Chapter 92

Lessons From the Other Side of the Computer:
Student Perceptions of Effective Online Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Online teaching and learning have quickly become the next hot trend in education, as colleges and universities look to utilize the convenience and applicability of utilizing online platforms as a complement and supplement to traditional face-to-face instruction. Research is beginning to examine the effectiveness of online delivery, both from pedagogical and assessment perspectives. Work has supported some of the best practices which serve as a critical guide to those designing and teaching online or hybrid classes. What has been under-researched is the user side: primarily the student perceptions of what makes online instruction effective for their own learning. This chapter explores the current research and combines student vignettes to explore the learner perceptions of the qualities and effectiveness of online instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The art of teaching has evolved considerably over the last several decades as No Child Left Behind and the Accountability and Standards movements have necessitated modifications in teaching strategies to address the diverse learning needs in todays classrooms. Fundamentally, teaching still involves the transmission of content to a group of students. What has changed the most, is the various strategies which teachers employ to reach the greatest gains in learning. The advent of the Digital Age has led to an unprecedented onslaught of information. We have computers at our fingertips and smartphones which

can perform a multitude of tasks and access to any type of information as the touch of the screen. This wealth of information offers a challenge to teachers as they must recognize that access to knowledge is no longer a concern, however support for how to utilize and analyze this information has become an issue. Thus, the role of the teacher has truly shifted from the "sage on the stage" to a facilitator who directs learners. The role of the facilitator is to create the activities and learning strategies which support the use of information (Adcock, 2008). In addition, teachers are now able to focus on the more advanced Blooms Taxonomic levels of learning which focus on analysis, evaluation and creation of knowledge (Hopson, Simms, & Knezek, 2001) This shift is significant and a glance at any classroom will demonstrate how much the profession has changed.

Teaching in the K-12 classroom environment is still significantly limited by content standards which can limit the creative practices of a teacher as the need to cover material is critical to demonstrate student growth. The last few decades have seen some new pedagogical changes as the advent of technology has offered a valuable resource to support learning. Predictions from educational scholars claimed that the use of computers in the classroom would extend communication, provide immediate access to data, and even create new forms of expression (Halverson & Smith, 2009). Skeptics such as Larry Cuban have documented that, in fact, very few fundamental changes, in terms of instructional practices, have occurred over the past several decades (Cuban & Jandric, 2015). Cuban explains that

The swift access and use of mobile devices in the US and developed world have not yet been matched by changes in how schools are organized, how teaching usually occurs and gains in student achievement – expectations raised by the new technologies applied to schools. A large gap continues to exist between the daily whirl of information and communication devices outside the school and what teachers do with students inside their classrooms (Cuban & Jandric, 2015, p. 430).

While Cuban argues that teaching has not been transformed by the use of technology, certainly he and others recognize that technology has yielded considerable positive benefits in our public schools. One major advantage of technology has been a change in the ability to promote various differentiation strategies for teachers. Computer use has allowed teachers to develop multifaceted, multilayers lessons which can reach a wide range of student ability and learning styles. This alone has the potential to transform the current classroom and support students by meeting them at their own educational level.

Although teaching in K-12 schools may not have reached a transformational level yet, scholars have suggested that much of the innovative uses of technology have occurred at the collegiate level where freedom in instructional strategies is more welcomed. College and universities are not limited by state standards or mandates in the way that K-12 teacher may be held back in using innovative strategies. The climate in higher education is also changing as the cost of schooling is escalating and finding ways to demonstrate the value added for college learning has been demanded. Colleges are also seeking ways to be more cost effective and flexible, as the cost of education is continuing to limit equitable access to higher education. One strategy has been the development of hybrid and online courses which can be more cost effective as well as reach the diverse needs of our students. The massive growth of online learning in higher education has many advantages, but maintaining relevant, meaningful, and innovative instructional practices in an online environment does not come without challenges.

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