Recipe for Success: Leveraging Student and Instructor Perceptions of Online Graduate Courses in Course Design

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Abstract

This research study explores perceptions of online courses, especially towards the use of technologies (i.e., Glogster, PBwiki, podcasting, blogs, and other Web 2.0 tools) and communication (i.e., e-mail, Skype, discussion board). The authors compare views between graduate instructors and students in graduate and post-baccalaureate programs. Participants included 257 students and 32 instructors that responded to the online surveys. Both the pros and cons of teaching online graduate courses and useful resources are discussed.

There are numerous research studies which confirm that online courses are just as effective as traditional, face-to-face courses (Lohr, 2009). Even with this knowledge, many people continue to feel that traditional courses are better and more effective than courses taught completely online (Figlio, Rush, & Yin, 2010). Given this disparity, this study sought to examine the perceptions of graduate instructors and students toward online coursework. Unfortunately, research comparing the views of both instructors and students are scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of graduate students and instructors toward online coursework technologies (i.e. wikis, blogs, podcasts, and other Web applications) and communications (i.e., e-mail, instant messaging, video chat, discussion board, etc.) in a College of Education Master's Degree program. Based on results of the study, the authors explored techniques that instructors can employ to overcome the negative perceptions of an online environment and therefore enhance the positive aspects.

Methods

Participants

Graduate instructors and students who attended a south-central Texas university's College of Education graduate and post-baccalaureate programs were chosen to be participants. The various graduate and post-baccalaureate programs available afforded an opportunity to survey students and instructors who have been involved in both online and traditional, face-to-face courses. The total number of participants surveyed was 86 instructors and 1,211 students. A total of 257 students and 32 instructors responded to the survey with a return rate of 21.2% for students and 37.2% for instructors.

Student participants included 47 males (18% of the participants in this category) and 210 females (82% of the participants in this category). There were 68 participants between the ages of 20-27 (26%), 75 between the ages of 28-35 (29%), 52 between the ages of 36-43 (21%), 34 between the ages 44-51 (13%), and 28 were 52 years old or more (11%).

Instructor participants included 10 males (31% of the participants in this category) and 22 females (69% of the participants in this category). There were four instructors between the ages of 28-35 (13%), three between the ages of 36-43 (9%), seven between the ages of 44-51 (22%), and 18 were 52 years old or more (56%).

Instruments

Two anonymous, online surveys created in Google Docs were used to gather the data for the research. The surveys are almost identical except for some statement re-wording to help students or instructors respond and ensure the survey provides clearer responses. Statements and questions in the surveys were created to collect generalizations about all online courses, rather than specific online courses. The only identifiable information gathered was whether the participant was an instructor or student, what department the participant was involved with, gender, and age range. The survey was conducted strictly online within a two week time period, using human subjects' protocol through the IRB process.

Both surveys included 33 items. Of those items, 23 of the statements were 5-level, Likert-style choices. Five of the statements were multiple-choice. Five of the statements had the option of choosing multiple answers.

Definition of Terms

There was terminology that needed to be defined in the surveys for the benefit of participants. *Teacher of record* referred to those who are full time, paid classroom teachers. *Higher education* (2012) referred to college level education. *Self-directed learning* is a process in which students take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes (Knowles, 1984). The role of the instructor is the "guide on the side." *Instructor-directed learning* is a process in which the instructor diagnoses student learning needs, formulates learning goals, identifies resources for learning, selects and implements learning strategies, and evaluates learning outcomes (Lyons, 2004). Technology delivers the content in *expository instruction* (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). *Active learning* occurs when the technology allows students to control digital artifacts to information or address problems when technology mediates human interaction, and learning emerges through interactions with other students and the technology, *Interactive learning* occurs instruction (Means et al., 2010). *Traditional courses* meet face-to-face, typically in a classroom. All participants meet together in the same facility at the same scheduled time each week (Lapsley, Kulik, Moody, & Arbaugh, 2008). *Hybrid courses* are a combination traditional classroom instruction and online instruction (Means et al., 2010).

Results

According to the results of the survey, most of the student respondents' self-perception demonstrated that they considered themselves to be visual and hands-on learners. Combine that with the respondents who self-reported themselves as verbal and visual learners and it is half (50%) of the respondents (Figure 1).
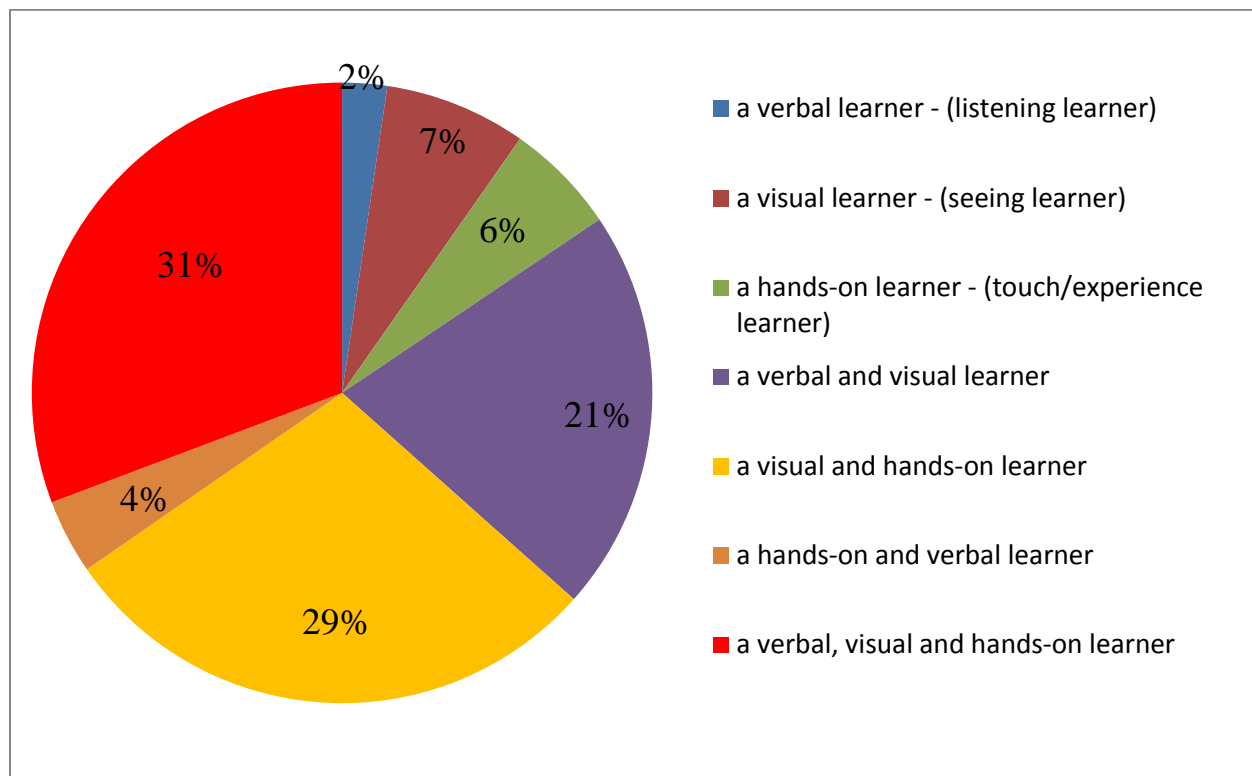
Figure 1. Student learners.

More than half of the students felt they have a medium level of skill with technology; more than half of the students had some experience with various technologies besides email and surfing the web. An overwhelming 96% of students felt they had medium or high technology skills.

Table 1 shows the student responses to statements specifically pertaining to the use of technology.

Table 1
Student's Beliefs Regarding the Use of Technology as a Percentage

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Enhances the Quality of Learning Experiences and Outcomes	.16	.51	.21	.07	.05
Prefer to Utilize Technology Employed in K-12 School Settings	.30	.44	.18	.03	.05
Online Courses are Difficult Because of Unfamiliar Technology	.05	.19	.13	.39	.24

Of the three statements listed in Table 1, the statement "online courses are difficult because of unfamiliar technology" was compared to the student's level of technology skills to

see if there was a strong correlation between the two (Table 2). More than half of those students with low technology skills strongly agreed or agreed that online courses are difficult due to unfamiliar technology while less than one-fourth of the students with high technology skills disagreed or strongly agreed with the same statement. Those students with medium technology skills were more evenly distributed between whether they agreed or disagreed.

Table 2
Student's Technology Skill Level vs. Difficulty of Online Course Because of Unfamiliar Technology as a Percentage

Technology Skill Level	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Low	.019	.008	.004	.008	.000
Medium	.015	.153	.109	.249	.089
High	.012	.031	.019	.132	.152

When professors construct an online course, one of the key points they should be aware of are the students' reports that there is "less social interaction" in an online course when compared to a face-to-face course delivery (Figure 2). Although this is a logical assumption, there are strategies available to instructors to use to combat a lack of interaction.
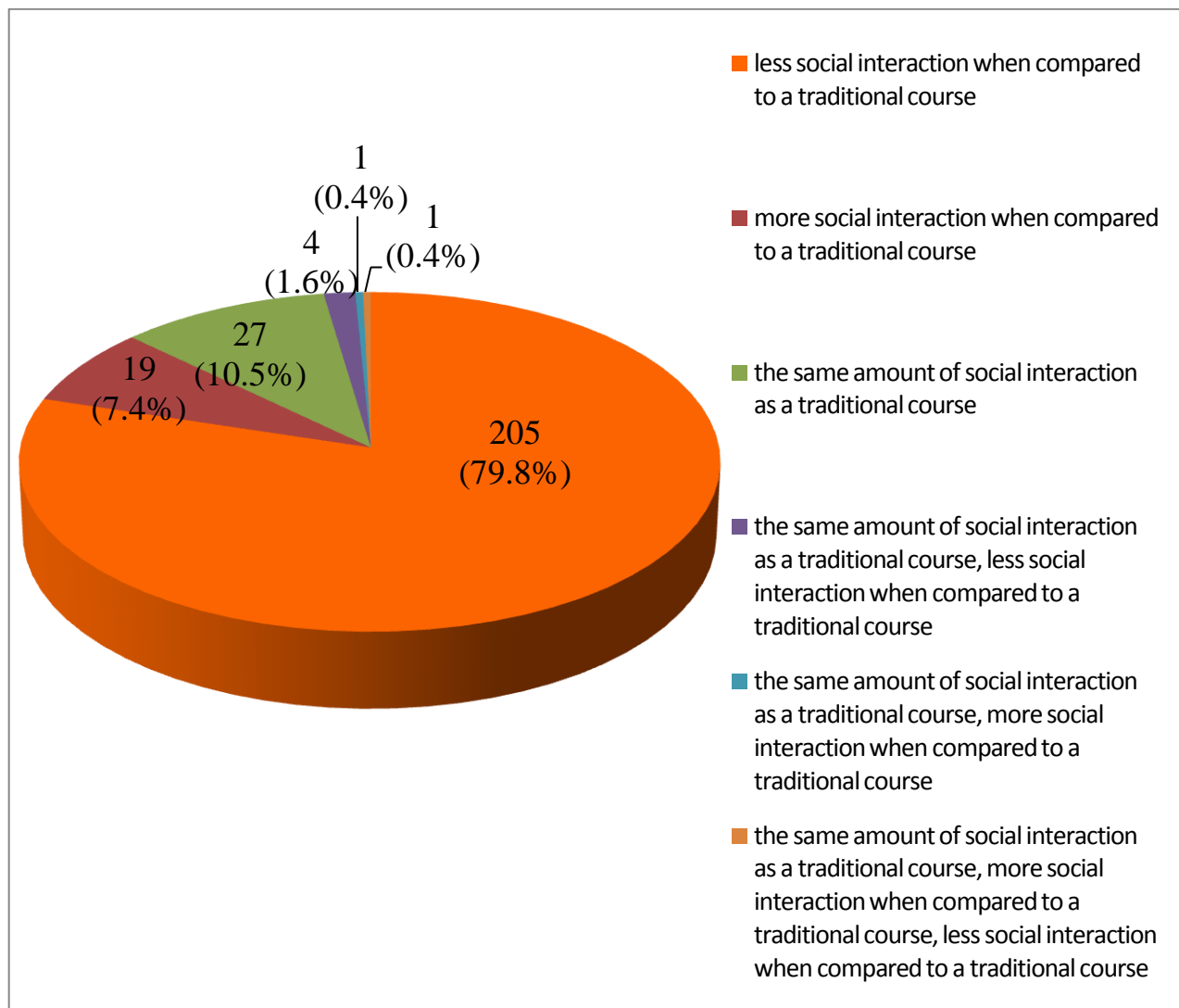
Figure 2. Student perception of amount of social interaction in online courses.

Table 3 shows student and instructor responses to statements to determine if students and instructors shared the same views.

Table 3

Comparison of Attitudes Toward Online Courses Compared to Traditional Courses as a Percentage

Statement	Students					Instructors				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Instructor and Student/Student and Instructor is Less Difficult to Establish	.06	.19	.22	.33	.20	.02	.13	.28	.38	.19
Student & Student is Less Difficult to Establish	.04	.19	.21	.38	.18	.03	.06	.34	.47	.10
Easier to Request/ Provide Help/Assistance	.03	.21	.22	.35	.19	.08	.16	.22	.38	.16
Just as Much Feedback	.09	.30	.18	.25	.18	.16	.47	.19	.16	.02
Require More Time and Attention	.22	.35	.26	.14	.03	.47	.31	.13	.06	.03
Makes Me Feel Overwhelmed	.10	.23	.26	.29	.12	.06	.22	.38	.22	.12

Creative Ideas for Success

In light of this information, how do instructors overcome the negative perceptions of an online environment and enhance the positive? The authors believe that the process starts at the very beginning and is carried through the entire course with better communication and continuing support.

Set up for success

In order for a course to begin on a positive note, the instructor should take great care to introduce him/herself and establish routines (Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Seung-hee, & Bude, 2005). A personal introduction and a course introduction can be created using EyeJot (www.eyejot.com), a free web application. This simple procedure can cast an ambiance of care and attentiveness to alleviate student fears from the very start of the course.

Course procedures and guidelines should be well thought-out prior to the beginning of the class (Liu et al., 2005). The instructor will need to communicate to students about the simplest of procedures including file naming, how to request help, participation requirements for the course, and a list of email contact addresses.

There are numerous free sources that can be productive and resourceful which are available to assist the instructor and students with assignments. The use of technology and web applications should always be examined from the aspect of, does the integration of this tool serve

a purpose (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). The resources list can begin with the following ideas for assignments in an online course:

- Have students produce their philosophy of education using a tag cloud service (i.e. www.tagxedo.com).
- Promote the construction of class websites for a multitude of uses from free sites such as PBworks (www.pbworks.com) and Edmodo (www.edmodo.com).
- Extend the use of the website (or wiki) by having students create pieces of their work in tools such as Animoto, Voki, Eyejot, Glogster, and Voicethread.

Fostering an Atmosphere of Communication and Collaboration

Especially when combined with other web applications, a class website can be very effective for introducing class members to one another, as well as to the instructor, and nurturing continued communication (see http://classroommgmt.pbworks.com for an authentic example). Skype (www.skype.com), a free video chat tool, offers an easy way for an instructor to keep virtual office hours for online students and is easily accessible now that it is available on tablets and smart phones. A cyberspace Coffee Lounge (discussion board) can be an effective way to encourage student to problem-solve with each other and arrive at solutions before having to ask the instructor (Liu et al., 2005). Instructors can encourage this with participation points for asking and answering questions in the *Lounge*.

Peer review is an excellent way to assist students without burdening the instructor (Liu et al., 2005). Students can self-evaluate and then seek the opinion of other classmates before turning in assignments. This procedure can not only alleviate stress for all concerned, but the end product will be much better developed.

Continuing Support

It is important for the instructor to communicate effectively as the course progresses through the semester. There are numerous ways to do this, but the following captures a few:

- Continue to hold virtual office hours with students throughout the semester, setting scheduled times to conduct the sessions.
- Provide weekly announcements in the course management system or class webpage. This will be helpful to students as both a reminder of things to accomplish and a connection to the instructor.
- Continuously monitor student logins. Most course management systems and wikis will record the date and time of each login. This can assist the instructor with information about students who may be falling behind.
- Produce screen capture videos accompanied by written instructions for each assignment. This will aid students to understand each task from the beginning. Freely available screencast tools include Screencast-O-Matic (www.screencast-o-matic.com) and Jing (http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html).
- Include video and written technology tool tutorials for all web tools used in the course. Most, if not all of these, can be found on YouTube (www.youtube.com).
- Instructors, as well as students should log on and check emails and websites daily.

Conclusion

It is not easy to foster an environment that encourages opportunities for communication and learning in an online course. However, if the instructor plans for multiple ways to explain tools, assignments, and lecture material, there is a greater chance that both the student and instructor will enjoy a more positive experience. There is no formula, and the technology continues to change, but there are trusted strategies to employ. As on-line instruction moves forward, instructors must stay current with the available tools and use the ones that function best with whatever task is before them. An online course can be successfully created that narrows the difference between a face-to-face learning experience and online learning. A difference between the two methods is that an online course can reach a community of busy professionals within the parameters of their life experiences.

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