2005

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Angela Criscoe
Georgia College & State University

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DISTANCE LEARNING OR TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM LEARNING PREFERENCE AMONGST GRADUATE LEVEL COLLEGE STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

Angela Criscoe

Abstract

This research is a case study of distance learning performed at Georgia College & State University in the fall of 2004. In this study a survey was given to 16 students that were currently taking a masters accounting course via the distance learning format. The survey included questions that would help determine if graduate students preferred traditional courses to distance learning courses. The results indicated that students do prefer traditional courses and that there is no significant difference between the learning format preferred between males and females. Further results suggest instructor effectiveness with technology and may warrant to further research in instructor capabilities, knowledge, and professional development of distance learning technology. Also suggested is further research to determine the attitudes towards online courses.

Case Study

Distance learning courses have become useful to educate students in remote locations. This type of environment has allowed students to save time and money used for travel. It also allows universities to save money on salaries for instructors and equipment fees. But is distance education preferred amongst students? Is this style of education effective for students?

In distance learning courses, a teacher conducts class at a local site or school with students present in the same room. A video camera (sometimes several cameras are present), several television monitors, microphones, and speakers are strategically placed at this local site. Generally, a site facilitator helps to operate this equipment, and prior to class beginning, the site facilitator turns on the equipment to test the video conference connection to a remote site where yet another room of cameras, monitors, microphones, speakers, and students participate in the class. Sometimes there is technical difficulty with the connection. A weak connection can cause a glitch in the video or an interruption of audio. On occasion the video conference equipment between both the local and the remote site never make a con-
nection, thus causing the class to cancel and fall behind in the planned curriculum. A study of distance learning students would help to determine the attitudes and preferences of students within distance learning courses.

Technology has become popular in education and many schools have invested in equipment to allow an instructor to teach students in remote locations. Teachers have been expected to change their curriculum to accommodate the style of education, and students are expected to be technically prepared for the experience (Broady-Ortmann, 2002). Distance learning courses, as expected with any technology, have faults that should be considered. Equipment maintenance is a must to ensure communication to all participants is clear and received. Fees for equipment maintenance can become very costly and may need to be evaluated to ensure cost effectiveness (Valentine, 2002). Misuse of technology can also be deemed a problem in distance learning courses. Lack of training for the instructor or the technical facilitator may impede utilization of the technology to the fullest of its capabilities (Valentine, 2002).

Another type of distance learning format is a web-based environment or online course. Teaster and Blieszner (1999) say “the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods: however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separate in space and possibly time” (p. 741) (as cited in Valentine 2002). All communication amongst participants is based solely on the use of chat sessions, discussions, emails, and lesson modules developed within an internet program. This format allows students to work at their own pace to a certain extent. One problem with this format is communication between the students and instructors. Instructors are unable to follow their students’ learning and provide feedback when needed (Tuzun, Yilmaz, 2001). The time delay is another issue when working with groups in different time zones. Romanoff (2003) discovered during a case study involving a collaboration project between schools in Maine and Hawaii that chat sessions and e-mail alone presented obstacles in communication. Furthermore, another issue is that the students must be capable of participating in the class via a computer. Therefore, the students must be computer literate as well as have access to a computer. Merisotis and Phipps (1999) suggest that some students are inexperienced with using technology, particularly education technology (as cited in Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002). Expecting participants to be technologically prepared is not reasonable and might sabotage the learning outcome intended for the course (Broady-Ortmann, 2002).
Attitudes of distance learning course participants have played a major role in the success of distance learning courses. Instructors must be able to envision each lesson from a student's point of view, both from the local site and the remote site. The instructor's preparation must include a method to ensure all participants receive all handouts, tests, and course materials in a timely manner (Valentine, 2002). A study at Arkansas State University determined that 90% of instructors surveyed claimed they needed more time to prepare for distance learning courses (Dickinson, Agnew, and Gorman, 1999). Instructors may also need to consider student concerns, such as, style of learning. Not all students have the ability to learn using different instructional formats and there are some subjects that are harder to teach using distance learning technology (Valentine, 2002). Students should be informed, prior to the beginning of the course, of the technical expectation from the participant. This allows students to “self-select” or decide if they would prefer to learn the particular subject via distance learning or via a traditional classroom setting. Students allowed to “self-select” their distance learning courses perform significantly higher than those that do not have the option to select the learning format (Collins, Pascarella, 2003).

Knowing what students want in terms of an educational delivery method or instructional format, may help to determine where technology in an academic environment needs to develop. Student perceptions and attitudes of distance education compared to traditional courses may help to determine the preferred types of instructional format. A study performed at Arkansas State University compared the attitudes of students participating in distance learning courses. The study concluded that although distance education was attractive to students in remote locations, the preference among the students was to participate in a traditional or conventional style course (Kesselring, Brown, 2000). O’Malley and McGraw (1999) were able to determine that business students at the State University of West Georgia preferred traditional courses to distance learning courses and that the there was a negative perception of the distance learning instructional format. Another study at Morehead State University found that some students were delighted in the interactive abilities of distance education compared to other types of media delivered courses, which were not interactive (Daulton, Barlow, 1996). The various perceptions found in other studies posed a question for Georgia College & State University (GC&SU). Is distance education preferred amongst students? Should GC&SU continue distance learning courses, as defined in this research, at the graduate level?

Distance learning may include various technologies; however,
for this study, two operational definitions have been composed. Distance Learning: A style of learning where the instructor and student are separated by space and communication amongst participants include video and audio transmission. Online Course: A style of learning where the instructor and student are separated by space and time. All communication amongst participants is based solely on the use of chat sessions, discussions, emails, and lesson modules developed within an internet program.

There are many concerns of distance learning, some of which have yet to be mentioned, such as expectations from both the student and instructor who participate in the distance learning course, or the role of the technician within the distance learning course. However, to limit this research, the focus will be on the attitudes of graduate students who participate in the distance learning courses. The purpose of this study is to determine if Georgia College & State University (GC&SU) should continue distance learning courses, as defined in this research, at the graduate level. This determination will be based upon the preference of traditional courses to distance learning courses. Males and females differ towards their attitudes in education; therefore I plan to determine whether males or females at GC&SU favor distance learning courses over traditional courses. H1 – GC&SU graduate students prefer traditional courses over distance learning courses. H2 – More males prefer distance learning courses than females.

Methods & Procedures
Participants

The study was conducted at Georgia College & State University (GC&SU), located in Milledgeville, Georgia, population around 20,000. During the fall of 2004 term, GC&SU had two distance learning courses, with an average of 11 students per distance learning site. Participants of the study included 16 graduate students in the masters accounting (ACCT 6145) distance learning course transmitted to Macon State College in Macon, Georgia. Participants surveyed were those at the Milledgeville, Georgia site (n = 6) and also the students at the Macon, Georgia site (n = 10). Both sites were included in the survey because the instructor rotated his physical presence to each site, thus creating a distance learning environment for each site through-out the term. Of the participants surveyed, 75% were female and 25% male. The median age was 25 and the range was 23 to 45. Thirty-one percent of the participants stated this was their first distance learning course. Nineteen percent had taken an
online course, as defined in this research. Ninety-four percent of the participants were majoring in the Master's of Accounting program at GC&SU. The other 6% were majoring in a Master's of Business Administration program at GC&SU.

Instrumentation

A ten question survey included questions regarding age, gender, major, learning preferences, and attitudes towards distance learning courses. Printed at the top of the survey were the operational definitions of distance learning and online course, instructions, and a confidentiality statement. See appendix.

Procedure

I received verbal permission from Dr. Rodger Holland to survey his graduate students participating in the ACCT 6145 distance learning course on October 18, 2004 at Georgia College & State University. A survey was given to each student as they entered the classroom. Participants were given up to 15 minutes to complete the survey at which then the surveys were collected and appreciation for their cooperation in the study was provided to the participants and Dr. Rodger Holland.

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine if Georgia College & State University should continue distance learning courses, as defined in this research, at the graduate level. This could be determined by identifying the preference of instructional format. A data analysis would reveal if GC&SU graduate students prefer traditional courses over distance learning courses as well as if more males prefer distance learning courses than females. Data was analyzed via a spreadsheet format and percentages were calculated for each item on the survey. All participants (n = 16) responded to the survey. The results showed 75% of GC&SU graduate students prefer traditional courses and 25% prefer online courses. Because all participants, both male and female, agreed they did not prefer distance learning courses to traditional courses, a chi-square test was performed to determine if more males preferred online courses than females. Using Fisher’s exact test (p = .55) it was found that there was no statistical difference between males and females and their preference of online and traditional courses.

Further results in regards to distance learning and the experiences of the participants show that 13% claimed the instructor was effective
with the technology of distance learning; however, 88% claimed that the instructor was “Sometimes” or not effective at all with the technology of the distance learning course. Only 19% agreed that they felt comfortable in a distance learning course. Also, 50% agreed that they were distracted and had difficulty learning in a distance learning course; however, 50% claimed they were willing to take another distance learning course. See table 1.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that graduate students at Georgia College & State University prefer traditional courses and that there is no difference in the preference of learning format between males and females. Distance learning technology, as defined in this study, at GC&SU has progressed from a high demand, cost effective learning design to an undesirable instructional format. This progression has led to fewer classes thus leaving the distance learning technology equipment to be out-dated and requiring regular maintenance and servicing. Limitations to this study may include the technical difficulties experienced throughout the fall term and previous experiences in other distance learning courses. Previous research suggests that due to technical difficulty students prefer traditional courses to distance learning courses.

Equipment problems can result in less time for class meetings and the lack of quality in instructional presentation (Valentine, 2002). Other research has found that instructors are willing to use distance learning technology, however, many times training or professional development is unavailable (Broady-Ortmann, 2002). Also, there seems to be a lack of compensation to the instructor for the additional time required to prepare for the use of technology within a distance learning course (Wantz, Tromski, Mortsof, Yoxtheimer, Brill, Cole, 2003). This information may relate to the 88% of the participants that believe the instructor was “Sometimes” or not at all effective with the technology used in the distance learning course. The sample size (n = 16) can be considered a threat of validity. A larger sample from various universities may provide further information regarding the preferences of course format as well as the preferences between males and females.

Georgia College & State University should consider the time, cost of maintenance, and effective participation of students and instructors in distance learning courses offered. Further research regarding technology capabilities, knowledge, and professional development for instructors may provide answers as to why students at
GC&SU prefer traditional courses to distance learning courses. Also, further research is recommended to determine attitudes towards online courses. As technology evolves, GC&SU may find that moving away from distance learning courses and progressing into online courses will enhance the attitudes of students and instructors towards “distance learning” as a whole.
### Table 1

Survey Results by Percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Item</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email is used in this course</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor seems effective with technology</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable in a distance learning course</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am distracted and have difficulty learning in a distance learning course</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am willing to participate in another distance learning course</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix

SURVEY

Distance Learning: A style of learning where the instructor and student are separated by space. Communication amongst participants includes video and audio transmission between one or more locations.

Online Course: A style of learning where the instructor and student are separated by space and time. All communication amongst participants is based solely on the use of chat sessions, discussions, emails, and lesson modules developed within an internet program, i.e. WebCT.

Please complete the survey below. If you do not want to participate in this study, please return the survey to the researcher.

Please circle your answers or fill in the blanks.

1. This is my first distance learning (as defined at the top of the survey) course.
   YES or NO

2. Is email used as a tool of communication along with this course?
   YES or NO

3. The instructor seems effective in using the distance learning course technology?
   AGREE SOMETIMES DISAGREE

4. I feel comfortable or relaxed in a distance learning course.
   AGREE SOMETIMES DISAGREE

5. I am distracted and have difficulty learning because of the distance learning technologies?
   AGREE SOMETIMES DISAGREE

6. I am willing to participate in another distance learning course.
   AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE

7. Have you ever taken an online course?
   YES or NO

8. Which do you prefer? (Please only circle ONE)
   Distance Learning Courses Online Courses Traditional Courses

9. Male or Female

10. Age ___________________

11. Major ___________________


