

Chapter 21

Distance Learning Courses: A Survey of Activities and Assignments

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on current literature and a survey of online students and instructors from online institutions, the researchers explored the different types of assignments and assessments required for completion of online courses, the Learning Management Systems utilized, and differences between undergraduate and graduate tasks assigned, according to field of study. While there is a significant amount of available research on instructional efficacy in online classes, there are few studies that account for the types of course activities students must complete in distance learning courses. This study details the variety of online assessments and activities assigned to students attending institutions of higher education that are either fully online or utilizing a blended learning format. Recommendations are made for diverse instructional tasks, which can be assigned based on available technology and curricular flexibility. Key terms used in the study are defined at the end of this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Effective learning activities are critical for relevant, scholarly knowledge acquisition. Online instructors are challenged to implement meaningful course activities to help students acquire new skills and demonstrate mastery of course content. Many instructors have flexibility in creating unique course

activities for each course, while others adopt a generic syllabus with prescribed activities students must complete to successfully pass the class.

This study details the different types of course activities students must complete in a diverse sampling of online courses. Researchers also investigated the types of assessments students were required to fulfill. Data were tabulated to indicate the different learning management systems (LMS) utilized by survey participants, the format in which

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courses were offered, semester length, as well as the indicated frequency and enjoyment level of assigned activities for instructors and students.

There is little research available that describes the types of course activities and assessments desired in distance learning courses. This study fills this void by including the findings from a survey of students enrolled in online classes and instructors of online courses about the types of course activities and assessments assigned. Recommendations are made for instructors and curriculum decision-makers hoping to adopt diverse instructional activities.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. What is the typical format and length for an online course? – This question was included to determine if study participants engaged in online or blended course formats; if participants were undergraduate students, graduate students, or instructors, and the duration of the online course.
2. What types of activities and assessments are assigned in online courses?
3. How do participants rate enjoyment of assigned activities?
4. How do assignments and assessment vary between fields of study and level of students?
5. How does the type of Learning Management System (LMS) utilized affect what types of assignments and assessments are used?
6. How does the type of Learning Management System (LMS) utilized affect how students perceive course activities?

BACKGROUND

In an online course, students may be assigned a variety of learning tasks to assess course content

knowledge. For example, papers, multimedia presentations, research, journaling, group activities, course discussions, class readings, and examinations may be required (Oliver, n.d.; Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008). Wild and Quinn (1997) indicated that learning activities in the online environment are fundamentally linked with learning outcomes. Course assignments determine the ways students engage with course content and construct knowledge.

Liao (2006) suggested course assignments be designed to build upon prior knowledge; engage students with real-world issues; and allow student choice in how to approach instructional tasks within the education academic discipline. Online instructors should assign course activities that facilitate deep processing and promote meaningful contextual learning (Ally, 2004). Duffy and Cunningham (1996, as cited in Lombardi, 2007) noted since course activities provide a context for learners to encounter content and information presented in the course readings:

Instructors [who] provide engaging activities supported by the proper scaffolding can help students develop expertise across all four domains of learning: Cognitive capacity to think, solve problems, and create; Affective capacity to value, appreciate, and care; Psychomotor capacity to move, perceive, and apply physical skills; [and] Conative capacity to act, decide, and commit... Higher education has focused for too long on inculcating and assessing those cognitive skills that are relatively easy to acquire—remembering, understanding, and applying—rather than the arguably more important skills of analyzing, evaluating, and creating. (pp. 8-9)

Teaching in the online environment requires different pedagogical approaches than the traditional classroom (Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008). Kochtanek and Hein (2000) noted that professors in distance learning courses must act “as facilitators...providing students with opportunities to

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