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Comparing Students' Experiences and Preferences with Online Courses

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Abstract: *Literature on online learning is replete with key factors needed for effective course delivery; however, the approaches and ideas that educators deem important do not always align with those of students. This study sought to compare actual online course design with student-indicated preferences. A survey instrument was administered to students enrolled in one or more online courses at a rural university in the southwestern United States. Students identified components of their online course(s) and rated components based on personal importance. Data were analyzed using the Borich Model, ranking items on differences between what the participants preferred and what they experienced. The results provide some important insights for educators designing and teaching online courses in higher education.*

Key Words: online education, student preference, student experience, Borich Model

INTRODUCTION

The number of college and university courses that are taught in non-traditional formats has increased dramatically in the past several years (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Mainly this change has been accomplished through a variety of technological approaches (Tallent-Runnels, et. al, 2006). The Online Learning Consortium (2015) reports that enrollment in online courses continues to increase each year. Clay, Rowland, Packard (2008) and Parry (2010) suggest that this increase will play out in a variety of ways: some students will be earning online degrees; others will take online courses as part of more traditional degree and certificate programs; still other students will be enrolling in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) as part of their personal, professional, and/or academic growth. As the number of students taking online courses increases, educators strive to design online courses based on effective teaching practices (Akdemir & Koszalka, 2008; Carnaghan & Webb, 2007).

Research studies analyzing the effectiveness of online courses typically use a list of effective teaching strategies as the basis of the evaluation (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013, Britto, Ford, & Wise, 2014). Although it is important to design and assess online courses around best practices, it is also important to consider the desires of students taking online courses (Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013). Moore and Kearsley (1996) as well as Yukselturk and

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Yildirim (2008) each posit that student satisfaction is an important constraint affecting the quality of online learning experiences. Hence, there is a continued need for further research examining student satisfaction with current practice. Rubin, Fernandes and Avgerinou (2013) defined social, cognitive and teaching presence as necessary elements for students to be satisfied with their online course experiences.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Researchers have shown that students have favorable opinions about online learning, both wholly online and hybrid, as compared with traditional face-to-face classroom experiences. In general, students like the flexibility of online learning. Greener (2008) found that students taking hybrid courses preferred the flexibility and the interaction with course content of the online component of their courses. Students also believed that they learned as much in these formats as they would in traditional classes. Meyer (2007) showed that students taking hybrid courses were more involved in their online discussions than they were in their classroom discussions. Further, Meyer's (2003) research indicated that students believed that online discussions took more time, but provided them with more opportunity for thoughtful and well-supported responses. Anderson and Haddad (2005) also found that female students felt more comfortable expressing their opinions online and that they believed they learned more as a result.

Other researchers have studied what practices ensure student success in online learning (Al-Shalchi, 2009; Fish & Wickersham, 2009) and what students expect and prefer in their courses (Choy, McNickle, & Clayton, 2002; Cuthrell & Lyon, 2007; Dziuban, et al., 2015; Greener, 2008; Hara & Kling, 1999; Morris, 2010; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004; Wu & Hiltz, 2004; Young, 2006). Fish and Gill (2009) point out in their study that online teachers need to consider the needs of the most frequent student in online courses, the adult learner. Almala (2007) suggests that technology used for online courses should be 'user-friendly' for both the student and the instructor. Fish and Wickersham (2009) also point out that online instructors must provide support for students such as tutorials for the course software at the beginning of the course and content that is easy to navigate with high quality images, graphics, and video streams. Keengwe, Diteeyont and Lawson-Body (2012) also suggest that effective e-learning tools play a role in student satisfaction in online courses. Glass and Sue's (2008) study of an online mathematics course showed that students found the immediate feedback from homework as an important feature of the class. Students reported liking the ability to access help as needed and being able to access information quickly from the online text. A study of a hybrid course at a British university, Greener (2008) found that students preferred small sizes for their online group work. Participants reported that small groups allowed for effective online discussions that forced all group members to take part in all aspects of the assignment (Greener, p. 252). Kuo et al. (2013) echo this finding that interaction plays an important role in online learning. Dziuban, et al. (2015) surveyed 1,197 participants and found that engaged learning, and agency were significant satisfaction factors in online courses. However, the researchers found that the assessment aspect of the course was not found to be an area of satisfaction. The researchers determined that satisfaction in an online course may stem from expectations of students before they enroll in the course.

Given the expanding body of knowledge regarding student preferences in online courses, the purpose of this study was to add to what is known about participants' actual experiences in online courses. The researchers also wanted to compare what students report to be their actual experiences to what they say they prefer with online learning experiences. The specific research questions

were: 1) What are the participants' experiences in online courses? 2) What are the participants' preferences regarding online courses? and 3) How do participants' reported actual online course experiences compare to their reported online course preferences?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

In this study, we surveyed participants taking at least one online course at a state university in the rural southwest. All of the courses were delivered via BlackBoard Academic Suite. Respondents (N=265) were students with varying academic interests and backgrounds. 91 (34.3%) were male; 172 (64.9%) were female; and 2 (0.8%) failed to indicate their gender. The majority of participants, 175 (66.0%), were graduate students. The remainder of the participants were 44 (16.2%) college seniors; 29 (10.6%) juniors; 12 (4.9%) sophomores; three (1.5%) were freshmen; and two (0.8%) did not indicate their level of education. In terms of ethnicity, 128 (48.3%) participants described themselves as Caucasian; 120 (45.3%) as Hispanic; eight (3.0%) as African American; and the remaining nine (3.45%), identified as another ethnicity or did not respond. Almost half or 131 (49.4%) indicated that they currently had a GPA between 3.5 and 4.0; 85 (32.1%) indicated a GPA of 3.0 to 3.49; 35 (13.2%) a GPA of 2.5 to 2.99; 12 (4.5%) a GPA of 2.0 to 2.49; one (0.4%) a GPA of 1.0 to 1.99; and one (0.4%) participant did not respond. 168 (63.4%) of the respondents noted that they had taken four or more online courses. Furthermore, 31 (11.7%) had taken three online courses; 42 (15.8%) had taken two; and 24 (9.1%), had taken one other online course. Just more than half or 137 (51.7%) of the participants declared themselves as education majors; no other choice of major yielded more than 11.0% of the responses. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants by major. Finally, 113 of the students indicated that they lived within 30 miles of the university; five stated that they lived between 31 and 60 miles away. Nine of the participants stated that they lived between 61 to 100 miles away; and a final 135 participants, responded that their residences were over 101 miles from the campus.

Table 1: Student Reported Academic Majors

Item	Number	%
Animal Science	18	6.79
Behavioral and Social Sciences	5	1.88
Biology	13	4.90
Business Administration	6	2.26
Computer Science & Mathematics	3	1.13
Criminal Justice	29	10.94
Education	137	51.69
Fine Arts & Communication	4	1.50
Industrial Technology	2	.75
Languages & Literature	18	6.79
Natural Resource Management	4	1.50
Physical Education	1	.37
Vocational Nursing	2	.75
Other (not specified)	23	8.67
Total	265	100

INSTRUMENT

To examine the issues of student preferences in online courses, a survey instrument was designed and administered. Content validity was a significant concern to the researchers. Brown (2001) points out that content validity in surveys refers to the degree that the content matches the theoretical construct under study. We began by examining a larger body of research collected in previous online studies and looked at each for emerging themes related to student preferences and expectations with online courses. Sixteen themes were identified (see Table 11) and, based on these themes; questions were developed and refined by examining and re-examining survey items and discarding those items that did not contribute to the goal of the study. Likewise, similar items were combined to reduce survey length.

The resultant survey was divided into three sections. In section one, we collected demographic information about the participants. In section two, we inquired about the participants' experiences relating to the specific online course(s) in which they were enrolled. In section three, we included questions in which the participants rated the level of importance of the key elements of online courses in general to determine their preferences. Section one data were collected through a series of multiple-choice questions. In sections two and three, participants were asked to respond to items based on the following scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. A Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to determine the reliability of the instrument and resulted in $\alpha = .88$.

The survey instrument was placed in each BlackBoard course. Participants were provided a written explanation through the informed consent, explaining the purpose of the research was to examine participants' experiences in online courses. They were requested to complete each section of the survey as it related to the specific course they were taking. Participants also were notified that their responses were being collected by someone other than their course professor and that their responses would not have an impact on their course grade. The survey remained available to participants during the last month of the course term. Because participants might be taking multiple online courses and thus could take the survey multiple times, all participants were asked to complete sections one and two in each web course they were taking. However, participants were instructed to complete section three only once. The final number of usable surveys totaled 265 with a response rate of 45%.

DATA ANALYSIS

Means and standard deviations were calculated for each survey item. To compare student experiences with preferences, the researchers first selected which variables to compare by identifying like items from both the student experiences and student preferences sections, such as items about the instructor, course dynamics, curriculum and materials, and workload. These variables were then compared using the Borich (1980) Model. The Borich Model calculates a Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score (MWDS) that can be used to rank items based on calculated differences between what the participants preferred and what they experienced. The MWDS is calculated by subtracting the experience rating from the preference rating of each item. A weighted discrepancy score is subsequently calculated on each individual for each of the items by multiplying the discrepancy score by the mean preference rating. A MWDS for each of the items is calculated by taking the sum of the weighted discrepancy scores and dividing by the number of observations.

RESULTS

ONLINE COURSE STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Tables 2-5 summarize the results of the statistical analysis of the first research question, which concerned participants' experiences in the online courses. The responses were divided into four categories: instructor, course dynamics, materials, and workload.

The first area of the survey analyzed were questions related to the instructor. These survey items directly connected to the activities of the instructor of the course. Table 3 shows the mean responses to the individual items. Negatively worded survey questions were reverse coded prior to statistical analysis in Table 2 and subsequent tables.

Table 2: Student Experiences in the Online Course (Instructor)

Item	M	SD
The instructor was competent to teach in the online environment.	4.46	0.92
The instructor provided timely feedback on assignments and exams.	4.40	0.92
The instructor stimulated my thinking on the subject matter.	4.34	0.96
The instructor was available to me.	4.38	0.84
The instructor engaged me in the course.	4.19	1.05
The instructor's expectations for assignments were difficult to understand.	2.52	1.21

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Overall, students' experience with the instructors was positive. Five of the six items identified in this area produced mean scores of over 4.00. Participants indicated that their experiences in the courses showed that their instructors were competent (M=4.46), provided timely feedback (M= 4.40), were available to the students (M= 4.38), stimulated their thinking (M= 4.34), and engaged participants in the course (M= 4.19). The participants were undecided about expectations (M=2.52).

The next set of survey items was concerned with course dynamics, or how the pattern of activity within the course took place. In developing these items, the researchers looked to examine the interactions among the course instructor, students and content. Survey items for each are indicated in tables 3-5, but will be discussed together.

Table 3: Student Experiences with the Instructor in the Online Course (Course Dynamics)

Item	M	SD
The option was available to meet the instructor through face-to-face office hours or by appointment.	4.25	1.17
The option was available to interact with the instructor in real-time through the telephone, chat, Skype, or some type of Internet meeting software.	3.65	1.38
The availability of the instructor positively affected my final grade.	3.40	1.42

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 4: Student Experiences with other Students in the Online Course (Course Dynamics)

Item	M	SD
Interacting with other students in this course helped to improve my grade.	2.26	1.14
I was able to get to know the other students in the class well.	2.15	0.98
Having opportunities to interact with other students helped me complete the course.	2.07	1.15

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 5: Student Experiences with the Content in the Online Course (Course Dynamics)

Item	M	SD
Content was delivered in an appropriately timed pace.	4.50	0.79
Assignment instructions were complete and comprehensible.	4.49	0.76
There was freedom within this online course for me to manage my own time with regard to completing assignments.	4.24	1.04
The organization and structure contributed to my success in the course.	4.15	1.05
The course schedule and rubrics provided helped me to improve my grade.	4.12	1.00
The course structure supported my efforts at self-discipline. (e.g., regularly scheduled assignments and activities created a rhythm that established a consistent study pattern.)	4.08	1.07
I was able to slow down or speed up the coursework according to my ability to master the content.	3.98	1.22
There were so many links, references and additional resources that I did not have time to explore them.	2.49	1.21
The option was available to attend face-to-face lectures.	1.58	1.08
This course contained a lot of "busy work" that did not enhance my learning.	1.79	1.24

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Most of the responses in this section of the survey suggested that participants rated the elements of course dynamics highly, ranging from a mean of 3.65 to 4.50. Participants indicated that content was delivered in an appropriately timed pace (M= 4.50) and assignments were complete and comprehensible (M= 4.49). Within the course framework, participants felt that the instructor was available to meet with them face-to-face (M= 4.25). The next two survey responses indicated that course structure allowed them freedom to manage their own time to complete assignments (M= 4.24) and contributed to their success in the course (M= 4.15). Participants continued to suggest that course structure provided schedules and rubrics that contributed to their success in the course (M= 4.12) and that the structure supported their efforts at self-discipline (M= 4. 08). Closely related to this last item, participants indicated that they were able to speed up or slow down the coursework in order to master the content (M=3.98). Finally, participants showed that interactions with the instructor were available through real-time means, such as by telephone, chat or some type of Internet software (M=3.65).

Two items in this area were relatively neutral to the participants with means that they hovered around the midpoint of the scale. First, they felt that the availability of the instructor positively affected their grade (3.40). Next, they indicated that they did not have sufficient time to explore additional resources available in the course (M= 2.49).

Next, in this area, three items connected to other students in the course are found together in this set. First, interacting with other students helped improve participants' grade (M=2.26). Second, participants were able to get to know other students well (M= 2.15); and lastly, interactions with other students helped in the completion of the course (M=2.07).

The final responses in this set suggested that students did not experience too much busy work in the course (M=1.79) and that they rarely had the option to attend face-to-face lectures (M=1.58).

Online courses contain various materials available to participants that contribute to the function of the course. These include, in part, rubrics for assignments, examples of assignments, technology resources needed for completion of the course, and different types of supplemental materials. Table 6 shows the participants' results from the survey in relation to these materials.

Table 6: Student Experiences in the Online Course (Materials)

Item	M	SD
A detailed "course schedule" listing all assignments and due dates was provided in an easy to access and view format.	4.70	0.66
Course materials were legible, viewable, and audible as the case may be.	4.49	0.81
Assignment instructions were complete and comprehensible.	4.49	0.76
Useful supplemental materials were available.	4.00	1.09
Rubrics were provided in advance for all assignments.	3.94	1.28
Technology resources enhanced learning.	3.93	1.04
I used the supplemental materials.	3.60	1.21
Examples of completed assignments were provided.	3.19	1.52
There were so many supplemental resources, I was unsure of what content I actually needed to learn.	1.84	1.17
Learning new technology applications prevented me from learning course content.	1.80	1.21

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Generally, participants expressed that their experiences with course materials were positive. They indicated that a course schedule was provided and was easy to access for the course (M= 4.70). They ranked two items, course materials available to participants were found to be easy to read, view, or hear, and assignment instructions were complete and comprehensible the same (M= 4.49). Participants also suggested that useful supplemental materials were available to them (M= 4.00). Also rated highly were the rubrics provided in advance for assignments (M= 3.94) and technology resources enhanced learning (M= 3.93). They also suggested that they used the supplemental materials with some frequency (M= 3.60).

Study participants indicated that examples of completed assignments were sometimes available to them (M= 3.19). They also specified that neither the amount of supplemental resources (M= 1.84) nor learning new technologies interfered with learning the course content.

Table 7: Student Experiences in the Online Course (Workload)

Item	M	SD
The workload was appropriate for the credits offered.	4.34	0.93
I worked as hard in this online course as I have in my face-to-face courses.	4.34	1.00

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

The last area surveyed was the participants' experience with the workload of the course, particularly connected to amount of credit offered and in comparison to face-to-face courses. The items from Table 6 indicated that participants generally agreed that workload was appropriate for the credit offered (M=4.34) and that they worked as hard in the online course as they did in face-to-face courses (M= 4.34).

ONLINE COURSE STUDENT PREFERENCES

The data from the next set of items from the survey are related to student preferences and are summarized in Tables 8-13. Like student experiences, these data are also categorized by instructor, course dynamics, materials, and workload.

Table 8 shows the mean of the responses to these preferences in connection with instructor.

Table 8: Student Preferences in the Online Course (Instructor)

Item	M	SD
The instructor needs to have proficient technology skills for me to be successful.	3.06	1.09
The instructor needs to stimulate my thinking in a course.	3.00	1.22
It is important to me that the instructor's online teaching ability is effective, so that my grade does not suffer.	2.80	1.09

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

The findings of the survey suggest that participants' views of the online course instructor tend towards neutral ratings. Participants indicated that the instructor's technology skills are not a major issue for them to be successful (M= 3.06). Likewise, participants responded with a completely neutral score to indicated that they do not have a preference for whether course instructors are able to stimulate their thinking in the course (M= 3.00). Lastly, the instructor's online teaching ability is not a huge issue when considering the participants' grade in the course (M=2.80).

The next set of survey items examined participants' preferences in relation to course dynamics. Again, the course dynamics included interactions among the instructor, students and content.

Table 9: Student Preferences Regarding the Instructor in the Online Course (Course dynamics)

Item	M	SD
It is important to me to meet the instructor face-to-face at some point during the online course semester.	2.18	1.39
It is important to me to have a video/audio introduction from the instructor in online courses.	2.12	1.26
It is important to me to meet the instructor face-to-face before the online course begins.	1.98	1.29

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 10: Student Preferences Regarding Other Students in the Online Course (Course dynamics)

Item	M	SD
It is important for me to be able to work at my own pace in an online course even if it means less student interaction.	3.71	1.13
It is important to me to get to know the other students in my online classes.	2.24	1.20
It is important to me to be able to work in small groups in online classes.	1.92	1.89
It is important to me to be able to interact with other students in motivating me to complete the online course.	1.92	1.19

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 11: Student Preferences Regarding Course Content in the Online Course (Course dynamics)

Item	M	SD
It is important to me to have detailed instructions regarding completing assignments and when they are due in online courses.	4.61	0.68
It is important to me to have a structured and well-organized online course.	4.53	0.80
It is important that course content relates to course objectives and assessments in online courses.	4.49	0.76
It is important to me for online courses to follow the syllabus.	4.48	0.80
It is important to me that all course content be available in its entirety at the beginning of an online course.	4.11	0.99
It is important for me to be able to set my own schedule for course work in online classes.	3.86	1.13
It is important to me to have feedback from the instructor in an online course.	3.70	1.29
It is important to me to have the option to attend some face-to-face lectures at some point during the semester in an online course.	2.09	1.33

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Participants' preferences in the area of course dynamics are split with seven of the responses indicating that they agreed with the survey item and with seven indicating that they disagreed. Participants prefer that course content relates to objectives and assessments (M= 4.49) and that they have detailed instructions for completing assignments and due dates (M= 4.61). The next two responses are related. Participants showed that their preference is to have the course structured and well-organized (M= 4.53) and to have the course follow the syllabus (M= 4.48).

Next, participants suggested that they preferred to have the entire content of the course available from the beginning of the course (M= 4.11). Participants also indicated that they preferred to set their own schedule for an online course (M= 3.86), receive timely feedback (M=3.70), and to be able to work at their own pace, even if they must sacrifice interaction with other students (M= 3.71).

Responses for the other seven items tended towards the other end of the scale. Participants did not prefer to become acquainted with others enrolled in the course (M= 2.24). The participants' responses indicated that they neither preferred to meet with the instructor face-to-face during the course (M= 2.18) nor that they desired an introduction from the instructor at the beginning of the class (M= 2.12). Participants did not favor the option for face-to-face lectures during the semester of an online course (M= 2.09). It was also indicated that meeting with the course instructor before the class began was not important (M= 1.98). The responses to the final two items in this area both indicated that working with other students in the course was not important or motivating (M=1.92, each).

Table 12: Student Preferences in the Online Course (Materials)

Item	M	SD
It is important to me to have a course schedule or overview of the assignments and activities with due dates in online courses	4.67	0.64
It is important to me that all online course materials are legible (scanned documents are clear, photos not too small or too large, audio and video volume is adequate, etc.).	4.37	0.87
It is important to me to have rubrics showing how the instructor will grade assignments in online courses.	4.09	1.07
It is important to me that the technology performs well all the time.	3.94	1.07
It is important to me to be provided with examples of assignments.	3.73	1.24
It is important to me that supplemental materials be limited in online courses to prevent overload of information.	3.18	1.15

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

With respect to course materials, participants tended to indicate their preferences that agreed with survey themes (See Table 13). Higher mean scores were evidence that course members preferred that the course have a schedule showing due dates of assignments and activities (M= 4.67). Next participants suggested that they favor online materials, both visual and audio, that are easy to see or hear (M= 4.37). Participants also preferred rubrics to be available (M= 4.09) and that technology work well during the duration of the course (M= 3.94). Participants also favored having examples of assignments in the course (M= 3.73). The final survey item related to materials shows that participants neither agreed nor disagreed with the idea that supplemental materials be limited to prevent information overload (M= 3.18).

Next, Table 14 presents information about the participants' preferences specific to workload in the online course. They desired seeing the relationship with course objectives in order to help them put effort into the course (M= 4.25). Similarly, they preferred to have the course content be challenging to motivate them to work hard (M= 3.84). Finally, participants indicated that they disagreed with the idea that online courses are less work than face-to-face courses (M = 2.00).

Table 14: Student Preferences in the Online Course (Workload)

Item	M	SD
I don't mind putting in a lot of effort in an online course if I can see the relationship to the course objectives.	4.25	0.87
It is important to me that the online course has intellectually challenging content to motivate me to work hard.	3.84	0.98
I prefer online courses because they are less work than face-to-face courses.	2.00	1.16

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

COMPARING STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH PREFERENCES

The final research question was about comparing participants' actual experiences with online courses and their preferences with the same. The Mean Weighted Discrepancy Scores (MWDS) were calculated for the sixteen previously identified themes and the results are shown in Table 15. The perceived experience rating is subtracted from the perceived preference rating; therefore, positive MWDSs indicate that the perceived preference of the item is greater than the perceived experience. Conversely, if participants' experiences of an item are greater than their preferences, the MWDS is negative.

Table 15: Mean Weighted Discrepancy Scores for Selected Survey Variables.

Global Area	Ranking	MWDS	N
Utilization of a course schedule	1	2.79	211
Structured and well-organized course	2	1.78	211
Getting to know other students	3	0.20	213
Enhancement of course technology	4	0.19	211
Examples of assignments and rubrics provided	5	-0.14	210
Legible, viewable, & audible audio/visuals	6	-0.23	208
Assignment due dates provided in the course schedule	7	-0.42	211
Interaction with other students	8	-0.61	211
Opportunity to work at one's own pace	9	-0.87	210
Utilizing "real time" technology (Wimba, Skype, etc.)	10	-1.12	209
Opportunity to set one's own schedule	11	-1.72	209
Challenging workload	12	-1.74	208
Timely feedback	13	-2.67	211
Availability of supplemental materials	14	-2.76	211
Availability of complete assignment instructions	14	-2.76	210
Availability to meet with instructor	16	-4.45	211

Five of the variables hover around zero, indicating that participants' experiences and preferences align well in these aspects of the courses. These variables include getting to know other students (MWDS= 0.20), enhancement of course technology (MWDS= 0.19), assignment and rubric examples provided (MWDS= -0.14), audio and visuals that are legible, viewable and/or audible (MWDS= -0.23), and assignment due dates are provided in the course syllabus (MWDS= -0.42).

The two highest ranked positive variables were utilization of a course schedule (MWDS= 2.79) and a structured and well-organized course (MWDS= 1.78). These discrepancy scores suggested that the students' experiences did not meet their preference for a well-organized course.

Five scores landed between -0.50 and -2.00. These discrepancy scores indicated that the participants' experiences were slightly higher than their preferences. These items included: interaction with other students (MWDS= -0.61), opportunity to work at one's own pace (MWDS= -0.87), utilizing 'real time technology' (MWDS= -1.12), opportunity to set one's own schedule (MWDS= -1.72), and challenging workload (MWDS= -1.74).

Three of the final four areas achieved MWDSs between -2.00 and -3.00. These scores suggested that the discrepancy between experiences and preferences in online courses were becoming greater. Participants experienced more timely feedback than they desired (MWDS= -2.67). Likewise, they experienced more availability of supplemental materials and complete assignment instruction, each area having a MWDS of -2.76.

The final area examined indicated a major incongruence between participants' experiences and preferences. This item, availability to meet with the instructor, received a MWDS of -4.45. This one item suggests that there was a major difference between the participants' preferences and their experiences in regards to meeting with their instructors.

DISCUSSION

In the first research question, we asked, "What are the participants' experiences in online courses?" The present results indicated 90% of the participants had taken multiple online courses, which supports findings that online courses are increasing in both popularity and that students are enrolling in them more frequently (Dziuban, et al., 2015; Fish & Gill, 2009; Moisey & Hughes, 2004). Given that most of the participants were not novices to online courses, the ratings of a majority of the items surveyed yielded high ratings of their experiences. Overall, participants in the present study: 1) reported that they were pleased with the instructor and the course dynamics (schedules, rubrics, structure, instructor availability); 2) positively rated the course curricula and materials; 3) noted that their instructors stimulated their thinking and were available during office hours; and 4) did not report excessive busy work, excessive supplemental materials, or having to fight the online technology. Other research in online course development supports these findings. Herbert (2006) found that online students surveyed ranked faculty interaction and support highest. Similarly, Greener (2008) put forth that students in online courses expect strong instructor support with both technology (eg. images, graphics, videos) and course content (eg. readings, examples, rubrics). Glass and Sue (2008) showed that students rated well designed materials and logically sequenced curriculum as important. Davis, Little, and Stewart (2008) posited that the needs of online learners, specifically adult online learners, must guide the development of curriculum. These learners desired work that is immediately applicable and not superfluous. Moore and Kearsley's (1996) research echoed these findings. When discussing the construction of online courses, theorists (Fish & Gill, 2009; Fish & Wickersham, 2009; Moisey & Hughes, 2004) pointed out that course instructors must plan in advance to meet the needs of course content, technology and instructor availability.

On the other end of the student experience spectrum, we were obliged to look at those items with "average" ratings hovering around 3.0 in order to find areas for improvement. In this area, participants: 1) lacked examples of completed assignments were provided; and 2) found assignment expectation difficult to understand. In the case of both items, providing such

examples and explaining assignments better could improve the mean scores. These findings support those of Moisey and Hughes (2004), who showed that students need to be provided with various types of resources to be successful in online courses. Young (2006) also suggested that meaningful examples were necessary in online courses, in that immediate access to the instructor is not always feasible. Lack of such examples can cause frustration and reduce motivation (Young, 2006, p. 72).

The second research question read, "What are the participants' preference regarding online courses?" It is not surprising to find that participants expressed their preferences readily by rating ten items high (M= 4.00 or above). The first group of preferences is related to course organization. In this area, students indicated that they preferred: 1) course content that related to assessments; 2) detailed instruction and due dates; 3) a structured and well-organized course; 4) a course that followed the syllabus; 5) an overview of the course; and 6) course objectives. As the consumers of the content of the course, it makes sense that student want a product that is easily accessed and used. Instructors need to realize that organization of the content of the course can go far in creating a positive learning environment. This finding supports work done by Young (2006), who found that students want instructors who facilitate online courses effectively and who deliver a valuable course via consistent and timely communication which promotes a partnership in learning between the instructor and student. Similarly, Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka and Conceição-Runlee's (2000) work indicates that instructors must be cognizant of the organization of the online course to facilitate a positive experience for all involved.

The second area of student preferences concerns materials. Participants indicated: 1) they desired availability to course materials in their entirety from the beginning of the course; 2) that course materials (including technology) that are clear; and 3) rubrics. Sometimes online course instructors only make materials available to students as the course progresses. The findings in the present study indicate that students wish to see all materials upfront and in a clear manner, including how they will be assessed. Frey, Faul, and Yankelov (2003) showed that students posting of detailed assignments online as a major perceived preference for students. Related to this issue, Fish and Wickersham (2009) found that online courses need to be easy to navigate for students and contain high quality graphics (cf. Keengwe, Diteeyont, & Lawson-Body, 2012). Lastly, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) found that the structure of the course, including technology, greatly impacts the perceptions of online students. If the course is easy to navigate, students can find and use the materials provided to them, which will create a more favorable learning environment.

On the other end of the preference ratings, only three items had preference mean scores of less than 2.0. In general, students did not: 1) prefer to meet the instructor face-to-face; 2) want to work in small groups; and 3) need to meet with other students. The point could be made that all three items would be expected to make the above list when surveying students who have chosen to take an online course where instructors and students are not readily available. These findings contradict Moore and Kearsley's (1996) and Herbert's (2008) findings that student prefer to have a strong faculty presence in the classroom. However, the idea that students did not prefer faculty interaction supports Glass and Sue's (2008) research that indicated online students tended to avoid working with faculty and other students. Their research indicated that, unless required, students placed low value on discussions with others in the course. Well-structured group work is cited as a positive aspect to any course, online, hybrid, or otherwise. Educational theory tells us that social interactions can lead to greater and more effective learning (Grabinger & Dunlap, 2000; Vygotsky, 1980). Braxton, Shaw Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) posit that a

student's sense of belonging in an online course can play a significant factor in their success. Well managed group work can help meet this need (Vonderwell, 2003). Palloff and Pratt (2001) suggest that online learners need to learn strategies for effective collaboration. Approaches to interaction must be taught by the online instructor (Vonderwell, 2003).

Finally, in the third research question, we asked, "How do participants' reported actual online course experiences compare to their reported online course preferences?" When analyzing the weighted discrepancy scores, we sought to determine those areas of online study that could be improved by determining any major discrepancies between what the students preferred and their actual experiences. Most of the MWDSs did not indicate that there was a major difference between the participants' experiences and preferences in the courses related to this study. The one extreme exception is that participants indicated that the availability to meet the course instructor was not as important to them as they had experienced in the course. The presence of the instructor in online courses tends to be an important factor in the positive evaluation of online courses (Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy-Elliason, & Shea, 2007; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013; Mahmood, Mahmood & Malik, 2012). Whereas availability of the course instructor is crucial for a successful course, forcing engagement with the instructor can be perceived as a negative. Greener (2008) pointed out that students take online courses because of their flexibility. Requiring students to interact with the course instructor in a non-meaningful manner may make the students feel inhibited.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This online survey was limited to the student population of one southern state university. The findings are limited to application of colleges or universities of similar size and demographics. The survey also did not distinguish by course type. Students in a variety of courses participated in the study, so the application to specific content areas is limited. A final limitation is that most of the respondents tended to be familiar with online courses. A survey that included more novice or a greater mix of experienced students may have provided different results.

Further research should be conducted in specific content areas that could discriminate better the experiences and preferences of differing areas of study. The study also should be conducted with a broader pool of participants.

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