Effective Distance Education: Dual Perspectives

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Abstract

Online education has become the mainstream tool within higher education, yet there are still gaps in understanding what factors effect student satisfaction and success, and why dropout rates remain higher than for traditional pedagogical delivery methods. A phenomenological qualitative study was conducted with six student and six faculty participants using an online survey to answer the question; "What are the perceived antecedents to student satisfaction and success in online learning from the professor and student perspectives?" Analysis of the responses yielded themes describing the participants' perceived antecedents to student satisfaction and success, and identified significant differences between faculty and students perceptions related to course length. Findings also indicated that a critical antecedent to student success and satisfaction remained the support and relationship between student and professor. The research advanced the understanding of factors impacting online learning student outcomes and suggested some future research opportunities to examine the critical student-faculty relationship.

Keywords: Online education, distance learning, pedagogy, qualitative research, phenomenological research.

Effective Distance Education: Dual Perspectives

Online learning, while now a mainstream tool within higher education, has emerged without adequate understanding and study (Beaudoin, Kurtz, & Eden, 2009; Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010). Quoting a 2011 Babson Survey Research Group report, Hoskins (2012) noted that online enrollments comprise almost 1/3 of total higher education course enrollments (p.51) while dropout rates exceed those of traditional face-to-face instruction (Simmons & Simmons, 2012). Within the wide adaptation of online education, there remain many variations in online learning (Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010), and investigation of the pedagogical effectiveness of the various approaches has been limited (Beaudoin et al., 2009). Also, much of the recent research on online education has been professor focused, with more interest in technologies and costs and less inquiry into satisfaction and quality (Beaudoin et al., 2009).

Smart (2006) noted that while distance education does include not only delivery by the Internet, but distribution of firm media such as DVDs, most distance learning is transitioning to online environments. With an interest in understanding antecedents to student success and satisfaction in future online learning, this study therefore focused exclusively on the online learning environment. To advance the understanding of online learning, a phenomenological study was conducted to investigate antecedents to success and satisfaction using input from those engaged in online learning, and was designed to also explore any differences between the student and faculty participants' perceptions. The results reveal some meaningful differences on the relative importance of the antecedents, and suggested further research to understand the differences.

Satisfaction and Success in Distance Education

Investigation into student success and satisfaction in online learning has been limited with most studies being quantitative in nature and only limited work involving qualitative inquiry into participants' perceptions of online learning dynamics (Creswell, 2009; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). Beaudoin et al. (2009) posited that the perceptions of participants in online learning can, in fact, predict outcomes, and Menchaca and Bekele (2008) suggested that qualitative research could offer more depth of insight into success factors. Learning satisfaction and student success are linked, with satisfaction critical to success so investigation of antecedents to both success and student satisfaction were examined jointly (Simmons & Simmons, 2012). With high dropout rates in online learning, motivation appears to be one of the keys to success, yet current online methods are fraught with problems that create isolation, frustration, anxiety, and confusion (Smart & Cappel, 2006). Research has suggested there may be a wide range of factors that affect satisfaction and success, and specific antecedents have varied among prior studies. Factors identified as effecting satisfaction and success included practical elements such as technology, course duration, convenience, and workload (Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010; Smart & Cappel, 2006), and personal and social factors including individual learning style, student personality, social interactions, and self-efficacy (Beaudoin et al., 2009; Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010; Hoskins, 2012; Simmons and Simmons, 2012). Beaudoin et al. (2009) surveyed 318 online learners across four countries and compiled a diverse list of success factors including; content and organization of the material, convenience and flexibility of the course, online interaction, instructor role, technology employed, technical support provided, student self-motivation, ability to manage time, capacity to learn with limited support, general enjoyment in learning, self-confidence, relationship with the professor, self-expression, comfort with lack of structure,

familiarity with technology, and relations with other students with most participants viewing student self-determination as a greater influence than institutional factors. Kupczynski, Mundy, and Jones (2011) noted that past research seemed mostly focused on social components such as the importance of community, connectedness, fulfillment of social needs, and professor interest, and Johnson and Card (2007) identified not only the social connectivity with other students and instructors, but immediacy of those students and professors connections as key motivators for student success. Hoskins (2012) posited that necessary social interaction can be best accomplished through dialogues. In exploring course length as an antecedent to student satisfaction and success, Ferguson and DeFelice (2010) found performance and satisfaction varied with course length with increased success with shorter courses, but higher satisfaction and better connection with the professor when taking a longer course, suggesting course length may be an antecedent. Computer competency levels can also be an influencing factor when delivering instruction online, even for recent generations suggesting that the choice of online or face-to-face delivery may be learner specific (Pena & Yeung, 2010). The various antecedents to success and satisfaction suggested by prior research guided my research design including influencing the interview questions used.

Research Design

The research question that framed this phenomenological study was:

What are the perceived antecedents to student satisfaction and success in online learning from the professor and student perspectives?

Additional sub-questions used to direct the inquiry were:

- What faculty behaviors or efforts effect student satisfaction and success in the online learning environment?

- How do course length or workload effect student satisfaction and success when learning online?

- How do media and technology choices impact online learning success and satisfaction?

- What practices common to online learning could be modified to enhance student satisfaction and success when studying online?

The research design was an online delivered, structured interview of four questions distributed to six online students and six online professors. Participants were drawn from my personal and social media connections, and the sample included students and professors from various universities and disciplines. All participants selected indicated that they liked the online learning concept. The online survey was executed using the Fluidsurveys system, and non-traceable links were distributed to those volunteering to participate. Participants were asked online whether they were answering as a student or professor, and presented with four identical, unlimited length, open-ended questions:

1. What <u>faculty efforts or practices</u> most promote student performance and satisfaction in distance education?

2. What <u>technology or media</u> stimulate student effectiveness and satisfaction?

3. What course duration, tempo, and workload in distance education are the most effective for student performance and satisfaction?

4. What common practice(s) in distance education would you recommend be changed to improve student learning and satisfaction?

Data Analyses

Data was collected by the Fluidsurveys systems exactly as entered by the participants, exported to a spreadsheet, examined for missing responses with none found, and pasted into MAXQDA10 qualitative analysis software for coding. All coding was performed by me, and due to time and budget constraints, independent auditing of the coding or research design was not performed. No translation or transcriptions were necessary due to the collection methodology, and no follow on questions or focus groups were conducted. After reading all responses completely, individual coding of the student and faculty participant responses was performed using open coding with codes and themes allowed to emerge from the analysis

Results

The open coding process resulted in the emergence of the following five themes with one theme, Faculty Support, containing three sub-themes:

- Community: The connection of students with each other and faculty in a collegial environment

- Course load and content: Comments related to appropriateness of duration, tempo, and assignments within online learning.

- Effective interactivity: Responses related to interactive student engagement such as in asynchronous or synchronous dialogues.

- Faculty support: Remarks related to faculty encouragement, support, communication, responsiveness, and relationships.

  o Relationship & encouragement: Faculty connections and emotional support.

    o Support & engagement: The helpfulness and availability of faculty to

     respond to student needs.

    o Communication clarity: The clarity and frequency of faculty-student

     communication including clear expectations setting.

   - Rich content and ease of technology use: Comments on rich media and

    information delivery methods other than text.

    Table 1 illustrates the frequency of codes by theme separated for students and faculty. While the number of mentions or the code frequency was not the sole indicator of significance, it did indicate general interest in the theme and suggested further analysis of the participants' text.

Table 1

Code Frequencies by theme and participant category

Code	Student	Faculty	Combined
Community	3	2	5
Course load and content	7	9	16
Effective interactivity	2	2	4
Faculty support total	13	16	29
- Relationship & Encouragement	4	4	8
- Support & Engagement	8	8	16
- Communication clarity	1	4	5
Rich content and ease of technology use	8	6	14

Faculty Support

    Both students and professors frequently mentioned faculty support as an important antecedent to students' success and satisfaction. Faculty engagement and availability was viewed by most participants as a key to student outcomes and satisfaction, with student participants identifying professor availability and responsiveness as crucial, and faculty participants echoing

that timely responses to student inquiries was one of the most critical determinants. One professor suggested that faculty consider having regular office hours during which they are available via Wimba, Collaborate, or Hangout to answer questions interactively. A student expressed the view, "Interactivity is key in a distance education setting. Dialogue, conference calls, and Skype are mechanisms that aid in creating a sense of connectedness and contribute to performance and satisfaction." A number of faculty participants described that continual contact, timely feedback, and consistent engagement were critical to students' performance and success.

Faculty and students also viewed the practice of encouragement and communication helpful in creating a relationship and in promoting a sense within the student that they are "cared for". Personal, individual responses from professors rather than group communications were also mentioned as practices that can enhance the student-professor connection. While email can be useful for rapid responses, verbal communication was viewed as offering more effective support. One participant even suggested that "communication is the key" to supporting the student. A faculty member described the importance of verbal connections thusly; "On the few occasions when instructors hold conference calls, it seems a greater insight is achieved and more questions are asked. Verbal communication is easier to fully understand given the ability to hear inflection, etc., as opposed to written"

Creating a relationship between the student and professor online was viewed as a challenge. Personalized interactions rather than group messaging were suggested as effective in developing the student-faculty connection, and professors may need to act more proactively than in the face-to-face environment, making an effort such as "encouragement provided by the professor without prompting" as a method to counter the isolated nature of the online environment.

Course Load and Content

Comments related to course load and content primarily addressed course length and workload. Both students and faculty suggested that course length and load should vary based on the subject matter and they should be matched to the course. There was also agreement between faculty and students that the course loads should reflect "Workload that is rigorous yet achievable in the given timeframe", that students should be immersed but not overloaded, with as one faculty participant noted, "Realistic course workloads".

In terms of course length, there was a significant divergence in perspectives between students and faculty. All students who suggested a specific timeframe recommended 12-16 weeks, or a normal or traditional semester. Faculty however consistently recommended shorter courses of 5 to 8 weeks suggesting that shorter courses yield better results in terms of completion. The differences may reflect dissimilar goals with faculty focused on completion rates and students more concerned with relationship establishment or greater time management flexibility.

Rich Content and Ease of Technology Use

Students and faculty both identified delivering information using other than text-based methodologies through richer, robust media as a significant factor in student satisfaction and success. There was a noteworthy disparity between the student and faculty groups in terms of what that meant, perhaps due to awareness of what current technology delivery systems are available. Students suggested more use of PowerPoint, interactive video conferencing, Skype and even audio recorded content delivery, all of which are not particularly leading edge media offerings. Faculty identified far more current media technologies such as YouTube instructions, BlackBoard Collaborate, Google HangOut, Jabber Telepresence, Eluminate and synchronous

interactive environments. While there may be a disparity between the awareness and expectations of the two participant groups, there was broad agreement that text-based information delivery is not as effective as alternative delivery methods.

Community and Effective Interactivity

There were a relatively small number of comments about social aspects such as community and interactivity as necessary antecedents to success and satisfaction. While some commented that community creates peer support and encouragement that can be helpful during difficult or frustrating times, the number of coded comments related to peer interaction relative to the frequency for faculty related interactions suggested that most viewed relationships and connections with faculty as far more significant for success and satisfaction.

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Discussion

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The survey of the diverse student and faculty within this study yielded findings that offered insight into the antecedents to student satisfaction and success. While online learning continues to advance both in terms of proportions of students and delivery media, both students and faculty still identified faculty support and relationships as the most crucial element to student success and satisfaction. In addition to responsiveness of support, students and faculty also identified individual encouragement from faculty as one of the critical needs for students. Surprisingly, participants did not indicate social connections with peers or related dialogues as particularly important for students to succeed and be satisfied. Both participant groups recognized that the integration of more rich media can be helpful in delivering information, even if the groups vary on how technologically advanced that media needs to be. In essence, students and faculty want to use the tools and technologies available, but still seek that human student-professor connection that is rendered more difficult in the online environment. Faculty is still key

to successful connections. That need for connectivity may also partly explain the disparity between students and faculty in terms of recommended course lengths. Faculty participants suggested that shorter courses result in greater completion rates as student attrition is minimized, while students preferred longer courses, perhaps partially because of the time required to establish the student to faculty relationship.

This qualitative research study was subject to researcher bias, as all coding, question development, and response interpretation was performed by a single researcher who is both a current PhD student and an undergraduate faculty member with expected normal biases. Future auditing of the research methods, coding, and results could be helpful in reducing bias. In addition, the specific characteristics and representativeness of the participants is unknown, and the structured online questionnaire data collection method did not yield as substantial data as semi-structure interviews or focus groups would.

Despite the study limitations, the research revealed the continued importance of student-professor relations and suggests that further study into how to create enhanced connectivity, deeper support, and reduce student isolation is warranted to support the ever increasing use of online learning.

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