COMPARING ADULT LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS OF IDEAL COURSE ENVIRONMENTS FOCUSED ON TASK ORIENTATION, TEACHER SUPPORT, AND STUDENT INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

Exploring adult learners' expectations of ideal course environments is essential since the social climate of courses influences students' learning outcomes and persistence. This study investigated adult learners' expectations of ideal course environments focused on task orientation, teacher support, and student influence using two versions of the ACES scale. In total, 170 participants completed both the face-to-face and online versions of the survey. The results showed no significant differences between adult learners' expectations of ideal course environments in relation to task orientation, teacher support, or student influence. Gender and race/ethnicity were found influencing their expectations of ideal online course environments in relation to task orientation and/or teacher support.

Keywords: Adult Learners, Face-to-Face Course Environment, Online Course Environment, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, ACES Scale, Social Climate

INTRODUCTION

It is predicted that more than 60% of jobs in Georgia will require a certificate or degree by 2020, so Georgia needs to graduate all its current students and 250,000 new graduates in just a few years to meet this need (Davis & Anderson, 2015; Office of the Governor, 2013). To achieve that goal, Georgia colleges and universities are concentrating on long-term strategic plans to employ innovative instructional methods, increase student persistence and graduation rates, improve college readiness, and reach at-risk and underserved populations (Davis & Anderson, 2015).

Higher education enrollments in online courses are continually increasing (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018), and Online education is critical to the higher education institution's long-term strategic plan. Although adult learners in higher education are increasingly taking online courses, ranging from at least one course to obtaining full degrees, the online instructional delivery method is not yet universally accepted. Therefore, it is important to investigate adult learners' expectations of ideal course environments, both face-to-face and online, so better instruction can be offered to ensure student persistence and success.

Course environment in this study refers to the social climate of a course encompassing teacher and student behaviors, teacher-student and student-student interactions, and student expectations of the environment (Beer & Darkenwald, 1989; Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). Course environment is important to adult learners because it affects

their learning outcomes and their persistence in course activities (Beer & Darkenwald, 1989). Task orientation, teacher support, and student influence are key components contributing to learning community sustainment that influences course environment (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1986; Imel, 1991; Langenbach & Aagaard, 1990). Therefore, the aims of this study are 1) to investigate adult learners' expectations of ideal course environments focused on task orientation, teacher support, and student influence, and 2) to provide insights into how to sustain the social climate of face-to-face and online courses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Adult Classroom Environment Scale (ACES) developed by Darkenwald and Valentine (1986) for investigating adult learners' expectations of course environments serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Course environment, referred as the social climate of a course, is important to adult learners because it affects not only their learning outcomes but also their persistence in course activities. "A climate that is not appropriate for adults will not facilitate learning or lead to satisfaction with learning experience" (Beer & Darkenwald, 1989, p. 33). Satisfaction has been proven to be one of the factors that could predict whether a student would persist with a class or drop out (Levy, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Reio & Crim, 2013). Adult learners who persist in online courses report more satisfaction with their class experiences than adult learners who withdraw (Beer & Darkenwald, 1989; Park & Choi, 2009). Levy (2007) examined the impact of students' satisfaction on students dropping out of online courses and proved that students' satisfaction in online courses is a major factor in their decision to complete or drop an online course. Park and Choi (2009) predicted with 89.8% accuracy whether a student would persist or drop out based on a model of individual characteristics and family and organizational support, satisfaction, and relevance. Reio and Crim (2013) conducted hierarchical regression analyses to examine the relations between social presence and satisfaction with learning experiences. The results demonstrated that both social presence and satisfaction with learning experiences were significant positive predictors of future online enrollment intent.

ACES measures student and instructor perceptions of course environment in seven dimensions including 1) affiliation, 2) involvement, 3) organization and clarity, 4) personal goal attainment, 5) task orientation, 6) teacher support, and 7) student influence (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1986). The first four dimensions are associated with course design and the other three (task orientation, teacher support, and student influence) relate to course facilitation to sustain a learning community.

Task orientation is the extent to which the instructor and the students remain focused on the course content through the accomplishment of class activities. Teacher support refers to the instructor's sensitivity, help, encouragement, and friendship towards students. Student influence is the extent to which the course environment is learner-centered, allowing for students' collaborative impact on the class (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1986; Imel, 1991; Langenbach & Aagaard, 1990).

ACES has been used in many studies (Imel, 1991; Kelly & Bronstein, 2003; Langenbach & Aagaard, 1990). For example, Kelly and Bronstein (2003) utilized the ACES to investigate the impact of using a folder feedback system for engaging adult learners. Their study consisted of 46 first-year, first-semester MSW students who were taking a research course. The average age of the students was 30.78 (SD = 9.70). There were 26 Caucasian students, three African American students, and three students in other categories. In total, two sections of the research course were included and taught by the same instructor during the same semester. One section utilized a folder feedback system and the other section did not. Kelly and Bronstein hoped that by using the folder feedback system, students would experience the teacher as more supportive and open to student influence, which would improve the overall classroom environment. However, the results of their study showed no differences for involvement, affiliation, teacher support, task orientation, personal goal attainment, originality and clarity, and student influence between two sections. There were also no significant differences between the two sections based on age and race/ethnicity.

Murphy and Cifuentes (2001) claimed that engaging adult learners in a course with a high

beginning level of structure (task orientation) and instructor support (teacher support) that transitions towards more learner influence (student influence) as the course progresses results in a sense of community. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) advocated the importance of creating a learning community and identified it as the basis for developing and maintaining a sense of inclusion within a course environment. Such a sense of community influences the social climate of a course and promotes student persistence (Beer & Darkenwald, 1989; Müeller, 2008). Müeller (2008) conducted a qualitative case study to understand the factors influencing female learners' persistence in both undergraduate and graduate online degree-completion programs at a college in the northeastern United States. The results revealed that engagement in the learning community is one of the key facilitators of learner persistence.

Demographics may also influence adult learners' expectations of ideal online course environments, such as age (Bull, 2015), gender (Aragon & Johnson, 2008), and race/ethnicity (Bull, 2015). Aragon and Johnson (2008) explored differences between completers and noncompleters in community college online courses based on academic readiness, enrollment characteristics, demographics, self-directed learning readiness, and reasons noncompleters reported for not continuing their online courses. They utilized a combination of archival demographic and course completion information from an institutional database as well as self-reports on a self-directed learning readiness inventory for all participants and phone interviews with noncompleting students. From the data collected for their study, gender, number of online courses enrolled in, and grade point average were significant predictors of online persistence. Based on the data, significantly more female students completed their online courses than male students. They also indicated that students who completed their online courses were enrolled in significantly more online courses than noncompleting students were and had higher grade point averages than noncompleting students. Bull (2015) investigated undergraduate student characteristics that predicted student persistence and performance in face-to-face and online courses at a four-year private northeastern university using multilevel modeling. The data set available for his study spanned from fall 2002 to spring 2013. The sample was 42,280 students, which accounted for 25,167 total unduplicated students. The results showed that as students aged, they were more likely to persist in online courses. In addition, students who identified their race/ethnicity as a minority were less likely to succeed in face-to-face and online courses.

STUDY IMPLEMENTATION

Purpose

The aim of this study was to provide faculty and administrators at a comprehensive university in South Georgia with insights into their adult learners' expectations of ideal course environments in order to sustain a sense of community within face-to-face and online courses. The field of online education is continually changing, so instructors need to be adaptable, knowledgeable, and skilled with newer technologies and strategies in order to be successful (Wuensch, Aziz, Ozan, Kishore, & Tabrizi, 2008). Investigating adult learners' expectations of ideal course environments would provide instructors valuable feedback and enable them to alter their facilitation behaviors to be more in line with student expectations (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1986).

Instrument

The ACES consists of 49 items that cover seven dimensions: affiliation, involvement, organization and clarity, personal goal attainment, task orientation, teacher support, and student influence (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1986). Participants rate their agreement with seven statements for each dimension using a four-point Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree, with two reverse-coded statements for each dimension (Beer & Darkenwald, 1989; Imel, 1991). Since this study focused on learning community sustainment, only the dimensions of task orientation, teacher support, and student influence were included. Darkenwald and Valentine (1986) reported high total scale reliability for the ACES scale using Cronbach's alpha (student ideal form $\alpha = .93$, student actual form $\alpha = .94$, and teacher actual form $\alpha = .90$). The student ideal form was used in the study and the reliability coefficients for the dimensions of task orientation ($\alpha = .66$), teacher support ($\alpha = .74$), and student influence ($\alpha = .71$) were within acceptable ranges of internal consistency.

Research Questions

Two research questions were used to guide this study. Paired samples t-tests and ANOVAs were employed for data analysis to answer the questions.

1. Were there any significant differences between adult learners' expectations of ideal face-to-face and online course environments using three subscales of the ACES: task orientation, teacher support, and student influence?

2. Were there any significant differences between adult learner demographics (age, gender, and race/ethnicity) and their expectations of ideal online course environments using three subscales of the ACES: task orientation, teacher support, and student influence?

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative design with a self-report survey, the ACES scale, as the research strategy (Creswell, 2014). The survey was created using Qualtrics and distributed to the student listserv at a comprehensive university in South Georgia, followed by Facebook posts and email reminders to promote the survey. Participants were asked to complete both versions of the ACES student ideal form, one for facet-to-face course environments and one for online course environments, along with three demographic questions for age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Each survey version took participants approximately ten minutes to complete.

Population and Sample

The population of this study was adult learners at a comprehensive university in South Georgia who have taken or are currently enrolled in at least one face-to-face or online course at the university. The reason the scope of this study was limited to a comprehensive university in South Georgia was that the researchers could provide direct feedback to instructors based on the expectations of their adult learners. In total, 321 participants responded to the survey; however, only 170 participants' responses were included in the data analysis since 151 participants did not complete both versions of the survey.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question 1

Three paired samples t-tests were performed to determine if there were any significant differences between adult learners' expectations of ideal face-to-face and online course environments for task orientation, teacher support, and student influence. As shown in Table 1, there were no significant differences between adult learners' expectations of ideal face-to-face and online course environment ratings for the ACES dimensions of task orientation ($t(169) = -1.42$, $p = .157$, $d' = 0.07$), teacher support ($t(169) = 0.86$, $p = .392$, $d' = 0.04$), and student influence ($t(169) = 0.67$, $p = .503$, $d' = 0.04$).

Research Question 2

Nine one-way ANOVAs were used to determine if there were any significant differences in adult leaners' expectations of ideal online course environments for task orientation, teacher support, and student influence based on adult learners' age, gender, and race/ethnicity. As shown in Table 2, the results comparing age groups indicated that they did not have statistically different expectations of ideal online course environments for task orientation, $F(2,143) = 0.17$, $p = .843$, $\eta p2 = .00$; teacher support, $F(2,143) = 0.81$, $p = .446$, $\eta p2 = .01$; and student influence, $F(2,143) = 0.03$, $p = .967$, $\eta p2 = .00$.

Table 1. Paired Samples T-tests Comparing Ideal Course Environments

	Ideal Face-to-Face Course Environment		Ideal Online Course Environment					
ACES Dimensions	M	SD	M	SD	*t*	*df*	*p*	Cohen's *d'*
Task Orientation	3.03	0.41	3.06	0.42	-1.42	169	.157	0.07
Teacher Support	3.46	0.54	3.44	0.52	0.86	169	.392	0.04
Student Influence	2.56	0.48	2.54	0.51	0.67	169	.503	0.04

*$p < .05$.

Table 2. ANOVAs for Effect of Age on Ideal Online Course Environments

	Young Adults		Working-Age Adults		Older Adults					
ACES Dimensions	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Task Orientation	3.06	0.41	3.04	0.45	2.86	NA	143	0.17	.843	.00
Teacher Support	3.48	0.53	3.67	0.55	3.57	NA	143	0.81	.446	.01
Student Influence	2.55	0.50	2.58	0.55	2.57	NA	143	0.03	.967	.00

Note. Standard deviation was not available for older adults as there was only one participant who responded in this category.
*$p < .05$

Table 3. ANOVAs for Effect of Gender on Ideal Online Course Environments

	Male		Female		Gender Neutral/ No Gende					
ACES Dimensions	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Task Orientation	2.90	0.45	3.11	0.40	3.21	0.10	169	3.46	.034*	.04
Teacher Support	3.24	0.69	3.48	0.46	3.50	0.71	169	3.09	.048*	.04
Student Influence	2.59	0.60	2.52	0.49	3.07	0.30	169	1.36	.261	.02

*$p < .05$

As shown in Table 3, the results comparing gender groups indicated that gender might have an impact on adult learners' expectations of ideal online course environments for task orientation, $F(2,169) = 3.46$, $p = .034$, $\eta p2 = .04$, and teacher support, $F(2,169) = 3.09$, $p = .048$, $\eta p2 = .04$. Based on a Tukey HSD post hoc analysis, female adult learners ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.40$) rated task orientation of ideal online course environments significantly higher than male adult learners ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.45$, $p = .034$). However, female ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.40$) and male ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.45$) adult learners did not have significantly different expectations from gender neutral/no gender adult learners ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.10$, $p < .05$) for task orientation.

Based on a Tukey HSD post hoc analysis, female adult learners ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.46$) rated teacher support of ideal online course environments significantly higher than male adult learners ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.69$, $p = .048$). Similar to task orientation, female ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.46$) and male ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.69$) adult learners did not have significantly different expectations from gender neutral/no gender adult learners ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.71$, $p < .05$) for teacher support. The results also showed that gender did not have an impact on adult learners' expectations of ideal online course environments for student influence, $F(2,169) = 1.36$, $p = .261$, $\eta p2 = .02$.

As shown in Table 4, the results comparing race/ethnicity groups indicated that race/ethnicity might influence adult learners' expectations of ideal online course environments for teacher support, $F(2,165) = 3.43$, $p = .035$, $\eta p2 = .04$. Based on a Tukey HSD post hoc analysis, Caucasian adult learners ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.48$) rated teacher support of ideal online

Table 4. ANOVAs for Effect of Race/Ethnicity on Online Course Environment

	Caucasian		African American		Other Grouped					
ACES Dimensions	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Task Orientation	3.13	0.39	2.97	0.45	2.99	0.43	165	2.80	.064	.03
Teacher Support	3.52	0.48	3.34	0.55	3.21	0.60	165	3.43	.035*	.04
Student Influence	2.54	0.52	2.54	0.54	2.58	0.49	165	0.05	.954	.00

*$p < .05$

course environments significantly higher than African American adult learners (M = 3.34, SD = 0.55, p = .035). However, Caucasian (M = 3.52, SD = 0.48) and African American adult learners (M = 3.34, SD = 0.55) did not have significantly different expectations from other grouped adult learners (M = 3.21, SD = 0.60, p > .05) for teacher support. The results also showed that race/ethnicity did not have an impact on adult learners' expectations of ideal online course environments for task orientation, F(2,165) = 2.80, p = .064, ηp2 = .03, and student influence, F(2,165) = 0.05, p = .954, ηp2 = .00.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Table 5 shows a summary of the significant findings in this study. First, there were no significant differences found in adult learners' expectations of ideal face-to-face and online course environments for task orientation, teacher support, and student influence dimensions, which means that adult learners would expect a similar level of these three components to be offered in both face-to-face and online course environments. Instructors need to maintain consistent strategies integrating these three components to sustain the learning community and promote student persistence whether they teach face-to-face or online. This aligns with previous research conducted by Freddolino and Sutherland (2000), which compared students' perceptions of 13 MSW courses, face-to-face, and distance video conferencing sites, from 1994 through 1998 using a modified version of the ACES. They found that adult learners have similar course environment preferences in face-to-face and distance video conferencing course environments.

Table 5. Summary of Significant Findings

ACES Dimensions	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Task Orientation	No	Yes	No
Teacher Support	No	Yes	Yes
Student Influence	No	No	No

Second, the results showed no significant differences in adult learners' expectations of ideal online course environments for task orientation, teacher support, and student influence based on age. Kelly and Bronstein (2003) discovered similar findings. They found that age was not a significant factor influencing students' experiences related to teacher support and student influence.

Third, female adult learners had significantly higher ratings on ideal online course environments for task orientation and teacher support than male adult learners, but no significant differences were reported for student influence. The results were somewhat congruent with Kariuki's (1995) findings. Kariuki found that female students rated teacher support and student influence in ideal online course environments significantly higher than male students, but females and males reported similar expectations of task orientation for ideal online course environments. Though task orientation and teacher support ratings in the current study were significantly different for females and males, they both noted agreement with expecting elements of task orientation and teacher support in their ideal online course environments. In such programs as education and biological/life sciences, which are majority female learner programs in the University System of Georgia comprehensive universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), differences in adult learner expectations, based on gender, may be more apparent.

Stavredes (2011) attributed gender differences in online courses to the learner's background and upbringing in a predominantly masculine or feminine culture. Stavredes noted that masculine cultures emphasize a competitive educational setting where males are more dominant than females, whereas, feminine cultures emphasize a more communal, less competitive environment with overlap between male and female roles. Stavredes went on to recommend that instructors take learner's culture into account to anticipate and alleviate potential issues based on gender roles from a learner's cultural background when outlining expectations for student participation and team involvement. With this in mind, some of the variations in female and male adult learners' expectations of task orientation and teacher support in ideal online course environments, in the current study, could be a result of the participants' cultural backgrounds. Based on the results, instructors have to consider gender differences and offer support when preparing course activities in an online course environment. In addition, student influence ratings showed agreement, regardless of gender, with similar adult learner expectations of collaborative decision making in an ideal online course environment.

Fourth, Caucasian adult learners reported significantly higher ratings on ideal online course environments for teacher support than African American adult learners; however, no significant differences were noted for task orientation and student influence. This result differs from Kelly and Bronstein's (2003) research where no significant differences were identified in relation to race/ethnicity. Kelly and Bronstein did not provide an explanation for the lack of significance concerning race/ethnicity, but there were few minority participants in their study. Though teacher support ratings for Caucasian and African American adult learners were significantly different, they both agreed with expecting elements of teacher support in their online courses. Such a difference may become more important in programs and courses with a higher Caucasian-African American learner ratio. In such programs as education, engineering, biological/life sciences, business management and administrative services, physical sciences, and mathematics, which are majority Caucasian learner programs in the University System of Georgia comprehensive universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), differences in adult learner expectations based on race/ethnicity may be more apparent. Based on Stavredes's (2011) descriptions of how different cultures approach learning, there may be additional race/ethnicity categorizations where the difference may be apparent given larger numbers of minorities participating or utilizing different race/ethnicity groupings. Whereas there was no significant difference in task orientation and student influence expectations based on race/ethnicity, overall, participants' ratings trended towards an agreement with expecting such components in their online courses.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provided an initial investigation into adult learners' expectations of ideal face-to-face and online course environments at a comprehensive university in South Georgia. It provided faculty and administrators with a glimpse of their adult learners' expectations of ideal course environments, specifically with regard to anticipated elements of task orientation, teacher support, and student influence. The findings identified no significant differences in adult learners' expectations of ideal face-to-face and online course environments for task orientation, teacher support, and student influence. Faculty should maintain consistent strategies integrating these three components to sustain the learning community and promote student persistence whether they teach face-to-face or online. The findings identified significant differences related to gender and race/ethnicity, which provide insights for instructors about learner demographic characteristics that could influence student expectations. Faculty should understand that female adult learners expect higher levels of task orientation and teacher support in online courses than male adult learners. Faculty can adjust their teaching strategies accordingly and focus on relevant course activities based on the course subject while keeping discussions focusing on course topics, establishing deadlines, encouraging students, demonstrating care for students' feelings, respecting students, and helping them to succeed. Further, faculty should also understand that Caucasian adult learners expect higher levels of teacher support in online courses than African American adult learners. They need to plan and implement instructional methods that align with student expectations. Differentiated instruction can be a useful teaching strategy that allows appropriate variation to meet an array of student needs because it is built on the understanding that learners are characteristically different based on academic readiness, demographics, interests, and learning styles (Dosch & Zidon, 2014; Lightwies, 2013; Lunsford & Treadwell, 2016; Milman, 2014). The findings identified no significant differences in adult learners' expectations of ideal online course environments for student influence, regardless of age, gender, or race/ethnicity, which implies that adult learners have similar expectations of collaborative decision making in ideal online course environments. When planning an online instruction, faculty should include activities that promote collaborative learning and involve all students in the decision making and knowledge-sharing process (Bawa, 2016).

Future research should consider using a different research method to explore the differences in adult learners' expectations of ideal online course environments related to gender and race/ethnicity. Including interviews with adult learners would help explain the impact of gender and race/ethnicity on task orientation and/or teacher support.

Future research should also work to increase the sample size by reducing the potential for participant fatigue and using additional marketing techniques. It could also exclude ACES items not of interest and offer different participant incentives that are more appealing and consider additional sampling methods for increasing generalizability, such as adding institutions.

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