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Quality and Satisfaction of Blended-style Education in Economic Courses

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Abstract: There is an assumption that ICT brings a new way of learning and teaching, so it should accompanied by new pedagogies and new approaches and strategies. The idea of blending different learning experiences has been in existence ever since humans started thinking about teaching. What has recently brought this term into the limelight is the infusion of web-based technologies into the learning and teaching process which have created new opportunities for students to interact with their peers, faculty and content, inside and outside of the classroom. And it is necessary to know the level of economic students' satisfaction with online versus traditional courses as well as finding an effective strategy for students' success and retention. Recent studies compared student performance, satisfaction and persistence between online and face-to-face classes course found no significant difference in grades between online and traditional classes; however, students in the online course were significantly less satisfied with the course on several dimensions. Among the most often cited culprits of over reliance on e-Learning in online programs are physical isolation, lack of social support or interaction and high attrition rates. The intent of this study was to examine differences (quality and satisfaction) between online and traditional classroom learning for undergraduate economic courses and to highlight the effectiveness of blended-style education. Specifically, the study explores the difference between three methods of learning (E-learning, face-to-face and blended-style of education) which is measured by final course grades and student satisfaction which is measured by student evaluation of instruction ratings.

Key words: Face-to-Face Education · E-Learning · Blended-Style · Education Effectiveness · Economic Courses

INTRODUCTION

Many universities had implemented learning management systems and got involved in innovative e-learning projects, the jury was still out on whether or not technology was transforming the learning experience or simply enabling existing teaching methods. "The question is to what extent are e-learning and digital technologies anticipating and underpinning innovation in teaching itself?" [1]. Nearly two million college students were enrolled in online courses in fall 2003, a 19% increase from 2002, with significant growth expected to continue [2]. Online delivery of the typical large undergraduate lecture class is considered administratively cost effective [3]. Online education is likely to continue to grow in popularity in the years ahead and both schools and universities are expected to take an especially strong interest in "blended" courses that combine computerized lessons with traditional classroom instruction [4]. And it's necessary to know the level of student satisfaction with online versus traditional courses as well as finding an effective strategy for student success and retention.

Russell, found no significant differences between the effectiveness of distance education and that of face-to-face classes in 355 comparison studies. Distance education, as defined by Russell, includes the delivery of education through a variety of electronic communication forms, including television and the internet [5]. Recent

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studies compared student performance, satisfaction and persistence between online and face-to-face classes. Sands, found no significant difference in grades between online and traditional classes; however, students in the online course were significantly less satisfied with the course on several dimensions [6]. Family and consumer sciences (FCS) educators have joined the discussion and have enumerated the benefits of online instruction [7]. Students enrolled in an online section of an introductory FCS undergraduate consumer economics course scored higher on the achievement posttest than did students enrolled in a traditional classroom setting [8].

Although benefits of e-Learning are many, drawbacks exist if relied upon exclusively. Among the most often cited culprits of over reliance on e-Learning in online programs are physical isolation, lack of social support or interaction and high attrition rates. Franks (2002) asserts that educators of who have tried both the traditional lecture format and a distance education approach become aware that neither method by itself is sufficient for every learner, every instructor and every course [9]. This inadequacy leads to strong possibilities for the effective application of a third option: a blended learning approach, which attempts to integrate the best from both modes. The goal of developing a blended learning strategy is to synthesize the best possible blend of instructional strategies, methods and media.

The intent of this study is to examine differences (quality and satisfaction) between online and traditional classroom learning for undergraduate economic course and to highlight the effectiveness of blended-style education. Specifically, the study explores: Is there a difference between different methods of learning (e-learning, face-to-face and blended-style of education) which is measured by final course grades and also student satisfaction which is measured by student evaluation of instruction ratings?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample of this research were economics students enrolled in a general university during the first semester of 2006 and both semesters of 2007, The number of students enrolled was 98 and 80 and 85, respectively. The course had the same instructor, textbook, lecture slides, quizzes, exams, assignments and grading methodology. The difference was that the 2006 class was delivered in a traditional classroom face-to-face setting and the first semester of 2007 class was delivered online but in the second semester of 2007 students were enrolled in a blended learning style with a similar context to two others style. Students who enrolled in the online class and blended style were required to complete their exams in a traditional classroom setting. Students who withdrew from the courses were excluded from the studies; therefore, the numbers of students included in the analysis were 92 in the 2006 class and 74 and 84 in the 2007 classes.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and t tests with a level of significance of $p < .05$. Final course grades for both the face-to-face and online classes were expressed as percentages. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the analysis of the final grades was .925. The "Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI)" instrument has been used at the university for 20 years. The instrument uses Likert-type scale items designed to measure students' assessment of the instructor's teaching and overall opinion about the course. Students were asked to rate the 16 items from "Excellent" (1) to "Poor" (5). Lower means indicated a more positive assessment of the item. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the instrument was .9018; therefore, the instrument was deemed reliable. The university does not use a separate SEI instrument for online and blended classes; therefore the same instrument was administered in a classroom setting prior to the final exam for three different classes. SEI participation was voluntary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mean final course grade was 75.66 for the face-to-face class and 70.48 for the online class. This difference was not statistically significant, but the mean final course grade for blended learning had an unprecedented increase and reach to 86.90 which had a significant difference with two other methods of learning.

The students' overall evaluation of the instructor was 2.90 out of 4 for the face-to-face class and 3.02 out of 4 for the online class; for the course overall, online class students' mean score was 3.15 versus a mean score of 3.44 from the face-to-face class. The differences of the overall SEI scores were not statistically significant. Notably, only one sub-item in the evaluation of the instructor was considered significant: The extent to which the student learned a great deal from instructor. The mean score was 2.5 for the face-to-face class and 3.05 for the online class. Predictably, students in the online class felt they had not learned a great deal from the instructor

compared to students in the traditional class. A similar research that had been conducted by Hauck, in the School of Fashion Design and Merchandising at Kent State University for assessing of difference between online and traditional learning confirm the above results [10]. Whereas mean score of blended learning was 3.7 out of 4 which had a significant difference with two others methods. Consequently this result indicates more effectiveness of learning in blended-style. In addition blended method has lower drop out rate than two others methods.

The results support the literature that blended learning (combination of online and face-to-face classes) is more effective on student achievement. Although no statistically significant differences in student satisfaction were found on online and traditional style but there was a significant difference between blended learning with two other styles.

CONCLUSION

There are some clear benefits in the use of online courses. Administratively, online instruction may continue to be cost-effective. These courses could be easier to schedule and deliver using graduate students and part-time instructors. From a student satisfaction and success perspective, many students like the convenience, time flexibility and independent learning [7]. On the other hand, there are students who are less satisfied with online classes than the traditional face-to-face learning environment, especially in some introductory courses of undergraduate economic programs. The use of online instruction may not be appropriate for some economic courses [10]. Based on our results perhaps a hybrid format that uses both online and traditional face-to-face delivery methods in introductory courses can create a sense of community, faster relationships and help with student success and retention. Future research and debates should center on the formula of class time reduction based on the nature of the economic course content.

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