



STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INSTRUCTOR INTERACTION IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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—Abstract—

Online learning has continued to experience rapid growth in higher education institutions across the nation. Proponents of online learning often emphasize the convenience, flexibility, and access to education that the online learning environment can provide. Opponents stress that the lack of personal interaction of online learning can detract from the teacher/learner experience. This study sought to examine students' perceived interactions and connections with an instructor in an online course. Specifically, the objectives were (1) to determine whether adding weekly video announcements and streaming lectures would have a positive impact on students' perceptions of instructor presence in an online course; and (2) to identify which elements of an online course students perceive as interaction with the instructor.

Key Words: *online learning, student interaction, instructor interaction, instructor presence, streaming videos, communication*

JEL Classification: I21

1. INTRODUCTION

The internet has revolutionized many industrial, professional, and service fields in our society. Higher education has not been insulated from this drastic paradigm shift in delivering "services." In 2006, reports indicated that over 90 percent of public institutions offer some form of online education (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, et. al., 2006). During 2005, approximately one in six students had completed at least one online course (Jackson & Helms, 2008).

Higher education researchers and practitioners agree that instructor-student interaction is an important part of learning and is not unique to the online environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Holmberg, 1983; Moore, 1993, Moore & Kearsley, 2006). However, given the physical distance, reduced physical and verbal cues, and asynchronous format of online learning, interaction between the instructor and students may be particularly challenging (Anderson, 2002; Moore, 1991).

For online instructors making connections with online students can be a struggle. Dennen, Darabi &

Smith (2007) suggest that the following practices are critically important for instructors to adopt: (1) maintaining frequency of contact, (2) having a regular presence in class discussion spaces, and (3) making expectations clear to learners.

The current study sought to examine students' perceived interactions and connections with an instructor in an online course. Specifically, the author's objectives were (1) to determine whether adding weekly video announcements and streaming lectures would have a positive impact on students' perceptions of instructor presence in an online course; and (2) to identify what elements of an online course students perceive as interaction with the instructor.

2. BACKGROUND

Research as to what constitutes interaction in the online environment, and the various types of interaction, provided the theoretical foundation for this study. Learning interaction is considered to be a reciprocal experience between the learner and the learning environment. Effective learning interaction should bring the learner closer to obtaining his/her educational goals (Wagner, 1994). The transactional distance between a learner and instructor in distance learning (e.g., online learning) can lead to psychological and communication gaps. According



to Moore (1991), these gaps can be compensated by selecting appropriate teaching techniques and strategies. Moore identified three types of interactions that must be addressed student-to-student, student-to-instructor, and student-to-content.

Russo and Campbell (2004) found that the responsiveness of instructor e-mails and providing feedback affected students' perceptions of instructor presence. Students also reported that seeing a photo or hearing the instructor's voice created a stronger instructor presence.

Jung (2001) purports three alternative types of interaction: academic, collaborative, and interpersonal. Other researchers (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001; Berge, 1995) suggest considering interactions in terms of the functions they serve (e.g., social interaction, organizational interaction, or direct instruction of materials).

Kuboni and Martin (2004) stress the importance of considering motivation and personalization and found students reacted favourably when instructors encouraged and guided them through the online environment. Paulsen (1995) identified four types of online interaction: one-alone, one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many. Regardless of how interaction is defined, it is apparent that identifying or measuring exactly what constitutes interaction in the online environment can be convoluted, at best.

Recognizing the breadth and depth of the discussion of interaction in an online course, the researcher's goal was to identify whether online video lectures and/or weekly video announcements have an impact on students' perception of instructor interaction. Identifying which components of the online course students identified as interaction in the course was also an objective.

3. METHODOLOGY

During the 2011-2012 four week, intersession term, 40 students were enrolled in an upper division general education online course at a mid-west, public higher education institution. Students were given the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback halfway through the semester.

Two weeks before the end of the semester, students were also invited to complete a 26 question perception survey about various components of the

course including: why they chose to take the online course, their perception of weekly online announcements, their perceived connection with the instructor through video announcements, their connection with the instructor in this course compared with face-to-face courses, their connection with the instructor in this course compared with other online courses, their perception about whether the instructor's personality was apparent throughout the course, responsiveness of the instructor to the needs and concerns of the students, components of the course that encouraged interaction, components that discouraged interaction, and their thoughts as to why announcements should or should not be used in online courses.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Demographics

The course enrolled 40 students during the 2011-2012 four-week, inter-session semester. Thirty nine (97.5%) of the students elected to complete the voluntary survey. The respondents were 38.5% (n = 15) male and 61.5% (n=24) female. The majority of the class (n=33; 84.6%) were Juniors (n=13; 33.3%) or Seniors (n = 20; 51.3%) and considered themselves traditional college students (n = 27; 69.2%).

Most of the students cited "convenience of online learning" as the reason they chose to take this course online (n=23; 58.9%). Other reasons included: online was the only option (n= 8; 20.5%), prefer online classes (n= 6; 15.3%), and prefer this instructor (n=2; 5.1%).

4.2. Mid-Term Open-Ended Comments

The purpose of the mid-term, open-ended online forum discussion was to allow students an opportunity to provide unsolicited information about the course. In an effort not to bias responses, the researcher chose not to ask specific questions about the course; but, to simply ask what respondents liked and/or disliked about the course, and how the course could be improved. Open-ended coding of the qualitative responses revealed that the top five positive comments referred to the following aspects: interesting course topic (64.1%), streaming lectures (58.9%), organized and structured website (23.1%), multiple attempts at quizzes allowed (20.5%), and engaging forum discussions (17.9%).



Specifically, in regards to the streaming video lectures, one student stated, “*I really like having the streaming video lectures and weekly updates. I wish all online courses were like that. It makes me feel more connected to the material and instructor. It’s more like being in a face-to-face class.*”

Another student added, “*Your video lectures are really helpful and make me have the confidence to finish this course. Otherwise, I would have dropped out from this class.*”

The top five constructive comments in the voluntary, open-ended discussion of the course entailed: course timeframe was too intense (15.4%), prefer to read the materials versus video lecture (15.4%), paper requirement (10.3%), need answers to quizzes (10.3%), and dislike online forum discussions (15.4%).

While a majority of the students did make positive comments regarding the online lectures and weekly videos (59.0%), not all of the students in the class found the online lectures useful (15.4%). One such student explained, “*I do not particularly like the streaming videos, I am the type to read the material on my own.*”

4.3 Student Perceptions

Weekly Announcements. When asked specifically about weekly announcements on the end of the semester 26 question perception survey, a large majority of the students (n=30; 77.0%) felt that the online weekly video announcements were either useful or very useful (n= 6; 15.4% neutral: n = 3; 7.7% unuseful or very unuseful). Almost two third of the students (n = 29; 74.4%) either strongly agreed (n = 9; 23.1%) or agreed (n= 20; 51.3%) they felt a stronger connection with the instructor because the weekly video announcements were utilized (n = 9; 23.1% neutral: n = 1; 2.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Representative positive comments regarding the online announcements and videos included feelings that the instructor cares about them, videos create a similar face-to-face environment, and videos help make a personal connection:

- “*I feel instructors who make videos of lectures and assignments care more about student learning.*”

- “*The videos make it seem like the instructor was actually teaching the class, rather than offering information and allowing us to review it and learn it on our own. This made it seem like more of an in class course, rather than an online course; just one that you can complete on your own time schedule.*”
- “*This was a great online course. Felt more like a real person was actually teaching it rather than just having our material pop up with no explanation.*”
- “*Announcements remind the students that there is life on the other end of the computer so you feel better about asking questions as they arise.*”
- “*The video lectures encouraged a connection because I felt like I was in an actual face-to-face class.*”

When asked if respondents felt a strong connection with the instructor because weekly video announcements were utilized, a strong majority of 74.4% (n = 29) either strongly agreed (n = 9; 21.3%) or agreed (n = 20; 51.3%) (n = 9; 21.1% neutral: n = 1; 2.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Students who provided a more constructive critique of online lectures and announcements appeared to either not to make the connection with the instructor through the videos, never watched them, or felt that by the instructor providing such detailed information, interaction was discouraged:

- “*I am sure she tried to connect through the use of videos but as stated above that did not work for me.*”
- “*I actually never watched them, so either way it didn’t seem to matter to me.*”
- “*I believe the clear instructions for all assignments actually discouraged any connection between the instructor and students. In previous online classes, I have always been in frequent contact with the instructor, as I typically had quite a lot of questions to ask. This class has been much less frequent, as most of the information was clear and concise.*”

Coded, open ended comments revealed that students felt online announcements should be used in online classes because they provide clarification for



assignments (33.3%), connect instructor and student (28.2%), provide class updates (18.0%) and help keep students on track (15.4%). The reasons not to use announcements in online classes included: the website was too detailed and further explanation was not needed (10.3%), technical difficulties with the videos (7.7%), or students chose not to watch the videos (7.7%).

Comparisons of face-to-face and other online courses. When asked to compare this course with face-to-face courses they have taken in the past, most respondents (n = 25; 64.1%) reported either feeling very connected or connected with the instructor compared with face-to-face courses they have taken in the past (n = 11; 28.2% neutral: n = 3; 7.7% disconnected or very disconnected).

In relation to other online classes respondents have taken in the past, a large majority (n = 28; 71.8%) felt very connected (n = 17; 43.6%) or connected (n = 11; 28.2%) with the instructor in this course (n = 6; 15.4% neutral: n = 0; 0.0% disconnected or very disconnected: n = 5; 12.8% have never taken another online course).

Connections with the Instructor. The components that appeared to discourage interaction with the instructor were: e-mail replies should be faster (5.1%), the paper discouraged interaction (5.1%), and the class was online (5.1%).

A very large majority of the class (n = 33; 84.6%) either strongly agreed (n = 14; 33.6%) or agreed (n = 20; 51.3%: n = 3; 7.7%, neutral: n = 4; 7.7%, disagreed or strongly disagreed) that the instructor's personality was apparent by the end of the class; and, the instructor was very responsive or responsive to needs and concerns of the class (n = 38; 97.2%) (n = 1; 2.6%: neutral).

When asked what components of the course encouraged interaction, the top coded responses included: video lectures (35.9%), weekly video updates (35.9%), quick e-mail responses (28.2%), handwritten feedback (10.3%), instructor's introduction of family (5.1%) and detailed forum responses (2.6%).

One student descriptively summarized the benefits of weekly videos and announcements, saying, *"I have taken online courses, and this instructor is the only one that I actually feel like 'exists.' When you take an online course, it often seems like there is an*

'invisible' person grading everything, and we have no connection. By actually visually seeing this instructor and picking up pieces of her personality, I feel like there was a real teacher in the class."

5. CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

For faculty seeking to make a personal connection with their students, incorporating weekly video lectures and announcements appear to have an impact on students' perceptions of interaction and connection with the instructor. The use of video announcements and/or lectures could possibly increase students' perceptions of instructor presence in the online environment.

Along with the video announcements and lectures, students perceived quick e-mail responses, handwritten and detailed feedback, and the instructor introducing family members as components that encouraged interaction between the instructor and the students.

Different learning styles may play a role in a student's willingness to spend time watching online video announcements or lectures. Students who did not respond positively to the video components of the course stated they would rather read the material, or they simply chose not to watch the videos.

Although the instructor stated in the syllabus that all e-mails would be responded to within 24 hours Monday through Friday and 48 hours on the weekend, some students felt that e-mail responses should have been faster and the "delay" in response discouraged interaction. Student perception and instructor perception of "quick feedback" may not be congruent.

Faculty should also be cognizant of technical issues that may arise, including platforms and download capabilities. Faculty should work closely with an instructional designer to assure videos are compatible with institutional platforms.

5.2. Limitations

The majority of the respondents were upper-division, traditional students. While the results of the study certainly support current literature on improving interaction in the online environment, findings should not be generalized to all online courses in all disciplines.

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