

Chapter VI

Comparative Analyses of Online and Traditional Undergraduate Business Law Classes: How Effective is E-Pedagogy?

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ABSTRACT

E-learning and e-pedagogy continues to grow in importance in the delivery of higher education, due in part to the cost of higher education, a changing student profile, scarcity of traditional classroom space, and the recognition that distance learning has created a genuinely new paradigm of instruction. To respond to the changing student demographics, working adults, students in the military and residents of rural communities as well as of other countries, more and more universities are including online (internet-based) course offerings to their core offerings. As they do, the question arises whether online instruction is, or can be, as effective as classroom instruction. Investigating the question has been the focus of several studies. Our studies compared students enrolled in both online and traditional classroom versions of one business law course where all elements were the same except for the instruction format. The first study found no significant difference between the two formats with regard to student satisfaction and student learning, supporting earlier comparisons of online and traditional instruction modes. However, the second study did find statistically significant differences between the online and the traditional course formats with regard to student satisfaction with the instructor, and student satisfaction with the course structure.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Morris University (RMU) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has continued to develop and offer an increasing number of online course offerings to meet the needs of its traditional student base, working adults, as well as those of a growing number of international and off-campus students. Since its first online offerings in 1999, RMU has added 246 new online and partially online courses. In academic year 2006-07, there were 145 totally online courses university-wide. Of these, fourteen were offered in the School of Business. In that year, there were an additional 136 courses partially online, forty-three of which were in the School of Business. As the University expands its offerings and more and more instructors and students become involved in online education, ensuring instructional quality and learning effectiveness assumes a central role in course planning.

RMU is a private university with an enrollment of approximately 5000 students. Founded in 1921, the university has experienced rapid growth in the last two decades. It supports six schools with the School of Business being the largest. A large number of undergraduate and graduate course offerings in this school have had online course development as a focus for several years. A number of the courses are available to the students in both the traditional and the online formats. For the past three years, *Legal Environment of Business* (BLAW 1050) has been a popular course in both formats.

Overview of Legal Environment of Business (BLAW 1050)

The course is designed to enable students to develop an understanding of the American legal system and to attain a working knowledge of ethics, contract law and consumer protection to a degree sufficient to be useful in business and consumer transactions. The course also helps students to better comprehend the rules

of conduct they can reasonably expect others to follow, as well as the conduct others may expect from them in various business situations. In this course, students acquire an awareness of their legal rights and responsibilities and gain the ability to apply legal principles to help solve business and consumer problems.

Online vs. Traditional Instructional Issues

In any discussion of online and traditional course delivery and development, some obvious and fundamental differences will be acknowledged by instructors. In general, the traditional course is taught in a structured classroom, the students are physically there, all instruction is in real time and the instructor is present for the class meetings. In the online format, the class is taught in a cybernetic environment, instruction does not have to be in real time, the students are not present in one place, and the instructor monitors most of the activity from a distance.

In defining distance education, Desmond Keegan (1996) identified six significant elements of online learning. These were: the separation of the teacher from the student; placement with an educational organization; use of technology to convey content and unite instructor with the learner; two-way communication that facilitates student-initiated conversation; potential for face to face meetings for social as well as instructional purposes; and participation in an "industrialized form of education" (Keegan, 1996, p. 44).

The fundamental differences between online and traditional instruction pose some major challenges and concerns for course instructors and educational institutions. Chief among these is student learning and perhaps to a lesser degree, student satisfaction as it affects learning in an online environment. Online teaching, or e-pedagogy, forces the instructor to assume a new teaching role and necessitates a reappraisal of the traditional teacher-student relationship.

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