Educational Satisfaction in Online Classes

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Abstract

Recent research has continued to demonstrate the rising needs of online course evaluation in terms of student satisfaction. The current study examines variability in online class satisfaction. We predicted that individuals that utilize online classes will not be as satisfied with their education when compared to traditional face to face classes. Thirty-seven participants were recruited by the researchers and included classmates, friends, and family members. Participants completed a mixed-method survey that contained both quantitative and qualitative questions. The quantitative questions assessed for demographic characteristics, number of online classes taken, to identify the institution(s) in which the online class was taken, and overall satisfaction regarding classes completed online. Open-ended questions asked participants to retrospectively and qualitatively describe their thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages of the online class(es) they have taken. It was found that satisfaction varies between individuals since everyone has their own idea of what constitutes satisfaction. Common themes that emerged were that online classes provided students with participation flexibility which allowed students to work conveniently at their own pace without the hassle of commuting to school. Other common themes were that the lack of peer and professor interaction, in addition to procrastination, affected student satisfaction of online course(s) in a negative way.

*Keywords:* online class(es), student satisfaction, education

Educational Satisfaction in Online Classes

With the increase of the number of online courses offered to students in both K-12 education as well as post-secondary education, the question remains, “are online courses equally effective as face-to-face courses?”

One study that analyzed responses from 2,800 colleges and universities found that the number of chief academic leaders that say “online learning is critical to their long-term strategy has increased from less than 50% in 2002 to 69.1% in 2012. Post-secondary online course enrollment increased at a rate of 9.3% in 2013, with 6.7 million students enrolled in at least one online course” (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Current research indicates that there are several factors that contribute to online learning outcomes; however there are conflicting conclusions as to what *exactly* determines student success or lack thereof. One study found some negative experiences with online classes to include technical difficulties, and the feeling of not knowing what to do (regarding coursework), especially if the class is disorganized. The same study found that students particularly liked the participation flexibility associated with online classes, the overall convenience, class expectations, and instructor availability (Mansour & Mupinga, 2007).

Because it is well documented that an array of learning needs and preferences exist, some studies have focused on specific aspects about learners with regard to success, specifically existing competencies. One study found that higher reading comprehension was indicative of probable success in online courses (Deka & McMurray, 2006). While another study concluded that mastery within a subject field along with competitiveness and overall GPA, were not related to satisfaction in online courses (Seiver & Troja, 2014).

Other studies focus on pedagogy. One such study took place over the course of three consecutive terms in 2010 in five sections of a sociology class taught by the same instructor – three online sections and two face-to-face. There were a total of 231 face-to-face students, and 212 online students involved. The instructor, content, due dates and expectations were equivalent between the courses. The results found that with equal inputs (as much as possible) there were “no significant difference in student satisfaction between the two formats.” The study reports that the face to face students performed better, and these differences in student performance on tests may stem from the students’ pre-existing educational competencies. For example, some online students were only allowed to take the online version as a way to prove readiness for reinstatement due to academic deficiencies and failures. (Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, & Thompson, 2012). It is unclear if the aforementioned studies considered “success” and “satisfaction” to be synonymous.

The Babson Survey Research Group states, “An important concern for those advocating online education has been the continued resistance among many faculty members. Results for 2012 show chief academic officers reported a slight decrease in faculty acceptance of online instruction compared to the results reported for 2011.” When their researchers asked academic leaders to respond to the statement: “Faculty at my school accept the value and legitimacy of online education” between Fall 2002 and Fall 2012 the number of respondents that disagree with that statement remains at 12.6 % (Allen & Seaman, 2013)

One issue encountered across research studies was that of specificity. Identifying the specific factors that contribute to success or satisfaction in online courses were not definitively decided and each study suggested further studies should be performed. Additionally, responses from both educators and students were subjective and swayed by personal thoughts and feelings about online vs. face-to-face learning.

It is important to study the issue now in order to identify online class needs and what improvements are appropriate in education overall. The age of technology has rapidly changed, and utilizing technology is a way in which schools can meet the growing demands of students and educators. Providing educators with the necessary tools and resources they need in order to provide quality online education and courses will help students overall. With 86.5 % of colleges offering online courses, the importance of this equation is even applicable to institutions offering higher learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Further research is needed based on current research as it seems that student biases may not be aligned with what the educator deems important in terms of satisfaction with online courses. Student satisfaction can encompass several different aspects of online learning including convenience, flexibility, and the ability to work at your own pace. Sometimes the students are more wrapped up in whether or not the class is easy, rather than the actual quality of knowledge they are gaining. Allowing researchers to study online class educators instead studying student’s opinions of online classes may yield different results in terms of the quality of knowledge being taught. It may be worth while to try to research the educator’s satisfaction of students actually learning. To truly understand the effectiveness of online classes in comparison to face-to-face classes, we need to study and compare online courses that mimic face-to-face class structure in the same content area.

The current study examines variability in online class satisfaction. We predict that individuals that utilize online classes will not be as satisfied with their education when compared with students learning in traditional face to face classes.

**Method**

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited to respond to a survey created by the researchers and contributors included classmates, friends, and family members. There were a total of 37 participants -- seven males and 30 females. All participants were 18 years or older. The study was voluntary and there were no incentives given to participants. The survey took approximately ten minutes to complete.

**Measures**

**Demographic characteristics.** Participants responded to questions about their gender, education, the number of online classes taken, the subject(s) of online classes taken, and what grade(s) they received in the online class.

**Online Class Satisfaction.** In the survey, participants responded to six questions regarding online class satisfaction. The questions were written by the researchers. Participants were asked to answer the questions based on a past reflection of online class participation. Sample items included, “How satisfied were you with your online experience overall,” “How satisfied were you with the quality of knowledge you gained,” and “How satisfied were you with the letter grade you earned.” Response options were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all satisfied” (1) to “extremely satisfied” (5). See Appendix.

**Advantages and Disadvantages.** Participants also responded to two open-ended questions regarding the advantages and disadvantage of taking online classes. The questions were written by the researchers and participants were given one line on which to write in their response.

**Design**

Our instrument design began by collaborating to brainstorm possible survey questions. As a group we considered questions that would solicit responses applicable to our research questions. The instrument was revised several times to allow more freedom in the responses. Specifically we revisited the forced choice questions to allow for greater diversity in participant responses. Data was collected by each of the four researchers each of whom collected 10-15 surveys that were administered in person or via email. As the data was being collected, researchers allowed responders a degree of privacy, but were available to make clarifications if needed. One advantage of the survey was that it was comprehensive, included a mix of opened ended and forced choice questions and participants found it clear and concise. As the researchers were novices, the fact that the instrument included open ended and forced choice questions might be considered a disadvantage as well, since we are not experts at matching appropriate deigns to research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 23).

**Results**

**Online Class Satisfaction Overall.** Participants were asked the question, “How satisfied were you with your online experience overall?” There were 30 female participants. Three female participants were extremely satisfied, 11 were very satisfied, eight were mixed about their online class experience, five were mildly satisfied, and three were not satisfied at all. There were seven male participants. One was extremely satisfied, two were very satisfied, two were mixed about their online class experience, one was mildly satisfied, and one was not satisfied at all. See Table 1.

**Online Class Quality of Knowledge Satisfaction.** Participants were asked the question, “How satisfied were you with the quality of knowledge overall?” There were 30 female participants. Of those, two were extremely satisfied with their online classes, six were very satisfied, 13 were mixed about their online class experience, seven were mildly satisfied, and two were not at all satisfied. Based on our sample of female students, it seems that females tend to have mixed satisfaction about their online course experience. There were also seven male participants. Of those, no male participant was extremely satisfied, two were very satisfied, two were mixed about their online course experience, one was mildly satisfied, and two were not satisfied at all. See Table 2.

**Satisfaction with Overall Organization.** Students were asked the question, “How satisfied were you with the organizational level of the class?” Out of the seven males, one male was extremely satisfied, one was very satisfied, three males were mixed about their satisfaction with the online course organization, one was mildly satisfied, and one was not satisfied at all. Of the 30 women, three were extremely satisfied, nine were very satisfied, six females were mixed about their online satisfaction of the overall organization, 10 were mildly satisfied, and two were not at all satisfied. See Table 3.

**Advantages.** Students were asked to list their opinions on what advantages online courses offer over face to face courses. Several reoccurring themes included convenience, being able to work at their own pace, flexibility of the class, and that there was no commuting to school. As stated by a female participant, “The flexibility of the course and not having to attend class physically helped me because I am an independent learner.” As stated by a male participant, “I did not have to drive to the campus to take class and I was able to work at my own pace on the assignments, which enabled me to learn better.” Students that take online classes value the convenience and flexibility of them which allows them to work at their own pace, in addition to saving time by not having to commute to school.

**Disadvantages.** Students were asked to list their opinions on what disadvantages online courses offer. It was found that lack of peer interaction, procrastination on assignments, and having no rapport/accessibility to professor were common disadvantages among responses. As stated by a female participant, “I had to rely on text-based instructions and receive text-based clarification since the professor and I could not meet in person. The fact that you work at your own pace was easy for me but I had to be very disciplined and make sure I dedicated time to do assignments because it’s so easy to leave everything until the deadline.” As stated by a male participant, “I was not able to develop rapport with the professor or classmates, which made the learning process harder for me.” The lack of human interaction was a common frustration for student participants taking an online class as it forced them to fend for themselves in times when they would normally rely on peer or instructor guidance. When a student seeks clarification from a classmate or professor in a traditional class setting, it normally can be attended to instantly.

In order to further analyze and compare the results, we would have to quantify our responses. We will use the following measures: a score of zero will be given to a response of “not satisfied at all,” a score of one will be given to a response of “mildly satisfied,” a score of 2 will be given to a response of “mixed,” a score of three will be given to a response of “very satisfied,” and a score of 4 will be given to a response of “extremely satisfied.” See figures 1-3.

**Discussion**

A limitation to the study could include the ratio of men to women in our study as we found that there was a much larger sample of women than men. This could have skewed our results and the low number of male responses cannot be generalized. Also, the number of Counseling and Guidance students as participants could be an underlying factor that also influenced our results. Due to the fact that our sample was taken from graduate level students, this could have greatly skewed our results as graduate level students most likely achieved at a higher level in their undergraduate classes.

When comparing the results, the subjects scored more favorable responses with the “overall” satisfaction of the class compared to the satisfaction of the “quality of knowledge” acquired and the “overall organization.” In comparing “quality of knowledge” acquired and the “overall organization” as factors that contribute to the “overall satisfaction” of the class, students scored the latter with more favorable responses. So, we have reason to believe that “overall organization” is an important factor in the “overall satisfaction” of an online class This is supported by Armstrong’s (2011) findings where they did find “organization” as an important factor that influenced student’s perception of online courses, but there were four other findings and satisfaction of “quality of knowledge” acquired was not one of them. The other four were: “(a) the role of communication in shaping perceptions and actions of students, (b) how technology is used, (c) approaches to learning are shaped by student perceptions as are students determination of academic quality, and (d) students use nonacademic resources because of ease and familiarity” (Armstrong, 2011).

One study found that the quality of knowledge is not as important to satisfaction in comparison to the course design (Armstrong, 2011). Our study corroborates this particular finding as several students misinterpret satisfaction with a good grade. The wording of our design may be flawed in that students equate receiving a desirable grade with satisfaction, whereas our original question was meant to focus on satisfaction in quality of knowledge gained.

We looked at the gender of our subjects to try to establish some correlation. We noticed that females responded more favorable in all three areas of focus. This may warrant further analysis to determine causality. For example, a Chi-Square Test is needed to determine if the differences are statistically significant. Also, one must keep in mind that our sample had a 7 to 30 male to female ratio, so further studies need to take into account a more gender-balanced sample.

In summation, it seems that more research is needed to study student satisfaction and effectiveness of online classes. Many of these classes can be utilized for particular students to succeed. With the ever growing popularity of online classes and the increasingly high tech Internet age, it is safe to say that online course will continue to gain popularity and should be regulated accordingly to the needs of the students and educators.

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Appendix

Online Course Satisfaction

Gender: Male Female

Major/Program: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Year: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1) How many online classes have you taken? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

2) Where have you taken online classes? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ When? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3) What subject(s) was it? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4) What level? *Freshmen/Soph/Junior/Senior/Grad* 5) What grade(s) did you earn? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

5) What were the advantages of taking the class(es) online? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

6) What were the disadvantages? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

7) Would you take an online class in the future? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Why/Why Not? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

8) My online learning was valuable. Circle one:

*Strongly Disagree Somewhat disagree Undecided Somewhat Agree Strongly Agree*

9) In comparison to face-to-face classes, how much more effort and time is needed in an online course?

*No time difference Less Time Mixed More Time Very much more time*

10) Which of the following contributed most to your SUCCESSES in the class? Circle all that apply:

*Instructor Subject Classmates Overall Organization Interest Self Other**: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

11) Which of the following contributed most to any DIFFICULTIES in the class? Circle all that apply:

*Instructor Subject Classmates Overall Organization Interest Self Other:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

12) How satisfied were you with your online experience overall?

*Not at all Satisfied Mildly Satisfied Mixed Very Satisfied Extremely Satisfied*

13) How would you rate your level of interest in the topic PRIOR to taking the online class? Circle one:

*Not at all interested Mildly Interested Mixed Very Interested Extremely interested*

14) How would you rate your level of interest AFTER taking the online class?

 *Not at all interested Mildly Interested Mixed Very Interested Extremely interested*

15) Which aspects of the class contributed to how SATISFIED you were with your online learning:

The amount of time spent completing assignments:

*Not at all Satisfied Mildly Satisfied Mixed Very Satisfied Extremely Satisfied*

The letter grade you earned:

*Not at all Satisfied Mildly Satisfied Mixed Very Satisfied Extremely Satisfied*

The QUALITY of knowledge you gained:

*Not at all Satisfied Mildly Satisfied Mixed Very Satisfied Extremely Satisfied*

The organization level of the class:

*Not at all Satisfied Mildly Satisfied Mixed Very Satisfied Extremely Satisfied*

Your prior knowledge about the subject matter:

*Not at all Satisfied Mildly Satisfied Mixed Very Satisfied Extremely Satisfied*

Do you have any other comments/concerns about online classes that you would like to share?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this survey.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Extremely Satisfied | Very Satisfied | Mixed Satisfied | Mild Satisfied | Not at all Satisfied | Total | Average Response |
| Female | 3 | 11 | 8 | 5 | 3 | 30 | 2.37 |
| Male | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 2.29 |
| Both | 4 | 13 | 10 | 6 | 4 | 37 | 2.35 |

Table 1

*Overall Class Satisfaction*

Table 2

*Knowledge Quality*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Extremely Satisfied | Very Satisfied | Mixed Satisfied | Mild Satisfied | Not at all Satisfied | Total | Average Response |
| Female | 2 | 6 | 13 | 7 | 2 | 30 | 1.97 |
| Male | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 1.71 |
| Both | 2 | 8 | 15 | 8 | 4 | 37 | 1.89 |

Table 3

*Overall Organization*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Extremely Satisfied | Very Satisfied | Mixed Satisfied | Mild Satisfied | Not at all Satisfied | Total | Average Response  |
| Female | 3 | 9 | 6 | 10 | 2 | 30 | 2.03 |
| Male | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 2.00 |
| Both | 4 | 10 | 9 | 11 | 3 | 37 | 2.03 |

*Note.* The table represents the number of responses for each category, the average response, and totals.