Online Education: Panacea or Plateau

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Introduction

More and more colleges and universities across the US have adopted online instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Perreault, Waldman, Alexander, & Zhao, 2008). Ginn & Hammond (2012), offer an example of the growth in a report on the adoption of online instruction by National Association of Schools and Public Affairs and Administration members. The report chronicled the increase in offerings of online courses, certificates, and Master degree programs from eight online courses in the 1990s to 15 in 2003 and 39 in 2012. Online offerings and enrollments are expansive (Ni, 2013) as colleges and universities continue to rethink the concept of instructional effectiveness, innovative pedagogy, and student retention.

Chief academic officers (70.8%) at colleges and universities agree that online education is critical to their overall strategic plan - an increase from 48.8% in 2002 (Allen, & Seaman, 2015). To ensure success of distance learning initiatives, "faculty and students must be willing to embrace, or at least grudgingly accept, online learning." (Bristow, Shepherd, Humphreys, & Ziebell, 2011 p. 246). With 24-hour access to the internet and technological innovations (i.e. smart phones, tablets, and wifi), online education has become more appealing. Half of all graduates in the past decade have enrolled in at least one online course (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011).

The growth rate of online courses has exceeded that of traditional enrollment (Rich & Dereshiwsky, 2011). In Fall 2010, the number of students enrolled in an online program (2.78 million) represented 14% of all college or university enrollment (Silber & Condra, 2011). Still, present trends indicate that faculty acceptance of online courses has "lagged" and the growth rate of these courses may be leveling off at a level 3.7 % lower than prior years (Allen & Seaman, 2015). The "lag" is noticeable in trends relative to MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). Developed and offered to provide affordable access to education, MOOCs were a growing trend until the recent decrease in the percentage of academic leaders who believe that MOOCs "represent a sustainable method of offering online courses" (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 6).

Purpose & Research Focus

As online education continues to grow, understanding faculty and student perceptions seems to be an imperative piece of the decision to continue to expand online offerings. The purpose of this study was to review faculty and students perceptions of online learning and to gain an understanding of the current status of distance education. Findings may inform researchers about whether faculty and student perception provide insight relative to the online education trend. Will it emerge as an essential component of university studies or is this the beginning of a plateau for online education?

Review of Literature

Faculty Perceptions

Many colleges and universities have made the decision to offer online instruction as part of a strategic plan to thrive, or perhaps to survive in the highly competitive educational market (Windes & Leshy, 2014). Initially adoption and growth of online educational offerings were slow and both students and faculty were skeptical that learning objectives could be adequately achieved in an online format (Allen, et.al, 2012). Faculty had concerns related to the quality of online courses, the time required to develop and teach online, issues of intellectual property, as well as the developing the skills required to teach online. (Gerlich, 2005). Osborne, Kriese, Tobey, & Johnson. (2009) found that faculty believed that students learn less, interaction is less effective, and students believe the classes taught on line are easier than those taught face-to-face. All of which can serve as barriers to developing and teaching courses online.

Allen and Seaman (2015) found that academic leaders view "online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face instruction" (p. 5). In fact the percentage rating from these leaders has increased from 57.2% in 2003 to 74.1% in 2014. Yet faculty do not report the same endorsement of online education. They believe that the university is moving too much education online and that the learning outcomes are inferior to those classes taught face-to-face. This includes faculty who have experience teaching online (Allen, Seaman, Lederman, & Jaschik, 2012).

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) (2013-14) faculty survey found that the proportion of faculty who report teaching a minimum of one class online has increased from 14% in 2010-11 to 17.4% in 2013-14. Interestingly, those holding the rank of instructor and lecturer are more likely to be teaching online than full professors. Faculty report that as the demand for online instruction increased (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Osborne, et.al., 2009), faculty began to feel strongly encouraged to teach online (Windes & Lesht, 2014; Gerlich, 2005) In fact some report that teaching online has become an expectation not a choice (Gerlich, 2005) Allen et. al., (2012) found that "about one-third of faculty members think that their institution is pushing too much instruction online, compared to fewer than 10 percent of administrators" (p. 2).

Student Perceptions

Allen & Seaman (2015) report that the number of college and university students taking at least one online course has continued to increase, but the increase is at lower rates than in the past. There are a variety of reasons students choose to take courses online but the most common seems to be flexibility and convenience (Dobbs, et. al., 2009; Osborne et. al., 2009; Perreault, et. al., 2008). Wyatt (2005) found that online courses appeal to students balancing their desire to continue their education with family responsibilities, work schedules, as well as the inability to attend school with a traditional schedule. Initially, it seemed that students who chose online education were older and working (Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009; Perreault et. al., 2008), but this has changed and more "traditional" students are enrolling in distance education. At the same time students continue to report missing the interaction that occurs in a face-to-face classroom experience.

Unfortunately, research reveals that students may enroll in an online course experience thinking that it is less rigorous than a traditional classroom (Osborne, et.al., 2009) and can be quite surprised to find that they have to work harder (McFarland & Hamilton, 2005-06), and that the course is more demanding (Wyatt, 2005), and more time consuming (Perreault, et. al., 2008) than the face-to-face counterpart.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted in two parts at a mid-sized private, four-year college in the northeast United States. In 2012, 60 graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in both traditional face-to-face and online courses participated. A fair representation of students (67%) had taken online courses in the past (n=37); 38% (n=23) had not taken an online course at all. In 2013, surveys were sent to both faculty and students. This sample included faculty that taught online courses in the past (n = 29) and faculty that only taught face-to-face (n = 91). Seventy-one percent of the student participants had taken an online class in the past (n = 34) while 29% had only taken face-to-face courses (n = 14). Survey responses for all three surveys were voluntary. All answers were anonymous.

Survey

The student survey, created by Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen (2009), was comprised of 59 items presented in a Likert scale (31 questions) and multiple choice/fill in (28 questions) format. Items focused on experience with online and traditional courses, perceptions about quality, challenge, and level of difficulty of online courses and traditional courses. Participants were asked to share their perceptions of various aspects of online courses including, why they would or would not take online courses, the quality of the learning experience and content of the courses, and how much work is perceived to be required. The faculty survey was very similar to the student survey concentrating on faculty perceptions of teaching.

Results

Data were entered into SPSS T-test results yielded a significant difference between perceptions of faculty who had taught online courses (M = 3.351, SD = .654)

Table 1 Perceptions of Online Courses (of those that have taught/taken online classes)

	Learned more online	Learned less online	Learn the same
Students 2012	8% (n=3)	43% (n=16)	49% (n=18)
Students 2013	9% (n=3)	32% (n=11)	59% (n=20)
Faculty 2013	7% (n=)2	48% (n=13)	44% (n=12)

Table 2	Perceptions of the Quality of Online Courses			
	Very high quality	**Good quality**	**Fair quality**	**Not at all good quality**
Students 2012	31% (n=10)	44% (n=14)	25% (n=8)	16% (n=5)
Students 2013	41% (n=14)	32% (n=11)	26% (n=9)	0% (n=0)
Faculty 2013	28% (n=8)	62% (n=18)	10% (n=3)	0% (n=0)

and faculty who never taught an online course (M = 3.701, SD = .597) on whether they thought online classes were better than face-to-face courses [t(118) = -2.751, p < .01].

The faculty that had experience teaching online, had a more positive outlook on online courses. There was also a significant difference between faculty that had taught online courses (M = 3.241, SD = .577) and faculty that had never taught an online course (M = 2.949, SD = .508) on whether they thought that face-to-face classes were better than online classes [t(118) = -2.615, p = .01]. The faculty that had not taught online had a more positive outlook of face-to-face courses (**Table 1**).

Results among the students in 2012, the students in 2013, and the faculty in 2013 were also examined.

Overall, both students and faculty agree that they perceive there is either less learning in an online environment or it is similar to a traditional, face-to-face venue (**Table 2**).

Faculty perceive that the online courses offered are slightly higher quality than students. Students perceive that over time, the courses are getting better with more "higher quality" and "good quality" courses. None were recognized as "not at all good quality."

Overall, both students and faculty agree that they prefer traditional classroom courses. More students, however, prefer online courses as compared to faculty and in 2013, students and faculty were more apt to have no preference than in 2012 (**Table 3**).

Discussion

The results of this study support prior research and confirm that faculty that have online teaching experience perceive online education more positively than those without online teaching experience. Alternatively, those that have only taught face-to-face, perceive that traditional classroom pedagogy as superior over online courses. Interestingly, the perceptions of both students and faculty was that students learn less (or the same) in an online environment while faculty perceive a higher quality of the courses taught online than students. Probably the most significant finding of the study is that both students and faculty prefer the traditional classroom over online education.

Table 3	Course Preference		
	Prefer traditional courses	**Prefer online courses**	**No preference**
Students 2012	57% (n=21)	27% (n=10)	16% (n=6)
Students 2013	59% (n=20)	12% (n=4)	29% (n=10)
Faculty 2013	61% (n=17)	7% (n=2)	32% (n=9)

This is an important factor for higher education leaders to consider while making decisions for the future of distance learning and may be particularly important when considering the finding of Allen & Seaman (2015) that 70.8% of academic officers see online education as critical to the overall strategic plan. The perceptions of faculty and students are based on their own experience with distance learning. Prevailing perceptions will not change without significant effort to increase faculty and student experiences with online learning.

For many years, distance education was expanding and it seemed to offer increased markets and access yet at the same time the perceptions of students and faculty regarding online learning is mixed and it would seem that if given a choice they would prefer the traditional classroom experience. This is not to suggest that there is not a place for online education; clearly it serves an important function and provides many with flexibility and access. Perhaps there is a leveling off point where leaders in education need to weigh the benefits of distance learning with the perceptions of faculty and students and their preference to learn in a traditional classroom.

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