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Chapter III

Assessing the Relationship between Learner Satisfaction and Faculty Participation in Online Course Discussions

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Abstract

Faculty-student interaction in online courses heightens student satisfaction and success. Capella University studied the relationship between learner satisfaction with faculty (as reported in end-of-course evaluations) and faculty participation in online courses (as measured by monitoring faculty interaction). Learners appear to be more responsive in courses led by instructors who seem committed to learner success and dedicated to improving learner engagement with the subject matter and other learners. Some instructor behaviors, including certain messages and

feedback on assignments, improved overall learner satisfaction. However, these faculty behaviors did not improve other learner perceptions, such as increased professional value. Instructor-learner interaction with respect to projects and course content may be more important to learner satisfaction and realization of professional value than other kinds of faculty-student interaction.

Introduction

Most online courses are highly dependent upon frequent interaction—often in the form of threaded discussions between students and faculty. Research suggests that faculty interaction with students in an online course is an indicator of student satisfaction and success, as well as a means to overcome the inherent sense of isolation that can characterize online learning and teaching. Therefore, online courses are developed to emphasize recurrent interaction between faculty and students and between students in an attempt to emulate the dialogue that occurs in a conventional classroom. However, our ability to assess the value of these discussions to student learning (both perceived and actual) has been problematic.

This chapter provides a case study of Capella University's attempt to understand the relationship between learners' self-reported satisfaction levels and actual measurements of faculty participation in online courses. This study addressed several issues crucial to online assessment, including the development of standards and methods for measuring both the quantity and quality of faculty-to-learner interaction in online courses, the obstacles to effective measurement of faculty-to-learner interaction, and the application of the results of online measurement to ongoing faculty development and to setting performance expectations for faculty. The results of Capella's investigation promise to shed light on the qualitative measures of online interaction, furthering that literature and complementing the larger literature on quantitative measures.

The chapter begins with a discussion of some of the relevant literature on interaction within online courses and explains how the theoretical framework of this literature has influenced Capella University's online course development model and faculty expectations. The chapter then discusses two aspects of an attempt to understand learner satisfaction with online interaction: Capella's Faculty Development Feedback System (FDFS) and an internal Capella study on the relationship between the faculty feedback and learner satisfaction (as measured by course evaluations). The chapter concludes with an analysis of the assessment project, a description of actions taken as a result of the research, and a summary of implications for further research, institutional practice, and instructional design.

Founded in 1993, Capella University presently enrolls over 12,900 adult learners and offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees as well as certificate programs in five schools: Business & Technology, Education, Human Services, Undergraduate Studies and Psychology. In 1997, Capella was accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Since 2000, the