International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Volume 9 | Number 2 Article 2

July 2015

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Recommended Citation
Tichavsky, Lisa P.; Hunt, Andrea N.; Driscoll, Adam; and Jicha, Karl (2015) ""It's Just Nice Having a Real Teacher": Student Perceptions of Online versus Face-to-Face Instruction," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 2.
Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2015.090202

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Abstract
With recent increases in online enrollment, undergraduate students are far more likely to experience an online learning environment than they were in the past. While existing literature provides general insight into reasons why students may or may not prefer online instruction, it is unclear whether these preferences are shaped by student’s perceptions of online learning or actual experience with online courses. To address this gap, undergraduate students enrolled in either online (n=370) or face-to-face (n=360) courses were surveyed about their course format preference. A content analysis of the responses was performed with the findings suggesting that 1) student perceptions may be based on old typologies of distance education akin to correspondence courses, regardless of actual experience with online courses, and 2) course preferences are related to issues involving teaching presence and self-regulated learning. The implications of this research for developing more effective online pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords
Online Teaching and Learning, Community of Inquiry, Teaching Presence, Social Presence, Student Perceptions, Student Preferences

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Cover Page Footnote
The authors wish to thank Maxine Atkinson and Barbi Honeycutt for their valuable feedback on an earlier version of this paper. We also wish to express our gratitude for the advice received from the anonymous reviewers.

"It's Just Nice Having a Real Teacher": Student Perceptions of Online versus Face-to-Face Instruction

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(Received 18 November 2015; accepted 21 May 2015)

With recent increases in online enrollment, undergraduate students are far more likely to experience an online learning environment than they were in the past. While existing literature provides general insight into reasons why students may or may not prefer online instruction, it is unclear whether these preferences are shaped by student's perceptions of online learning or actual experience with online courses. To address this gap, undergraduate students enrolled in either online (n=370) or face-to-face (n=360) courses were surveyed about their course format preference. A content analysis of the responses was performed with the findings suggesting that 1) student perceptions may be based on old typologies of distance education akin to correspondence courses, regardless of actual experience with online courses, and 2) course preferences are related to issues involving teaching presence and self-regulated learning. The implications of this research for developing more effective online pedagogy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over two-thirds of the chief academic leaders surveyed by the Sloan Consortium reported that online learning is critical to their institution's long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2014). With technological advances making online courses easier to implement and the cost savings which make them so attractive to campus administrators, it is not surprising that the number of institutions that offer online courses and the amount of such courses that they offer has been growing. Rising interest in online courses is also reflected by the fact that 32% of all enrolled students had taken at least one online course in 2011, up from 9.6% in 2002, and overall, an estimated 6.7 million students had taken an online course during their academic career (Allen & Seaman, 2014)

Despite increasing online enrollments, students are still reported to prefer face-to-face courses (Delaney, Johnson, Johnson, & Treslan, 2010; Diebel & Gow, 2009). Whether this preference stems from actual experience with online courses or from perceptions of what online learning entails is unclear as these studies usually focus on students currently taking an online course (e.g., Kim, Liu, & Bonk, 2005; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). This excludes the perceptions and opinions of a large segment of the student population who have never taken an online class.

This study adds to the existing literature by first examining the motivations behind student preferences for face-to-face or online courses (N=730) through a content analysis of the explanations offered for course-type preference. The reasons offered in the existing literature are not defined well enough to offer any specific explanations. For example, many students indicate that they prefer face-to-face courses because of the interaction (Diebel & Gow, 2009), but online courses also offer interaction through threaded discussion forums, chat rooms, blogs, wikis, and email communication with the instructor. Such general explanations are useful, but offer little in the way of tangible avenues for developing online pedagogy. Next, differences in perceptions of online learning between students with and without experience with an online course are examined in order to determine whether preferences are based on stereotypes and assumptions of online classes, or influenced by actual experience. Finally, a discussion of these findings is grounded within a Community of Inquiry framework with suggestions offered that may be used to inform pedagogical practices to create a more interactive online learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current Trends in Online Education

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in the United States, 17.6 million people were enrolled in an institution of higher education in the fall of 2011 (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). With college enrollment projected to increase, many institutions are looking for alternative ways to meet student demands. One possibility, as evidenced by recent reports on increasing enrollments, is to offer more online courses. Enrollment in online courses is not constrained by physical space, can accommodate the schedules of most students, and is a growing alternative for on-campus students (Daymont, Blau, & Campbell, 2011). The balance between self-pacing/self-direction and collaborative learning is one of the primary reasons that campus-based higher education institutions are adopting online education (Garrison, 2009). Further, most research suggests that when online courses are designed and taught according to strong pedagogical principles, students in online classes perform as well, and are equally satisfied with the method of instruction, as students in face-to-face classes (Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky & Thompson, 2012; Young 2006).

Student Preferences and the Learning Environment

Interaction is at the heart of most effective learning environments regardless of delivery format, and interaction tends to aid student motivation (Baker, 2010; Paechter & Maier, 2010). This is why researchers have stressed that the physical separation of the instructor and student in online classes should not compromise consistent and purposeful communication (Garrison, 1989; Garrison & Shale, 1990). However, online classes present unique challenges for effective communication since we cannot replicate the interaction that occurs in many traditional classrooms. Computers represent a very different approach to the teacher-student educational transaction (Garrison, 1989), and can increase misunderstandings (Moore,

1973).

Because students are physically separated from the instructor in an online class, communication and timely responses become increasingly important for students and therefore this physical separation also affects student perceptions of the online learning environment (Delaney et al., 2010). Further, Baker (2010) found a statically significant positive relationship with immediacy and teaching presence such that when an instructor establishes clear patterns of communication, students perceive them as having a teaching presence. This in turn affects student motivation.

While it is easy to see the instructor in traditional classes, instructors in online classes must establish a presence. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) proposed a framework in which students and the instructor work together to create a community of inquiry that is reflected in the online environment via cognitive, social, and teaching presence. Of importance to our discussion are the social presence, defined as "the ability of participants …to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (p. 89), and teaching presence which is essentially the design and implementation of the course and course facilitation. In the Community of Inquiry framework, social presence is theoretically a responsibility of teaching presence (e.g. the instructor) and mediates cognitive presence (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010). While the physical separation of instructor and student in online classes may make it more challenging to create social presence, it should not compromise consistent and purposeful communication. Advances in technology can possibly increase communication and the level of peer and instructor interaction (Jones, 2011).

In sum, it is clear that online education continues to grow and is part of the strategic plan at many colleges and universities. While requiring higher levels of self-motivation, online learning offers the advantages of flexibility and convenience for many students. Yet despite these advantages, most students still seem to prefer face-to-face courses. This study examines the explanations students offer for the type of course they prefer and questions whether these preferences are shaped from experience with online classes or are perhaps grounded in perceptions of what online learning would be like. Students' perceptions of online courses, whether based on experience or perceptions, may offer additional pedagogical insight for building effective online learning environments that integrate social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.

METHODS

Data

Survey data were collected in the spring, summer, and fall semesters in 2010 from undergraduate students who self-enrolled in 18 introductory-level sociology courses that fulfilled a general education requirement at a large (average 25,000 undergraduate students per year) southeastern university. Half of these classes (nine) were online courses and the other half were face-to-face courses with class enrollments for both formats ranging from 50 to 80 students per class. The courses were taught by nine instructors, including two of the authors of this paper. Of the nine instructors, four taught online courses, four taught face-to-face courses, and one instructor taught both online and face-to-face courses. The students enrolled in these classes represented a broad range of majors on campus and grade levels. Descriptive demographics of the students who completed the study are presented in Table 1.

Near the end of each semester, students were emailed a link to the online survey along with a detailed letter requesting their voluntary participation in the study. The instructors in both online and face-to-face courses encouraged participation through class announcements and sent follow-up emails to remind students about the survey and to let them know why their participation was important. All the instructors involved in the study delivered the requests for participation and multiple reminders within approximately the same time frame (within a few days of one another). The surveys, which were accessible to students for one month, collected the student's demographic information, general academic information, their satisfaction with their current course and instructor, and their preference in course delivery formats. The response rate among all consenting students was 93% (N=730).

In order to examine the possibility of effects due to selection bias, we employed t-tests to compare group means on the demographic information (i.e., sex, grade level, major, final course grade) of students who responded to the survey (our sample) to the same information of all the students enrolled in the courses included in the study (our population). No statistically significant differences between students who responded to the survey and other students enrolled in the same courses who did not respond to the survey were found. This suggests that selection bias, at least in terms of demographic characteristics, was not a factor.

Measures

Students were asked which type of course they *usually prefer* among the following choices: *Face-to-face* (traditional classroom setting), *Entirely online,* or *Combination* (face-to-face and online instruction). Immediately following the closed-ended question asking about their preference for course type, students were asked *"Please tell us WHY you prefer the type of class (online or face-to-face) you chose above"* in an open-ended question. In order to compare preferences between students with and without experience with online courses, students were also asked an open-ended question about the number of online courses they have taken. In addition, we also collected demographic variables (sex, race, age, marital status, hours worked per week, and the number of children in the household) and academic characteristics (GPA, year in school, the number of credit hours taken that semester) in order to make intergroup comparisons.

Analysis

To assess student perceptions of online learning, a content analysis was conducted of the reasons students gave for preferring face-to-face courses. As suggested by Charmaz (2006) and Esterberg (2002), analysis began with a line-by-line reading of students' explanations for their preference, noting open and in vivo codes in spreadsheet columns next to the explanations. After open coding, a secondary (axial) coding was performed in which coders looked for commonalities and emerging themes. Following the initial coding of the reasons for preferring face-to-face courses, a second researcher reviewed and coded the responses. Few differences were found in the two coding schemes with a computed consensus estimate of interrater reliability of (92%). When there was a difference, the researchers discussed the difference and came to an agreement of the final categorization. The themes that emerged

from the data for preferring face-to-face courses involved motivation, interaction, and familiarity. Ultimately, students described a perceived lack of a teaching presence which is consistent with the basic tenets of the Community of Inquiry framework. Following the content analysis, a separate bivariate comparison of means is used to compare responses of students with and without experience with online courses.

RESULTS

Descriptive and Mean Differences

Table 1 offers a descriptive analysis of the characteristics of the students based on the type of course in which they were enrolled at the time of the survey. Statistically significant differences in the means of the two groups are based on (two-tailed) independent-samples t-tests.

Students enrolled in online courses tended to be slightly (less than two years) older, and more likely to be married, to live off campus, have one or more children residing with them, and spend more hours per week in the paid labor force than students enrolled in the face-to-face classes. However, despite these differences, the majority of students in the study, regardless of the type of course enrolled, were traditional students. Therefore, focusing on the slight increases in non-traditional students (Doyle, 2009) who take online courses may be averting our attention from who is actually taking online classes. In response to the closed-ended question which asked students to select which type of course they preferred, the majority of students (56%) said that they preferred *Face-to-face courses,* followed by a *"Combination of Traditional and Online* (30%), and finally *Entirely Online* (13.6%).

Content Analysis of Preference for Face-to-Face Courses

Three themes emerged in the explanations that students gave for their preference of face-to-face courses: a desire for interaction, concerns about motivation, and the comfort of familiarity.

Interaction. The most dominant theme in student explanations for preferring face-to-face classes (92%) was related to interaction. This is demonstrated in statements concerning general interaction (21%), for example, just stating "I prefer more interaction." Several students (19%) also mentioned peer interaction as being part of the reason they preferred the face-to-face format as illustrated by the following excerpts from students who had never taken an online course:

> • *My delivery method of preference for education is always face to face…to continually learn from the act of interaction with another human being. Learning with a class of people creates energy and a comradery [sic] that cannot be gained in any other format.*
>
> • *Class allows for interpersonal communication with peers, and a place where you can form study groups and contacts for missing class. Online classes only serve to further individualism and causes alienation.*
>
> • *Because you can interact with peers and better understand the material by hearing how your peers perceive the information.*

The lack of interaction was also cited as a reason by several students who had taken at least one online course. Of particular interest is the similarity between this student, who has had multiple online courses, to the views expressed by the students who had never taken an online course.

> *I like when the teacher provokes a thought or question which can lead the class into discussion, even argument, because it makes everyone wonder/think/learn something new. I feel very detached when taking an online class.*

Thus, students with and without experience with online courses seem to view online courses as lacking in interaction.

Instructor interaction (50%) was mentioned more often than other types of interaction. Students were more specific in their reasons for interaction with instructors than they were with peers. For example, students cited immediate instructor feedback (26%),

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics and Mean Comparisons by Type of Course Enrolled

	Traditional (n=360)			Online (n=370)				
	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	
Sex (female= 1)	1	0.49	0.50	1	0.55	0.50	-.064	
Age	26	20.93	2.80	36	22.39	4.63	-1.456	***
Race (white=1)	1	0.22	0.42	1	0.19	0.39	.030	*
Marital Status (single=1)	1	0.97	0.18	1	0.88	0.33	.089	***
Any Kids in HH (yes=1)	1	0.04	0.19	1	0.14	0.34	-.097	***
Hours Worked per Week	50	5.89	9.85	60	14.88	15.97	-8.992	***
Travel Time to School (<15 min=1)	5	0.92	0.81	5	1.77	1.41	-.858	***
Year in School (first-year=1)	4	2.90	1.05	4	3.23	0.89	-.326	**
Grade Point Average ("A"=1)	5	3.20	1.08	7	3.56	1.20	-.357	*
Credit Hours Taken this Semester	25	14.73	2.53	18	10.62	5.04	4.103	***
Hours Spent Online in non-course related Activity	99	14.68	13.82	76	12.77	12.38	1.907	
Time Spent on Network Sites	201	6.08	13.03	50	4.81	6.48	1.271	
Number of DE Courses Taken	10	0.87	1.35	10	2.29	2.52	-1.422	***

***p.<.001, **p.<.01, *p.<.05

forming a personal relationship with their instructor (13%), and better clarity in presenting the material through interaction with students (10%). Further, several students noted that they value the energy and expertise of the instructor and are motivated by their instructor's enthusiasm which we labeled *instructor dynamism*. For example, "…*when the instructor is excited about the topic, even though it might not be of initial interest to me, I find myself becoming more interested in the subject [due] to the instructor's enthusiasm.*" Another student suggested

> *If I can see and hear a professor, what he/she emphasizes, hear the stories/examples/ analogies associated with different concepts I am better able to remember things...if I can see the passion and desire a professor has to teach and pass on information and understanding about a subject, I too am more enthusiastic and ready to learn than if I were to take the exam online. Being in class makes a subject come to life, whereas online, it is just a book or site of facts…*

Some of the comments related to instructor interaction convey the impression that the student viewed online instructors in a passive, almost invisible role, or as a hybrid between human and a computer. The perception of the invisible or absent online instructor is highlighted by one student who said he preferred face-to-face courses because "…*I know the teacher is Human and not some random person"*, and also by another student stating "…*it is eazier [sic] to pay attention and it is just nice to have a* real teacher" (emphasis ours). Another example of this perceived instructor absence was expressed by one student who said "I *prefer to receive the information on a first hand bases* [sic]". Additionally, the lack of an in-person instructor seems to imply the absence of opportunities for interaction outside of the formal class setting. A good example of this is found in this student's statement in which she said, "*I personally would never take and [sic] online course because I am one that likes to go to office hours and learn beyond the class with professors*."

Some students interpreted online courses as requiring that they teach themselves, as these students stated, "*[It is] easier to understand concepts when explained by the teacher rather than applying my own meaning to the readings and notes"* and *"…I find myself having to teach everything to myself…in online classes*." It is clear that these students do not expect to be offered any further clarification or explanations from an online instructor. Other examples of a perceived lack of instructor availability are found in the comment "*Working online also makes me feel like it is more okay to search around for help with a difficult concept"* and *"It is also impossible to ask a question during online instruction".*

Motivation. Motivation was also an important factor in students' preference for face-to-face courses. Overall, 47% of the students refer to some form of motivation in their reason for their preference. About a third of the students indicated a need for extrinsic motivation by constant verbal reminders of upcoming due dates from instructors. Even students who have never taken an online class predicted that they would not be motivated enough to engage in the course or complete the work without attending a physical classroom as demonstrated by the responses of these students who had no online experience: "*While I haven't taken any full online classes, I prefer face-to-face class because of the obligation to attend…I would be afraid that I would lose track of work in an online class…"* or *"...when you meet in a classroom, it becomes really difficult to forget assignment due dates and other important dates because they are usually highlighted. Online courses require constant attention, especially to minor details"*. The quality of work expected in an online course versus a traditional face-to-face course is captured by this student who had never taken an online course:

> *Entirely online is too impersonal and I have a harder time forcing myself to complete the work and to take it seriously… [with traditional] I also feel am more likely to take my assignments seriously because if I will feel guilty if I turn in bad work because I know I will have to face my teacher."*

Students who had taken at least one online course still expressed the need for someone to verbally remind them when things are due, for example "*I tend to not forget deadlines as easily with face-to-face classrooms because the teacher periodically reminds everyone when things are due so I don't forget*" and "*I prefer face-to-face classes because it forces me to learn and complete the work. I have a hard time procrastinating with school work sometimes and distance education makes it that much easier to do so*", or as this student elaborates:

> *This summer when I took my online class sometimes I get caught up with everything that I don't get to read upcoming events/ projects and emails. It is better if I am in class and the teacher goes over the assignment and the criteria vs. receiving a message saying what is due.*

Also related to motivation was students' perceptions of their greater ability to stay focused in face-to-face courses. This was given as an explanation by students with and without experience with online courses, for example *"In a face to face setting I stay focused and absorb more of the material"* or *"I find it easier to stay focused and on top of my assignments when it's a traditional course, rather than online"* and "*Online, I become very unfocused and find other things to*

TABLE 2. Reasons for Preferring Face-to-Face Courses (n=409)

Interaction (Total)†			369	90%
General Interaction	86	21%		
Peer Interaction	77	19%		
Instructor Interaction	206	50%		
Immediate Feedback (104, 26%)				
Personal Feedback (51, 13%)				
Clarity (42, 10%)				
Dynamism/Expertise (9, 2%)				
Motivation (Total)†			187	47%
Due date reminders	143			
Easier to focus	44			
Familiarity (Total)†			124	31%
Easier to learn/ understand	83			
Used to it	21			
DE Confusing, impersonal	20			
Miscellaneous (Total)†			41	10%
Hate Reading (Total)†			27	7%

†Percentage may exceed 100 due to multiple reasons offered by single individuals.

do/distract myself from fully focusing on that class. In a classroom I can focus on the class." Considering two of these students were not enrolled in an online course and reported no online course experience, it is likely that students are assuming what their focus level in an online course would be.

Familiarity. A third theme dealt with familiarity with face-to-face classes and the impression that this made it easier to learn in the face-to-face setting (20%), or just that they preferred what they were used to (5%). A few explained their preference for the face-to-face format based on their perception that online classes were impersonal or confusing (5%) as in the explanation offered by this student who had never taken an online course *"…it is much easier to keep up with work if one is required to go to classes regularly, rather than remember to access about 5 different webpages, all containing many other pages with assignments and syllabuses, etc."* Additionally, this perception may also be rooted in actual experience as expressed by one student who had taken five online courses but still preferred *"…strictly face-to-face classes because I know everything I need is in my notes/book/syllabus, there is nothing hidden online on some website, there isn't an assignment lurking on some vista/wolfware/blackboard type setup"*.

Twenty-seven students specifically expressed their preference for face-to-face delivery format because they disliked reading (7%). This suggests that these students saw face-to-face courses as less reading intensive. This is supported through other comments that did not specifically mention reading, but stated that the instructor in a face-to-face course would tell them what is important. Sometimes this thought was more implicit, as in the case of this student who stated *"Also, through the normal discourse of interaction within a classroom, students are made more aware of what material is most important for their success"*. However, other students expressed this need more explicitly as in the following examples given by students without any online course experience; *"[Online] is harder in my opinion because it is strictly reading and you never really know what is important when a teacher does not say what is important"* or *"Traditional classes are more personal and you are more aware of what is to be expected and how the teacher will grade homework or tests."*

In the same vein, students expressed the need for guidance in what to think. As an example of this type of response, a student who had taken one online course said *"I prefer traditional because it gives me a set time to be thinking about the material and a person in front of directing me about* what to think" (emphasis ours). Within this category, we included students who expressed the need to tailor their study based on the teaching style of the instructor, as one student explained, "*…and I get to know the professor so I can better tailor my responses to suit. So I prefer face-to-face because it allows you to see who you are talking with and gives me a better idea of how to respond based upon the tone of the professor and/or fellow students.*" Students who made comments similar to this nature were included in this category.

Comparison by Experience with Online Courses

In order to determine whether preferences for an online or face-to-face delivery format were based on preconceived perceptions of online courses or perhaps influenced by actual experience with online course they have taken, a separate quantitative analysis was conducted to determine whether having experience with an online course had any effect on student preferences. First, a bivariate analysis of student course preferences and students' experience with online classes is presented in Figure 1.

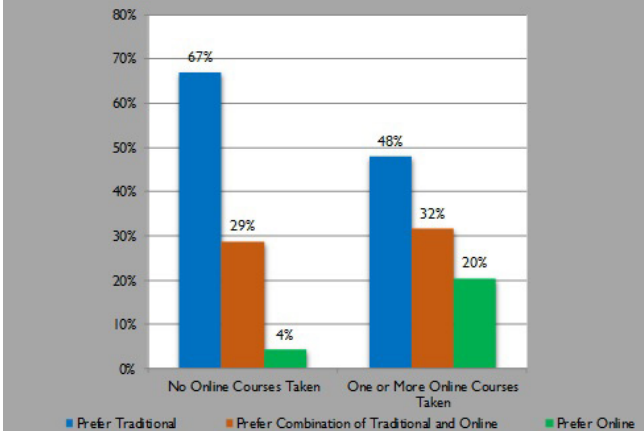
Figure 1 reflects course delivery preferences by experience with online courses. Regardless of experience with online courses, the majority of students preferred face-to-face courses. However, 20% of those who had taken at least one online course preferred online courses, while only 4% of those without online experience said that they preferred an online format. Conversely, 67% of students who had never taken an online course said that they preferred a face-to-face class while 48% of students who have had an online course expressed a preference for face-to-face courses. The possibility was considered that students who had experience with online classes might be mostly "non-traditional" students who prefer online courses for pragmatic reasons. Therefore, a comparison was made between the demographic profiles of the students and their choice of classes. The majority (64% or greater) of students in both preference categories are what most would consider "traditional" students, 18-22 year olds, single, with no children at home, and working less than 20 hours per week, therefore the difference is unlikely to be due to the type of students in each category.

Finally, the reasons students gave for their preference for face-to-face courses were compared between students who had experience with online courses and those who did not. When comparing the categorical means of students with and without experience with online classes, a chi-square analysis revealed that the reasons given for preferring face-to-face courses were largely the same for both groups. The only statistically significant differences are found for the reason categories of "ability to focus", "familiarity", and "interaction". Students who have never taken an online course are more likely to say that they prefer face-to-face classes because of familiarity ($p < .05$) and their perceived ability to focus better in face-to-face classes ($p < .000$). Students who have taken at least one online course are slightly less likely to cite the lack of interaction as a reason they prefer face-to-face classes ($p < .05$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Consistent with existing literature on students' preferences in course delivery formats, the majority of students in this study preferred face-to-face classes to online classes. However, when

FIGURE 1. Course Preferences by Online Experience (n=730)



the specific reasons for their preferences were examined along with actual experience with online courses, interesting patterns emerged. Regardless of whether students had taken an online course or not, they tended to perceive online instruction according to an old typology of distance education as an independent form of study lacking in social interaction with peers and, more notably, with the instructor. This suggests that students do not view online discussion forums as equivalent to in-class interactions. Since students who had never taken an online course held the same perception, there is a possibility that stereotypes of online courses shaped their experience once they took an online course, thus making them less likely to engage with the instructor or course materials.

However, not all face-to-face classes include interactive elements. For example, students in lecture-based courses may have little interaction with the instructor or other students. Conversely, many online courses employ various methods to create an interactive online environment. Thus, being in the physical presence of others might give the illusion of interaction in face-to-face classes which presents a challenge for online learning. It is possible that the interaction to which students are referring involves mostly the physical aspect of human interaction. Electronic interaction, no matter how frequent, may not be filling that aspect of the students' needs for social interaction.

The most robust theme in the reasons given for preferring face-to-face delivery formats is the perceived lack of interaction with an instructor in online courses. This was evident in statements that suggested that students believe they would have to "teach themselves", or that they would prefer a course taught by a "human" or a "real teacher". Students' perceptions of an absent or invisible instructor in online courses are also apparent in their beliefs that online students cannot ask questions in online courses, ask for help, attend office hours (though all instructors in this study offered them), or get to know the instructor personally. On a similar note, the concern expressed by some that online instructors cannot as easily demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject, interject their own personalities into the course, or convey which points are most important for them to know speaks to this same sense of student-instructor disconnect in online courses. Statements suggesting a perceived absence of an instructor in online courses, and preferring to be taught by a "real teacher" or "human" (presumably online courses are taught by the computer), and not wanting to have to teach themselves could indicate a lack of "teaching presence".

Garrison et al.'s (2000) conception of teaching presence focused more on the instructor's role in creating and facilitating a course in a way that would create a social presence among the learners and thus create a cognitive presence that would facilitate learning. Alternatively, Lehman & Conceição's (2010) conception of teaching presence is more of a combination of Garrison et al.'s (2000) teaching and social presence. While they agree that engagement (e.g., facilitation) is one aspect of a teaching presence, Lehman & Conceição's conceptualization places a heavier focus on students and the instructor "being there" and "being together" (p. 3) in a way that makes the technology more transparent – in other words, students and the instructor are aware that they are interacting with, or in the presence of, real people during online courses. It is the lack of this form of teaching presence that encapsulates the bulk of student negativity towards online learning in this study.

Another important point to note is that students tended to view themselves as poor self-motivators, and students who have difficulty self-motivating might not have acquired the skills for self-regulated learning and thus still rely on others to regulate and direct all aspects of their learning experience. Self-regulated learners generally take responsibility for their own learning (Loyens, Magda, & Rikers, 2008) by employing meta-cognitive techniques in which they actively monitor their progress in their learning and the achievement of their goals. They are able to follow assigned tasks, assess their level of comprehension via reflection and attempt to avoid behaviors that would jeopardize their academic success (Abar & Loken, 2010; Boekaerts, 1997; Winne, 1995).

In this study, some students gave more importance to verbal reminders for assignment due dates than to reminders that are posted within the website or emails. This would suggest that email is not as equally valued to verbal communication when it comes to instructor-student interaction. While it is possible that some students' dislike for reading resulted in a negative reaction to email as a form of communication, it could also indicate a reliance on verbal cues to eliminate the need to keep a calendar. Additionally, some students relied on the instructor's lecture to determine what was important to read or study, suggesting they felt as if they lacked the ability to determine importance on their own.

Through interaction with the instructor via the lecture, the instructor's tone and verbal emphasis on certain content signified to students what material they should pay special attention to when studying for exams. Alternatively, students may be using these cues to determine what material they must read and what portions of the text they can skim or skip. In online courses, the absences of such cues from lecture may cause the student to feel that they must read more of the assigned material. This possibility would be consistent with the students who mentioned distaste for reading as one of the reasons they preferred face-to-face-courses.

While getting students to read is a constant battle, we might consider that some students may not be cognitively prepared, or may not have the skills required for self-regulated/self-directed learning. Teaching students to be self-directed learners is an ongoing goal for many educators (Fink, 2013). However, until more students have these skills, online educators might consider structuring courses in ways that teach these skills in addition to course content.

Limitations

Though we had a sizeable sample, this was essentially a case study at a single institution with students enrolled in social science courses that meet a general education requirement. While the students who responded to the survey were demographically similar to all students enrolled in the courses which were included in the study, the potential for selection bias still exists. Introductory-level sociology courses may attract certain students and may differ from other courses in both content and pedagogy, particularly when compared to STEM courses. Additionally, students who responded to the study might differ from non-responders in terms of other non-demographic characteristics that we were unable to measure. For instance, we lacked data on the majors for each individual student and this could potentially influence the selection of face-to-face or online courses depending upon their program's curriculum and the number of online courses offered within it. In addition, we were unable to account for potential selection effects between the

surveyed students and the university student body as few demographic variables were available on the student body for us to use for comparisons. Perceptions of online learning may differ by discipline and type of institution. Therefore, future studies should include multiple disciplines within different institutional contexts, and in a range of international settings, in order to determine whether the same types of student perceptions regarding the lack of interaction in online learning environments are evident. Additionally, we were unable to measure several external factors such as student or instructor personalities and student aptitude (etc.) that might also influence student preferences and this should be considered when interpreting these results. Future studies could advance this research by holding instructor quality constant.

Further, we did not clarify what we meant by the choice of "combination" courses, but this is an important area of research considering that the U.S. Department of Education (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009) reports hybrid or blended courses as effective learning environments. In addition, future research may want to include faculty perceptions of online learning and how this may factor into effective online course design.

Implications for Teaching Practices

The Community of Inquiry framework provides a theoretical model that can inform both research on online learning and the practice of online teaching (Swan et al., 2008). Several excellent sources for integrating and measuring teaching and social presence (see Swan et al., 2008) can be found in existing literature. Jones (2011) suggests that such a presence starts with course development as the instructor communicates content expertise and accessibility through the course design. Arbaugh and Hwang (2006) suggest that consistent patterns of interaction and providing student feedback are also ways to establish a presence. Additionally, Persell (2004) and Stanley and Plaza (2002) describe interactive activities such as focused web-discussions and the creation of student web-pages that demonstrate engagement and reflection as ways of developing a teaching presence.

Additionally, there are several ways that online instructors can extend their teaching presence to include their social presence as well. Google Hangouts and Skype are two examples of programs that are available for free to anyone with an internet connection that provide face-to-face interaction over the internet. Holding office hours on Skype or through a Google Hangout space would be one way to take advantage of this technology and assure students that they are being taught by a "real" instructor. If an instructor has an office on campus, he or she might consider requiring students to meet with them one time near the beginning of the semester, perhaps to get a topic approved, or review the first paper or exam. For non-traditional students who might have difficulty meeting with an instructor in person, the instructor might require at least one meeting via Skype.

Another way instructors might inject their personality and create a presence online is through the use of video recordings. A short YouTube video to welcome students to the course and go over the syllabus might be much more engaging than a PowerPoint. Likewise, an email with a YouTube link for a short 30 second video reminding students about an upcoming paper that is due and the requirements for the paper might be more memorable than a plain text email. Instructors might also consider utilizing programs such as Camtasia® by Techsmith, or MediaSite® by Sonic Foundry, that may be available to them through their institution to record lectures or demonstrations. If no access to a web camera is available, audio files are also an effective way to create a presence (Aragon, 2003).

Instructors in online classes must take extra measures to establish a social presence for themselves and for their students. These efforts not only increase student satisfaction with online courses, but result in increased learning outcomes. Picciano (2002) found that students with higher levels of social presence performed better on written assignments compared to students with lower social presence. Likewise, Hostetter and Busch (2013) suggest that students with higher levels of social presence in discussion posts had statistically significantly higher ratings on written assessment measures. Both of the studies demonstrate that increased social presence gives students a stronger sense of community and is effective for improving student learning.

Conclusion

With the majority of institutions reporting online education as critical to their long-term strategy, it is now more important than ever that we consider ways to help students be successful in online delivery formats as well. Online courses present additional challenges for instructors in conveying a social presence in which students perceive them as "real" people, beyond the facilitation of the course. Additionally, online courses may prove especially challenging for students who do not have the skills for self-regulated learning. If online courses continue to be part of the long-term strategic plan for academic institutions, we need to consider how to teach students the skills they will need to become self-regulated learners. The ultimate goal is to create learning environments in which students are effective learners.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Maxine Atkinson and Barbi Honeycutt for their valuable feedback on an earlier version of this paper. We also wish to express our gratitude for the advice received from the anonymous reviewers.

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