Validating Student Feedback through Review of Online Program Delivery Best Practices

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Abstract

This paper reports the experiences of faculty members in a fully online master’s program as they seek to validate student feedback on their online learning experiences by conducting a brief literature review on best practices in online program delivery. The findings of independently conducted focus groups are reported, with students identifying four key areas for improvement in their online experience: interaction, material delivery, expectations, and technological/“other” support. Each area is then considered in light of current research in the field of online learning to inform suggestions for improvement.

Key words: Student Feedback, Online Learning, Distance Education, Program Evaluation, Online Education Best Practices
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The growth rate of online education programs far exceeds the total higher education rate. Online enrollment has achieved an annual growth rate of ten percent compared to the less than one percent in the overall higher education student population (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In the years spanning 2002 and 2010, the number of students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions who were enrolled in at least one fully online course grew from 1.6 million to an impressive 6.1 million. By fall semester of 2010, online enrollment accounted for 31.3% of total enrollment at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2011). This trend is expected to continue, as students seem drawn to the convenience and flexibility of online course delivery and its “‘anytime, anywhere’ concept” (Aharony, 2011, p. 8) as they balance their academic lives with their personal and professional obligations (Murdoch & Williams, 2011).

With a reported 89% of public four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. offering online courses, the scope of the online learning environment is vast (Parker, Lenhart & Moore, 2011). Effective teaching strategies are essential in any learning environment, but the transition to the online learning environment can be particularly challenging for instructors. A key challenge is the fostering of an environment that facilitates learning through virtual collaboration and competently addresses student learning objectives in a manner that is well-suited for the online environment (Murdoch & Williams, 2011). Many instructors also admit to feeling challenged to motivate students to participate in and adapt to the online learning environment, citing their own low level of competency in making the adaptation to the online classroom (Hughes & Daykin, 2002; Bawane & Spector, 2009). Students’ lack of motivation and participation in the online classroom can be particularly troublesome for younger adult students, as they seem to lack the tendency to engage with their academic studies, value peer-peer interaction and peer-instructor interaction, and modify their learning strategies effectively for the online environment. Somewhat surprisingly, older adult students seem to possess those tendencies and demonstrate the motivation and participation necessary to be more successfully engaged and productive online students (Dibiase & Kidwai, 2010). Further, instructors may struggle with the electronic boundaries of the online learning environment and can have difficulties establishing when the class day is “‘over”’ (Ragan, 2012).

These challenges and more are evident in our online master’s degree program and are currently being addressed by our faculty. Our fully online program has been in place for the past seven years. Last year, the university online learning unit conducted a focus group with our online graduate students to determine our effectiveness in online program delivery and identify key areas needing improvement.
Methods

Participants

The focus group consisted of female graduate students enrolled in a fully online master’s program (n=3). Two of the participants were part-time students, and one was a full-time student. Two of the participants were in their second semester of the program, while the other participant was in her first semester of the program. One participant identified herself as an experienced online user, while the other two participants stated the graduate program was their first experience as a fully online student. As for employment status, one participant was employed full-time, one participant was employed part-time, and one participant was not employed. Geographically, one participant lived in close proximity to the university, while one lived in-state, an hour from campus, and the third participant lived out-of-state. No further demographic information was collected on the participants.

Procedures

The university online learning unit awarded our department a grant with individual stipends and a two-week intensive, individual Blackboard training for all faculty members with teaching or administrative duties in our online master’s program. Prior to the training, the online learning unit solicited participation in a conference-call focus group by contacting all currently enrolled online master’s students by email. The intent of the focus group was to identify key areas for improvement in our program delivery that could inform faculty training.

The focus group was conducted with an open-ended interview style. Participants were invited to engage in an open dialogue regarding the following topics related to their experiences in the online master’s program: positive feedback for the program as a whole, student needs, their transition to the fully online experience, specific course feedback, and issues related to program entry, scheduling, and registration. In addition, basic demographic data was recorded for the participants.

Focus group discussions were recorded on tape and transcribed. Transcripts were summarized, with all identifying information removed, and later provided to faculty members in our department for review and evaluative feedback.

Results and Discussion

While focus group respondents suggested many appropriate strategies are employed, there is a recognized need for growth as we strive to offer our students an engaging and well-executed plan of study. Analysis of student feedback informed us that our students desired change in four key areas: interaction, material delivery, expectations, and technological/ “other” support, all of which are addressed in current literature relating to effective online education.
Interaction

In our student feedback, we learned that students desired more and consistent interaction and valued both peer-peer interaction and peer-instructor interaction. While some courses in our program offered online chats, which facilitated synchronous interactions, it was not a consistent offering across courses. In courses with regularly scheduled chats, students reported learning from each other and broadening their professional insights as they engaged with each other, benefitting from their varied professional, personal, and even geographical backgrounds. In fact, across courses, enhanced peer interaction and collaboration was expressed as a more relevant need than increased peer-instructor interaction. Students reported “feeling alone out there” and indicated they would have appreciated the opportunity to share their anxieties and challenges with each other as they progressed through the graduate program.

Though all our courses included an asynchronous interactive piece through discussion boards, suggestions for improvement in their utilization were offered. Students expressed an interest in faculty seeking to better facilitate class discussion through the boards, rather than merely requiring a certain number of student posts to receive a grade. Hughes and Daykin (2002) suggest this is a common oversight in online delivery, with instructors needing additional training in how to effectively facilitate online discussion. Rather than focusing merely on the technology of online delivery, they encourage instructors to seek out training, research and theories regarding how to encourage student contribution and discussion.

The above feedback seems consistent with our follow-up research in online education literature. Interaction is considered a crucial piece of the puzzle in both the quality of online learning and in student cognitive outcomes (Han & Johnson, 2012). A deeper, reflective learning that bolsters achieved learning goals is the seeming by-product of peer interaction in the online classroom (Mayes, 2006). When learners have ample opportunity to share experiences with peers in the online environment through multiple synchronous and asynchronous means, good student relationships are facilitated, which lend a sense of community, accountability, and a collective sense of knowledge construction to the learning environment (Chai & Tan, 2009; Lee, 2012).

The emphasis on the potential value of online discussions was also supported in the literature. Threaded discussions allow for critical thinking and reflection by affording the online learner time to read, respond, and seek additional knowledge as the discussion ensues (De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004). When learners interact with each other and course content at deeper levels through online discussions, internalization of knowledge is more readily achieved (Dennen & Wieland, 2007). Further, these threaded discussions are permanently stored, which is important for the facilitation of student reflection as students continue to navigate the course content and return to the discussions, as needed, to reconsider and reflect on their emerging levels of understanding (Li, 2004). Providing guidelines for students on when to contribute to ongoing, threaded discussions and expectations for how to respond to others’ posts are recommended starting points for instructors as they strive for the full academic outcome potential of online discussion boards (Hughes & Daykin, 2002).
Material delivery

Students expressed confidence in the faculty’s level of expertise and knowledge in our field and expressed an appreciation for the professional and personal relevance of the materials covered. However, there were some frustrations noted in both the methods of delivery across the courses and in the lack of supporting materials provided. Some students expressed that the readings were intensive and often difficult to comprehend independently and expressed a desire for more instructor explanation and instructor-provided supplements. This was, perhaps, the most troubling revelation we uncovered.

Students, whether online or traditional, need consistent guidance, support, and leadership from their instructors (Cole & Kritzer, 2009). Instructors in the online environment are charged with providing meaningful examples to support course content, facilitating the course in an effective manner, designing and delivering a course with merit, and demonstrating a genuine concern for student learning and outcomes (Young, 2006). Effective online instructors challenge their students with high expectations for academic and learning outcomes. They present material in creative, challenging ways, incorporating relevant and practical assignments aimed at facilitating the students’ ability to apply what is learned. Further, they affirm and encourage student efforts to master the content (Edwards, Perry & Janzen, 2011).

One example of effective content delivery is the practice known as “chunking”, which involves subdividing course materials and presenting them in short segments for students who benefit from brief learning sessions. The recommended model for subdividing materials consists of providing a passive learning material to support the assigned reading, such as a brief, narrated Powerpoint, that is then followed by a brief active-learning experience to reinforce the presented concept (Kelly, 2010). It is suggested that online students will log in to the class more frequently if material is presented in this condensed fashion and will be more prone to participate in threaded discussions and collaborative activities due to the increased log-ins. In this manner, the individual student who learns better through subdivided materials benefits, while the entire class benefits from increased participation and an active sense of community in the online class (Kelly, 2010; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004).

Expectations

The need for consistency and clarity for instructor expectations was also an evident theme in our student feedback. Students expressed frustrations that there was a lack of consistency in how instructors’ courses were set up and “looked” online, which added to their anxiety level when they were looking for information and trying to navigate course materials. The fact that instructors set different assignment “windows” and due dates was also problematic for students. Further, students reported that instructors varied greatly in providing feedback and responding to student questions and issues. In fact, even the methods for feedback differed across courses and instructors, with some instructors utilizing Blackboard messages and others utilizing university email accounts for communications.

Consistency and clarity for users are indicated in online education literature as components vital for effective delivery (Shank, 2011). When courses incorporate continuity
across components in course modules, students acclimate more quickly and efficiently to the rhythms and patterns of the course. When instructors within a degree program adhere to a format that is consistent and predictable across the courses offered, the students report feeling more comfortable navigating their course content. In addition, faculty report a sense of gratitude for the direction and guidance a consistent course format and template provide them as they design and deliver their courses (Kelly, 2011).

Shank (2011) suggests that instructors offer clear explanations to online learners in how to get started navigating course content and to remain open to student feedback when concerns appear to be common across the course. Instructors may benefit from setting up their own student accounts for this purpose, so they have a first-hand look at what the students are seeing when they log in to the course. Ongoing records of areas in the course that seem to confuse or frustrate the students can be beneficial for instructors as they plan and implement future course revisions (Shank, 2011).

**Technological and “other” support**

In the area of technological and other forms of support, students indicated the need for Blackboard training prior to the start of the semester. It seemed evident that students desire to start the semester ready to tackle academic material, having already been initiated into the technology side of being an online learner. Shank (2011) validates this feedback by suggesting faculty offer an online orientation prior to the start of the semester that allows students opportunities to practice logging into their courses, locating course syllabi and required materials, submitting assignments, and communicating with instructors and fellow students. In so doing, students are empowered technologically to start their coursework and are free to focus on the academic content as the semester ensues.

Students also expressed the need for additional resources that are hindered by the distance factor of their education. Traditional students benefit from many campus resources readily available to them that become challenging to provide for the distance learner. For instance, checking out library books to supplement course readings is a non-event for the traditional student, but it is a resource that has not been navigated for our fully online students. The traditional student, during advisement, makes an appointment and has a face-to-face session with the instructor. This one-on-one time often becomes a valuable discussion time to explore career avenues and professional opportunities in addition to the “nuts and bolts” course-scheduling issues handled during advisement. The need for some sort of online community to alert students to services and resources available to them was clear. Again, this suggests a student need for more interaction and connection. By better linking students to resources and fully supporting their needs, they would feel more connected both to their online program and to their university as a whole.

Surprisingly, searches in the literature for supporting the fully online learner through campus resources were not productive. This suggests an area for future exploration in making the student experiences for traditional students and distance learners equivalent in the level of support provided.
This research provides meaningful insights into the experiences of fully online students with respect to their needs and desires for a more engaging and effective program delivery. The small sample size was a limitation of the study. Even with repeated emailed attempts to solicit participation in the focus group, only three students responded and agreed to participate. The fact that we were not directly involved in the solicitation or collection of the data likely yielded authentic student feedback, with no fear of academic repercussions from their open dialogue. However, having no role in planning the focus group or providing direction for what data would be most beneficial to our faculty, both for research and application purposes, was a limitation. Data was presented to us in summary form only, and we had no access to full transcription notes. Demographic data is incomplete, as no data was collected on participants’ racial identities or age. Information on age of the participants would have been beneficial, as the literature on online education best practices indicates varying experiences in online education and engagement based on student age (Dibiase & Kidwai, 2010).

Online education continues to grow. In order to deliver quality online programming, current online programs must review and revise according to student feedback and best practices found in the literature. We have discussed four key areas identified in focus group feedback: interaction, material delivery, expectations, and technological/”other” support and provided a review of current literature in these areas. As online program delivery continues to evolve, faculty must, as Johnson (2002) suggested in *Who Moved My Cheese*, look for the new cheese. Movement in a new direction helps us find new cheese (p. 54).

**References**


