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Setting the Stage for "Good, Better, or Just Right" in Online and Blended Graduate Courses

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Abstract

Increasingly, academics and scholarly practitioners are faced with addressing the *expectations of* and *demands by* a new wave of entrants to the online higher education marketplace: the multicultural, multilingual, techno-savvy (MMTS) student. The goal of this paper is to share real-world experiences captured in a global classroom (online and blended formats) and to discuss the findings of a survey conducted at an American university. The intent is to stimulate reflection among faculty, instructional designers, and students on what may be "*good, better, or just right*" for online and blended instruction. The authors explore in detail the perspectives and satisfaction rates of the MMTS student in relation to course design, course content, and course delivery and offer ways to foster a dynamic learning and teaching experience.

Keywords: blended course; multicultural students; multilingual students; online course

Introduction

Enrollments in online courses by graduate students at higher education institutions continue to outpace enrollments in traditional or blended models of learning (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The continuing and emerging transition of universities towards online and blended models of delivery are now the norm in higher education. Transnational online education is no longer a concept; it is adapting to a wave of new learners. But, are we prepared to teach, to engage, to welcome the multicultural, multilingual, techno-savvy (MMTS) students into the online arena? Worldwide distance learning offers an opportunity for broader and more open access to this new generation of online learners. Currently, there are more than 3.9 million students enrolled in fully online degree programs in the United States, totaling more than 20% of all students in higher education (Atchley & Wingenbach, 2011). Worldwide distance learning requires both professors and students to transform their historical roles (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). As worldwide access to online learning and teaching continues to increase, educators and administrators are grappling with developing new dynamic and interactive online classrooms while maintaining academic and accreditation standards. Online education, when well-done, is student-centered in contrast to traditional professor-centered education. Students enrolled in online classes now manifest greater technological-savvy capabilities and a broader insistence on making their own choices compared with their peers a mere decade ago. Increasingly, these MMTS students demand highly dynamic interactive online as well as and blended classrooms that link theory to application (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). The importance of developing success strategies for MMTS students should give administrators and educators a cause to reflect.

Practical steps are necessary to ensure learning and satisfaction for MMTS students and faculty. Considerations ranging from course readiness, to course design, and to course content are critical to successfully engaging a broad audience. Attention to MMTS students requires additional faculty time and presence in the online environment, not necessarily because of academic acuity, but because many MMTS students have never taken an online course or blended course. Faculty

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members can harness social media to help innovate and modernize the online or blended classroom. On the other hand, while social media has changed the ways we communicate with one another, it has also presented challenges for some faculty as some students may comment in online discussion boards as if they were sending tweets, posting to Facebook, or sending texts. In communicating discussion board standards for student thread posts and replies, faculty should ideally provide a writing rubric (grammar, mechanics and usage) and a discussion board rubric (time, type and distinguishing elements of an outstanding, proficient, basic and below expectations response).

The authors pondered whether online and blended courses met and satisfied the needs of MMTS students in their graduate level courses. The usual exchange of teaching scenarios, experiential exercises, and "one size fits all" approaches began to emerge. In reflecting on course design, course content, and course delivery, the authors developed a survey using questions aimed at understanding and gaining a snapshot of student satisfaction relative to course design, visual appeal, technology interactivity, discussion board engagement, instructor engagement, feedback from instructor and peers, team success and the like. Findings led the authors to share lessons learned with others who seek to find the "*just right*" approach as in Goldilocks's quest for the "perfect, individualized" object in that fairy tale[1]. We also considered and developed survey questions to aid in future exploration of *what* makes other approaches deficient by being "too big or too small."

Survey Participants and Findings

Methodology

This quantitative survey study identified student's perceptions in a six-week course entitled *Creating High Performance Organizations* delivered in both online and blended formats at Northeastern University, Boston. The authors designed their own survey for use in this study based on their collective experiences and voluntary feedback from students enrolled in other online graduate and blended courses. The Likert style survey instrument sought student responses regarding satisfaction in course design, course content, and course delivery.

Sample

The population consisted of 1,000 Master's students with a resulting sample of 300 participants. When calculating the sample size the margin of error was 4.64% and the confidence level was 95%. The 300 participants were randomly selected from students taking a graduate (master degree) course titled *Creating High Performance Organizations*. Out of the 300 students selected a total of 132 students participated (51 online students and 81 blended students). Most of the students taking the survey were between the ages of 18 and 29 (75% online compared to 82% in the blended). Females were in the majority of respondents for both online and blended (72% female v. 28% male). Both survey respondents reflected a majority Asian (39%) student profile, followed by White/Caucasian (30%), unreported (23%), Hispanic (4%), and Black/African American (4%).

Data Collection

Surveys were developed and initially previewed by representative students after which a 40-question 2-page survey was made available online for anonymous response. Data was gathered during the final 2 weeks of courses (from February 12 to May 19, 2014) following pre-testing to assure full understanding of vocabulary including a pre-test and development of questions by

students themselves. The second version of this survey will be designed to support usage by students with some 15 home-languages other than English.

Analysis

The authors used the same questions in both the online and blended surveys with minor variations. The findings revealed that online students who had taken online courses (66% between 0 to 5 courses; 18% between 6 to 10 courses; and 16% in 11 or more courses) have a higher satisfaction rate for online courses when compared to blended students who were less satisfied with the online portions. Online students who had taken blended courses reported a higher satisfaction rate than their blended counterparts, presumably because of familiarity with the online portion of a blended class. In contrast, students who had taken blended courses (59% between 0 to 5 courses; 21% between 6 to 10 courses; and 20% in 11 or more courses) revealed a lower satisfaction rate for the online portion of a blended course with only 18% *very satisfied* compared to a satisfaction response from online students of 34% *very satisfied*. The survey queried the number of online and blended courses taken by the respondents.

Further, 80% of students taking an online course for the first time indicated *yes* to the question *were you prepared to take your first online course* and 85% of students taking a blended course answered *yes* to the question *were you prepared to take your first blended course*. This apparent level of confidence needs further study to explore the question, "is the MMTS student overly confident or sufficiently savvy to navigate a technological environment?" Next, we will explore in detail, and provide suggestions, for progressing on the scale of "*good, better or just right*" in course design, course content, and course delivery. Please see Appendix A for a more detailed outline of considerations.

Framework and Discussion

Course Design

The importance of course design cannot be over-estimated. Course design includes first impressions, instructional relationship, and community engagement. When students begin an online class, *first impressions* are critical not only for retention, but also for student perception. Students form their first impression of core instructional design features including, but not limited to, whether the instructor has followed a prescribed mode of organization, appearance, design, and usability within the first two to three minutes. During their initial introduction to the online course environment, students are assessing content, evaluating their academic expectations and needs, and considering competing factors such as workplace rules on accessibility of outside vendors, work and life balance, and other unforeseen conflicts.

The theme that emerged from the survey data is that MMTS students described their level of satisfaction in the appearance of online and blended courses favorably (online students reported a 33% very *satisfied* response while blended students reported a 34% response *of very satisfied*). Thus, first impressions are crucial to setting the stage for a successful start to learning, whether online or blended.

The instructional relationship is the connection between the student and the instructor. The survey revealed that students in fully online courses had a higher level of satisfaction with their instructors (42% *very satisfied* response) than did students in a blended course (26% *very satisfied* response). Ironically, students in the blended courses reported a higher level of satisfaction (35% *very satisfied* response) compared to online students who reported a lower level of satisfaction with their

instructor (30% *very satisfied* response). The authors broadly explored the level of satisfaction in the context of instructional relationship and the following themes emerged:

- The instructional relationship can be improved by greater instructor participation in online activities.
- The instructional relationship with students is dependent on instructors' timely and individualized feedback on assignments.
- Value-added benefits such as getting to know individual students, getting to know the instructor, and creating a sense of community online benefit the instructional relationship.
- Cultural perceptions (or misconceptions) are an important aspect to creating community in an online environment. The instructor should take the lead in creating opportunities to support a multicultural learning environment.
- Electronic communications (whether email, audio, or voice) appear to contribute to a better instructional relationship.

Building community in an online environment is challenging when compared to a blended or traditional environment. Unlike the online environment, the instructor in the blended and traditional environment has the opportunity to connect in person with the MMTS student; however, this does not mean that online learning is automatically void of community. The instructor has plenty of options to "connect" with students, including voice, video, synchronous meetings, and other social media platforms.

The course design in the online environment allows for the use of technology to create opportunities beyond the discussion board. Online courses need to use a highly interactive format relying on students' willingness and ability to participate in class discussions, as well as consideration of an adaptive release feature for assigned materials. Various teaching methods need to be implemented to achieve course objectives including course readings, class dialogue via the discussion board, team activities, simulations, videos and problem-based learning approaches. Some common themes that have emerged are:

- Students are encouraged to be more active and involved by opportunities to apply learned concepts to real life situations.
- Videos help students grasp material in a memorable, visual manner.
- Consistent and timely feedback from instructors help students remain motivated.
- Course discussion boards allow students to share viewpoints and understand information from different perspectives.
- Live sessions help students build community and eliminate the feeling of isolation.
- Students appear more comfortable in sharing and communicating when the faculty member is highly engaged.

Online courses, and the related blended portions of a course, need to provide materials to address all types of learning styles. With the Internet's greater availability of broad-ranging information, faculty are able, and indeed, need to place a greater focus on connecting pedagogy to real-life scenarios. The role of faculty in online classes now demands transforming from one of teacher to one of facilitator. Faculty should consider asking students to upload a headshot or other photograph or video of themselves as part of their introduction to the class. Some students may feel hesitant to share, so it will be important for the faculty member to offer alternatives such as suggesting a photograph of their hometown, pet, or other image.

Community building begins with faculty insistent on facilitating a climate where students will determine ways to connect to the group as a whole and individually. In an effort to motivate

student interaction, particularly with MMTS students, faculty should communicate that the online environment, much like the face-to-face environment, be a safe zone for learning and sharing. And, yes, just like face-to-face classes, students may inadvertently or purposely offend the sensitivities of others. Thus, it is important for faculty to clearly state communication standards and ensure that all students understand their importance.

Course Content

For purposes of this article, course content is concerned with organization, activities, technology, adaptive release, and content population by instructor and student. We also queried the level of satisfaction for the duration of the course and noted that traditionally delivered face-to-face courses with blended formats reduced the number of weeks, whether delivered in blended or online formats. The authors felt course content should be considered in the context of *how* it appears in the course rather than the quality of *what* is there. It is presumed that content is faculty driven—meaning that a substantial amount of preparation is begun by the instructor. In some settings, the instructor is required to meet a *2 x 2* standard where a checklist of items must adhere to a *two-week course content and design at least two weeks prior to the start of a course.*

Our survey revealed that students' perspectives for the level of satisfaction for content in both online and blended courses were similar (38% of online and 33% of blended each reported they were *very satisfied*). Further, the *somewhat satisfied* and *satisfied* also shared a similar response with fewer than 3% being *not satisfied* in regards to content. The authors explored discussion posts, arguably a major ingredient in content, and learned that the level of satisfaction among students for discussion boards among students in blended courses mirrored a *very satisfied* response of 37% for online students and 40% for blended students.

However, when the survey asked students to rate their level of satisfaction with mandatory posting on the discussion board, results revealed that students in online courses were less satisfied than students in blended courses (30% posted *very satisfied* in online vs. 40% *very satisfied* in blended). Although this paper does not address this specific finding, it suggests that an opportunity for future research exists, particularly regarding discussion board burnout, apathy, and/or cultural biases. Over all, discussion boards contributed to learning regardless of mandatory requirements *(*42% online *very satisfied* compared to 30% *very satisfied* in blended). Thus, even though there appeared to be a general dislike of mandatory discussion posting, the survey revealed that students, particularly students taking online courses, nevertheless valued the discussion posting's contribution to learning. Where English was not the first language, discussion board satisfaction dropped (21% *very satisfied* in online vs. 16% *very satisfied* in blended).

Course Delivery

Understanding the transformed role of faculty is essential to engaging students in an online or blended environment. The faculty member is a cheerleader, a champion, and a facilitator. Online faculty often recognize online learning as an opportunity to reach new and more diverse audiences. In addition, MMTS students may often seek greater contact with faculty outside the online or blended structure (often involving cultural guidelines on connecting or showing respect to teachers). Faculty may find their response requires caution and diplomacy in instances where MMTS students wish to *friend* faculty on Facebook, connect on LinkedIn, or even present token gifts.

Understanding the motivation of faculty aspiring to teach online is key to assessing the likelihood of success. While most faculty would agree that online or blended education is a part of the future, not all faculty are eager to launch even a partial transition to online or blended courses. In the case

of faculty who exhibit interest in online education, it is important to inquire about both their extrinsic motivators (convenience, flexibility, personal reputation, etc.) and intrinsic motivators (communicate knowledge to a new and wider audience, learning a new way of course delivery, gaining personal satisfaction, etc.). It also remains important for faculty to try new things and keep current with the ever-evolving technology in a spirit of adventure rather than tedium. Faculty members that have access to an instructional design staff should take advantage of this enviable resource for continuous professional development.

MMTS students, like many other students and faculty, approach online and blended learning with both extrinsic motivators referred to as choice drivers (convenience, flexibility, institutional reputation, cost savings, etc.) and intrinsic motivators referred to as self-drivers (opportunity to interact with cultures, applying course work to new situations, enhancing techniques for accountability and discipline, maturity, etc.). Faculty members should recognize and understand that many MMTS students studying online do so in isolation. And, this may also occur in the blended environment. Understanding what motivates MMTS students is critical because online learning to date continues to carry a high dropout rate ranging from 20–50%. Lack of motivation is one of the top three reasons for high dropout rates (Frankola, 2001). However, if we have a better understanding of what motivates students, then faculty and others can design courses to keep their students motivated.

Instructor engagement in course delivery is essential to student satisfaction. Instructors not only serve as facilitators, but they also assume responsibility for creating and designing, crafting and remolding, and encouraging engagement of strategies among and between students, referred to as community. Replication of core concepts and delivery going forward in a business or community organization setting is essential to yielding success. However daunting the task of "*getting it right*" may be, instructors must learn and adapt to ever-changing technologies, often already available to, and in use, by students. Being consistent in online and blended environments is paramount to capturing student interest, increasing participation and improving critical thinking and decision-making skills. In our view, a partnership among faculty, instructional designers, and students must continue to follow traditional methods of building trust, credibility and accountability.

Since critical thinking is pertinent in all fields, school systems need to teach critical thinking skills to students. Discussion boards are a good medium for helping students to develop their critical thinking skills through academic problem solving (Bagayoko, Kelley & Hasan, 2000). According to Greenlaw and DeLoach (2003), electronic tools can be used to teach students critical thinking skills. Discussions boards, however, should not be limited to textual exchanges; rather, instructors should familiarize themselves with tools in their content management server such as Blackboard Collaborate, Wimba, Adobe, Wikkis, and other outside vendors specializing in audio and video technology.

It is much more difficult for instructors teaching online classes than traditional classes to form pedagogical relationships with their students and gain their trust. One way to forge relationships with students is by engaging students in synchronous seminars. This enables instructors to develop face-to-face time with students in the virtual arena. During these sessions instructors can lecture on the weekly topic, provide guidance on assignments, answer student questions, and much more. Students can be involved by asking questions, answering polls, providing examples, and sharing stories about their experiences. Attendance rates, known as *active* versus *inactive* in the online environment, are much higher when these sessions are mandatory and graded. While some students may argue that any form of mandates constrict their flexibility, it has been shown that students who were involved in such sessions perform at a higher level than those students who did not attend the sessions.

Conclusion and Future Direction

This paper highlighted the dramatic increase of new entrants to online learning from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition, global students often bring a range of learning styles and apprehensions as well as social impediments to engagement. In this paper, we explored a practical framework for course design, course content, and course delivery. We made recommendations for retaining, engaging, and motivating the multicultural, multilingual techno-savvy student (MMTS) in the online and blended environments. Institutional interests in assessing online and blended courses are intensified as shown in emerging studies (e.g. Reich, 2014; Harvard Magazine, 2014; Griffiths, Chingos, Mulhern & Spies, 2014). The Chronicle of Higher Education (2014) has conducted a survey of 350 4-year college presidents', finding that 81% expect "hybrid courses that contain both face-to-face and online components" (p. 5) to have a positive effect on higher education—by far the largest positive score among seven, mostly technological innovations.

While the methods presented herein are nowhere complete, understanding the needs and expectations of the MMTS student demonstrates the importance of carefully aligning course design and pedagogy with the expectation of student satisfaction, particularly in a course dominated by the new generation of learners, the MMTS generation. Faculty should expect to spend more time in their online and blended course design and delivery (as well as one-on-one interaction with the MMTS student). Having noted this, the authors wish to emphasize that MMTS students may require additional time and resources to ensure success in the world of online and distance education. Through a gathering of anecdotal information, current research, and discussion of the findings, the authors conclude that faculty play an ever-important and ever-evolving role in engaging and encouraging MMTS students. Satisfaction is the key to a successful outcome. By using the methods presented and supporting materials within this paper, faculty are in a better position to deliver dynamic and interactive online courses while maintaining academic standards and ensuring an efficient and complementary delivery of their pedagogy. With continued dialogue, opportunities for engaging students, and an honest look at how we respect, engage and satisfy MMTS students, there is no doubt that eventually "*good, better, or just right*" explorations will lead to those that are "*just right*".

Note

[1] Derived from the 19th Century published work of Robert Southey (The Story of the Three Bears, 1837), Goldilocks and the Three Bears is a fairytale where Goldilocks the central character journeys through the forest, enters a home, and discovers the complexities of finding the "just right" porridge, chair, and bed. The fairytale demonstrates how Goldilocks encounters challenges when selecting porridge that was neither too hot nor too cold; chairs that were neither too big nor too small; and beds that were neither too hard nor too soft. After identifying the "just right" porridge, the "just right" chair, and the "just right" bed, Goldilocks falls asleep. Unexpectedly, Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear, the home's inhabitants return from a walk in the forest. Upon entering, the bears quickly discover someone has eaten their porridge, sat in their chairs, and tried out their beds. Awakened and startled by the bear's arrival, Goldilocks flees into the forest, never to return to the three bears home.

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Appendix A
Course Design *Good, Better or Just Right*

Good	*Better*	*Just Right*
Be organized	Be Proactive	Design the course room in a logical flow and anticipate any and all questions from students. Place yourself in their shoes by asking yourself if I was an online student for the first time would I understand this?
Provide clear student expectations for the course	Provide examples of assignments with instructions	Create a video walking students through the course and how to navigate the materials. Provide written instructions and examples of each assignment. Create additional videos explaining how to submit assignments, how students can review feedback and any other course specific instructions. The initial set up time will pay off in the long-run when dealing with students who have never navigated the online environment.
Use friendly language (particularly for online communications)	Provide examples of exemplary Discussion Board posts as guides for online students	Develop a guideline for netiquette in your classroom so students understand your expectations before the class begins. Provide examples of exemplary discussion posts as a guide and practice what you preach. Demonstrate your expectations through your own communications with students.
Introduce Yourself	Add a personal touch to your introduction	Provide both a formal and informal introduction. The formal introduction should briefly introduce you and the course to the students. This should be posted with a written welcome message in the announcements section of your course. In addition, this should be emailed out with a copy of the syllabus on the first day of class. The informal introduction should be about who you are in a welcoming manner. This should provide information that students can relate to without getting too personal. This video should be shared in the icebreaker discussion thread. This will allow students to see you as an individual not "a computer"!
Provide an outline of a typical week	Create a checklist for each week	On the first day of each new week a course schedule should be posted. It should welcome students to the week, encourage and motivate them, and provide them with a suggested timeline for completing their work. In addition, a weekly task list should be supplied which students can print out and place in front of them. The list should not only include the weekly assignments but also remind students to review feedback from their previous week's assignments.
Communicate Frequently with Students	Communicate with students through the Discussion Board, Announcements and emails	Engagement is a big part of the online environment and a tough balance to strike. You need to be engaged without micromanaging the students. A daily announcement is a great way to communicate with students. This can be a reminder about the work, sharing something you found which ties to the course material, or additional content you want to ensure they review. A professor should be in the weekly discussions at least five days a week at different times and responding to approximately 20–25% of the new discussion threads.