually online at the same time, learners may infer that the online environment will provide minimal opportunity for interpersonal communication. For some this may be a relief and the primary reason that they pursued online education. For others, this may increase anxiety because they believe that they will have less social contact with “real” people during their coursework. However, such assumptions are not necessarily correct. Although some online courses follow a more independent study model, many courses are designed around threaded asynchronous forums with the intent of developing highly interactive online learning communities (McCracken, 2003). Accordingly, such variance raises numerous questions which must be addressed to set and clarify student expectations. Exactly how will communication take place between the instructor and the students, or among the students themselves? Will such discussions take place on threaded discussion boards, synchronous chat sessions, or via email? Are there opportunities for one-on-one dialog or is everything conducted in an open forum? If a student has a question or has a comment, where should he or she address it? How much discussion is considered too little or too much?

In addition to these logistical issues, expectations of timeliness become important. The near instantaneous delivery of email has conditioned people to expect almost immediate responses to any inquiry. Hence, many students expect that because the instructor is only a mouse-click away, there should be immediate feedback and response to one’s questions (Perreault, Waldman, Alexander, & Zhao, 2002). Regardless of whether such an expectation is reasonable, without addressing this assumption and setting clear expectations regarding communication and response time (for both instructor and learner), the educational experience will be diminished.

The online learner will also approach online education with expectations concerning institutional support and responsiveness. Because most online learners have had campus-based experiences as well, they’re likely to enter online learning expecting similar accessibility to facility, library, and technical support. However, since the students have access to their online courses at all hours of the day, then it would follow that they’re going to desire 24/7 institutional support services such as technology helpdesks and library resources (Baker, Schihl, & Aggarwal, 2003). Addressing such expectations requires significant attention to the student support policies and resources.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

A critical aspect of addressing expectations is not merely to consider areas where the student may have expectations, but also to find gaps which often exist between these expectations and what the institution perceives as active and reasonable expectations (Cooper et al., 1998). Unless these gaps are recognized and identified, the service provider may not effectively address the customers’ concerns. In a research study Pitt and Jeantrout (as cited in Cooper et al.) found that giving attention to expectation management results in customer satisfaction being higher, achieving a larger market share, and building a better understanding of the customers’ expectations. Satisfaction is the state resulting from a customer feeling that his or her needs and expectations have been met (Steyn & Schulze, 2003). Cooper et al. also observed that in order to adequately meet expectations, the goal should not be merely to meet such expectations but to exceed them to the point of surprising and delighting one’s customers.

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