Chapter 16
Avoiding Isolation through Collaborative Learning and Lecture Videos

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To examine the impacts of collaborative learning and video lectures, 94 students enrolled in online- graduate research and statistics classes completed a survey rating the impacts of course instructional methods and learning style preferences. Students' comments suggested that the instructional methods brought the classroom to the online learner for many students, yet did not reveal a most preferred learning option.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

When institutions first offered online courses, the paramount research question was whether online courses were as effective as onsite courses. Because the question of equal effectiveness has not been entirely resolved, the exponential growth in online course offerings suggests that online courses are permanent fixtures in higher education and, therefore, necessitates a shifting of the research focus from equality with onsite courses to improvement of online courses. Students' individual differences impact their learning experience. Learning theorists have long advocated the use of multiple modes of instruction to appeal to the diverse learning styles of students; however, many online courses offer only text-based instruction. Reading the textbook, instructor notes, and emails might not meet the learning needs of all students. How can online instructors help students avoid the isolation of online learning and best meet their learning needs?

The research reported in this chapter was conducted in the College of Education (COE) at a metropolitan university in the Southern United States. The university was founded in 1927 as a

junior college and has grown to 11,000 students and 500 full-time faculty members. The university serves a diverse student body of 65.4% Caucasian-American students, 26.5% African American, 3.7% Asian American, 2% Hispanic American, and 2.4% other. As a metropolitan institution, the majority of students are non-traditional (older, employed, and often married) and 18.6% of students are enrolled in graduate programs. The COE is comprised of three departments--Teacher Education, Educational Leadership and Counseling, and Adult and Rehabilitation Education and three centers including the Center for Applied Studies in Education, the Center for Advance Placement and Gifted Education, and the Center for Literacy. The COE prepares school personnel through Bachelor's, Master's, Specialist, and Doctoral degrees in education.

To accommodate students' nontraditional schedules, many COE classes are offered during the evening hours, on weekends, and online. The COE offers three online degree programs and offers 64 online courses from which students from all degree programs may enroll. All courses, both online and onsite, are provided an online-course shell in the University's course management system and onsite instructors often enhance their traditional courses through utilizing various course shell features. Supports are available for the incorporation of technology in all aspects of teaching and learning. The COE is housed a building with numerous smart classrooms, two student computer labs, and the Scholarly Technology and Resources (STAR) office that offers frequent workshops on teaching online and individual tutoring for faculty. Faculty and students are given support for teaching and learning with the institution's course management system. The university provides opportunities for training and professional development, instructional design and course development services, multimedia production, course shell administration and support, and technical support for faculty and students.

SETTING THE STAGE

Online Instruction

Distance learning has experienced phenomenal growth with the advent of online learning. In 2004, online course enrollment reached 2.35 million exceeding even the predictions of the Center for Education Statistics more than ten times over (Allen & Seaman, 2005). The flexibility of both time and place allows a broader population to participate in higher education, especially adult learners. Institutions of higher education are now offering more online courses than ever before, especially graduate courses. According to Allen and Seaman (2005), "Sixty-five percent of schools offering graduate face-to-face courses also offer graduate courses online. Among all schools offering face-to-face Master's degree programs, 44% also offer Master's programs online" (p. 1).

Despite the popularity of online courses, there are still concerns that students, professors, and institutions must address. Online students might experience greater insecurities in their learning, feel less connected with the instructor, miss on-campus academic support, and feel isolated (Galusha, 2008). Both students and instructors find their traditional roles and responsibilities shifting as online learning becomes more learner-centered with instructors facilitating learning more so than transferring knowledge. Such changes are necessary if educators are to maximize the potential for online learning, educators should examine pedagogical assumptions and "create a pedagogical model or models that enable educators to capitalize on the potentials afforded by online learning technologies" (Norton & Hathaway, 2008, p. 476). Too often instructors design online courses to mimic traditional courses, in doing so instructors assume that traditional classroom instructional methods are the most effective and are worthy of replication in the online environment. However, not all traditional classroom instructional strategies are effective for all students in all

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