A CLOSER LOOK AT DISTANCE LEARNING FROM STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF WEB BASED ONLINE COURSES

Nega DEBELA, Ph.D.
School of Education, Marshall University
South Charleston, WV, 25303, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze responses of 40 respondents from Marshall University. The on-line survey that was conducted in 2003 asks: "What are the advantages/disadvantages of taking college web-based courses?" on behalf of the university's English As a Second Language program.

Nud*ist 6 and Sphinx Survey, were used to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the online students at Marshall University.

After reviewing and analyzing the survey, several themes have emerged. Online courses have also been perceived beneficial, because they are more convenient and are more accessible. Many students see Web CT as a great way to continue their education. Absence of long travel time was one of the major positive aspects listed by many of the students. A detailed examination of the qualitative data reveals that most disadvantages relate in some way to lack of face to face interaction.

Key Words: WebCT, Distance Learning and Qualitative Research

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

For most part, online mode of teaching and learning is typified by the delivery of course contents digitally or electronically, through computers using communication tools, such as discussion forums, chat rooms and emails from faculty to students, students to students and students to faculty.

Historically, argue Deal III and Walter F.[1] teaching and learning took place in traditional classrooms and laboratories with a variety of instruction strategies… the domain of the classroom was basically confined to the walls of the school building.

The effectiveness of internet based distance learning has increased in concert with its increased popularity argues Hofmann[2]. It has also been argued that an internet based courses should be designed mainly for independent and self confident students who do not feel that they are in serious need of intense interaction with tutors or lecturers when they go about their learning[3].

The internet can offer the learning process a variety of benefits, including easy access to educational content, interaction, a cooperative learning process and the reuse of content[4].

Wilson emphasized that distance learning, is an educational approach that integrates technology, connectivity, curricular content, and human resources[5].

The story of distance learning isn't that it can do everything or that it is problem free. In reality, it brings a new set of problems to the learning table. However, it enables us to do much more than we could before[6]. Distance education is becoming widely accepted as a means for higher education to provide broader access and achieve cost efficiencies while maintaining quality programs[7]. According to a research conducted on online courses in USA and Canada, the overwhelming reason cited for taking online courses around the United States and Canada is convenience[8].

Distance education has its own problems. Students of both sexes identified the lack of face to face interaction as a drawback to the online environment. Perhaps predictably, says one of the researchers, this was the single most common negative criticism I received in this set of data[9].

The educational landscape has transformed noticeably over the past three decades. Wernet, Olliges, and

Delicath (2000) provide a summary of some of these changes[10]:

- Enrollment has nearly doubled from 8 to 14 million between 1970 and 1995, mainly in the adult learner category; the "traditional" student population now comprises only 25% of campus population.

- Students are taking longer to complete their degrees—up to 6 or 7 years for an undergraduate, while graduate students are taking twice as long to complete course work compared to the past.

- More than three fourths of undergraduate students are now working while going to school; nearly a third are working full time. This affects student progress in a two-fold manner in terms of class completion, i.e., reduced class choices due to scheduling constraints and reduced number of classes due to lack of available time.

According to Boeglin & Campbell (2002)[11], hypermedia learning augments the learning atmosphere through interactive, visually dynamic capabilities. Most distance education software offers these capabilities with limitless access to course resources and accessibility to interact with the professors and classmates. However, the learner must understand his or her own learning approach in order to succeed using hypermedia-based tools.

Colleges and universities have utilized this wave of the future as a means to recruit new students as well as to better meet the needs of their current scholars through the creation of internet courses, also referred to as e-learning. These courses have become so popular that at one Wisconsin college, enrollment in online classes increased about 11 percent last fall [12]. In addition to online courses, some programs such as the University of Phoenix, are offering entire degree curriculum online, which allows the student to finish his/her degree at times and places which fit their schedules [13].

For obvious reasons, the government and big businesses are pushing web courses to train their employees. In 2000 web training for employees went from 8.8 % to 10.5 % in 2001 [14]. Businesses and the government are not the only ones taking advantage of online teaching and learning resources. There are many colleges who offer degrees where all the work is done digitally over the computer.

2. INTRODUCTION

In our fast changing world, distance learning is becoming progressively more popular with institutes of higher education. Online distance education is one of the technology enhanced ways to impart education to people who choose not to infringe upon their professional and personal responsibilities through attendance of traditional, face-to-face classes. At Marshall University Graduate College (MUGC), many graduate students opt for web based course learning outside of traditional learning milieu. MUGC has been one of the leading graduate institutions in West Virginia to integrate technology into its courses.

The State of West Virginia is situated in the eastern, mid Atlantic region of the United States. Physically, the state is divided into fifty-five counties and the terrain is mostly described as rolling plateaus to mountainous. While some mid size cities are scattered throughout the state, small towns and rural communities comprise the main populations. Given the mountainous geographic situation of WV, online distance education has been an attraction for many non traditional students.

WebCT stands for Web course Tools. WebCT has enabled students from various geographic locations to simultaneously access the same course without traveling hours to attend class on campus. Professors and students have right of entry to the course materials at any time they wish. Students can take tests and turn in assignments without ever seeing each other face to face.

Marshall University is the second largest school of higher education in the state of West Virginia. WebCT is Marshall's choice for distant learning via the internet. Students obtain notes, links, discussion questions and assignments all on the internet. They communicate through email and carry out chats online with professors or fellow classmates.

Marshall University has begun offering a number of courses via WebCT as part of its ongoing efforts to meet the needs of today's students, build a distance learning component, and enhance teaching and learning through the use of technology. A combination of traditional on campus classes and distance education classes are offered in education, counseling, engineering, political science, humanities, business, psychology, and environmental science [15]. In this competitive era, earning a graduate degree has become a rule instead of the exception; hence, many graduate students at Marshall University are taking advantage of the online classes to get their graduate degrees.

3. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The Graduate College carried out a survey to mull over the impact of online distance education and the perception of graduate college students taking online courses. After the survey was completed, a set of common themes began to emerge from the 40 respondents to the survey, as both advantages and disadvantages in the courses. Students enrolled at Marshall University Graduate College were asked to respond to a survey to evaluate the pros and cons of distance education courses. This survey tries to investigate qualitative responses of 40 respondents from Marshall University. The on-line study that was carried out in 2003 asks: "What are the advantages/disadvantages of taking college web-based courses?" on behalf of the university's English As a Second Language program for further research into this matter.

In order to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the online students at Marshall University, both Nud*ist 6(N6) a software for qualitative data analysis and Sphinx Survey, a software program for analyzing surveys, were alternatively used.

Following the review and analysis of the survey, several themes have emerged. Taking web-based courses, such as Web-CT, was valuable, according to some respondents, because it is more convenient and is more accessible. According to Kerkman [16], as more types of educational course are made available online the convenience of taking online education attracts those who have family obligation or must work full time while earning their masters degrees.

Moreover, most other respondents have noted that courses could be accessed from any where at any time. The beauty of the web based courses, as per the respondents, is the freedom that the students can do their assignments and discussion questions at their convenience. The respondents have emphasized that completing courses on-line provides them with more convenience than traditional classes. James concurs that Users can proceed through a training program at their own pace and at their own place. They can also access the training at any time, receiving only as much as they need. [17]

Many students see WebCT as a great way to continue their education. Absence of long travel time was one of the major positive aspects listed by many of the students. By taking WebCT classes, the students felt that they saved money on mileage, and wear and tear on their vehicle; therefore, taking classes was less of an expense, especially for those students who live far away from the University campus. One of the major commonalities between some of the respondents was that web based courses allowed time for their children, spouses, and other significant aspects of their family life. Kassop [18] argues that students with family or work responsibilities are often unable to commit to a traditional course because they cannot be in the same place at the same time for 15 consecutive weeks. Even if a course schedule is acceptable, limited enrollment may be a problem, for instance, a student who attempts to register for a Thursday night course only to discover that it is closed has no other immediate options. The advantages of online learning, however, include ample opportunities for students to pursue coursework at any time that fits into their busy lives [18]. It could be argued that one of the central advantageous aspect is the fact that less travel (often times no travel) is involved. Employment obligations of the student are not infringed upon, and once-necessary travel time can now be devoted to at-home study or other purposes. Money is also saved in gasoline and vehicle expenses.

It is interesting to note that quite a reasonable number of the respondents do not see any disadvantage of taking online courses.

While many perceive distance learning as the "way to go" others disagree. A detailed examination of the qualitative data reveals that most disadvantages relate in some way to lack of interaction. The most frequent disadvantage mentioned by students was the lack of opportunity for classroom interaction/discussion with fellow classmates. Respondents emphasized that such interaction was important. The human dimension looked to be a missing factor for which the online format was unable to compensate.

While the largest category of comments identifies limited interaction with classmates and/or the instructor as a distinct disadvantage in it self, other categories include elements related to interaction or communication. For instance, some students want more timely help with technology problems, while others would prefer more interactive technology such as television/satellite conferencing. Their comments focused on the Marshall system being "down," an inability to log into WebCT for some reason, or even the time required to "log on."

4. CONCLUSION

Online learning is indisputably here to stay. The convenience, flexibility and economic advantages that online learning furnishes make it a well-liked learning mode in the information era. In reality, web-based programs are sometimes the sole way that students living in remote areas and people with heavy work or family responsibilities can virtually continue their higher education. The use of WebCT as a teaching tool at Marshall University holds great promise for accommodating the needs of today's students in West Virginia and for expanding its distance learning component.

As acknowledged right through this research, other sources have found comparable results when asking students to list pros and cons of web based course work such as WebCT. Many benefits exist from taking courses that are web based, but learning via the web also has its limitations.

The research indicates that the advantages of Web based courses comprise but not limited to convenience, accessibility and flexibility. The disadvantages of online courses include but not limited to lack of interaction and technical problems.

Notes:

[1] Deal III and F. Walter, Distance Learning: Teaching Technology online, **Technology Teacher**, Vol. 61 Issue 8, 2002, pp. 21.

[2] D. W. Hofmann, **Tech Directions**, Vol. 62 Issue1, August 2002,p28 .

[3] Y.J. Katz, Attitudes Affecting College Students' Preferences for Distance Learning, **Journal of computer Assisted Learning**, 18, 2002, 2-9.

[4] H. Fuks, et al. The development and application of distance learning courses on the internet. **Open Learning**, 17(1), 2002, 23-38.

[5] J. Wilson, The power of distance learning guest editorial. **Education**, 122(4), 2002, 638.

[6] N. Cravotta, Debunking the distance learning myth. **EDN**, 48(1), 2003, 61-65.

[7] D. Eastmond, **New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education**, NO.78, 1998, 33-40.

[8] L. Guernsey, **The Chronicle of Higher Education**, issue 29. 1998.

[9] P. Sullivan, Gender Differences and the Online Classroom: Male and Female College Students Evaluate their experiences, Community College **Journal of Research and Practice**, 25: 2001, 805-818

[10] S. P. Wernet, R. H., Olliges, & T. A. Delicath, Postcourse evaluations of WebCT (Web Course Tools) classes by social work students. **Research on social work practice,** 10(4), 2000, 487-505.

[11] J.A. Boeglin, K. Campbell, Effects of learner's readiness on their perceived learning outcomes**. Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology** 28(2), 2002 .

[12] Wisconsin. Distance-Learning Enrollment Up at Wisconsin College. **Community College Week**, Vol. 16 Issue 11, 2004, p18.

[13] University of Phoenix. **The Nation's Leading Online University**. Retrieved March 21, 2004 from: http://online.phoenix.edu/index.asp

[14] L. Isaacs, Online Lessons. **American City & Council,** 0149337X, March 2003 Vol. 118 Issue 3

[15] Marshall University Available at **www.marshall.edu**. Retrieved March 20, 2004.

[16] J. Kerkman, L. Leah. Convenience of online education attracts midcareer students. **Chronicle of Philanthropy**, 16(6), 2004 .

[17] G. James, Advantages & disadvantages of online learning. Retrieved March 16, 2004 from **http://www.comminit.com/st2003/sld-7411.html**

[18] M. Kassop, Ten ways online education matches, or surpasses, face-to-face learning. Technology Source (**The Michigan Virtual University**). Retrieved March 16, 2004 from http://ts.mivu.org/default.asp?show=article&id=1059