



Online Pedagogy: Navigating Perceptions and Practices to Develop Learning Communities

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Abstract

With the development of online education, increased attention has been given to standards, motivations and best-practices within online education. This study is designed to explore the intersections between perceptions and practices that educators who teach online hold in relation to perceptions and practices of students who are taking online courses. Applications are provided for institutions, faculty and students who are considering participating in an online education environment.

Online education is one of the shaping factors that will determine the future of higher education. In a time where enrollment in on-campus programs has dropped, online or distance education has increased for the fourteenth year in a row (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018, p. 3). In the 1990s, online learning become a model that institutions began to adopt (Chao, Saj, & Tessier, 2006, §1). As of fall 2016, 31.6 percent of all students in the United States were taking at least one distance course (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018, p. 3).

While the popularity of this modality of learning is rapidly growing, there are key pedagogical considerations related to quality, access, retention and overall student learning that should be addressed. Faculty are currently navigating issues of delivering content virtually (Guo, Kim & Rubin, 2014; Crook & Schofield, 2017) as well as examining ways to create engaging

learning environments that help translate what may have previously been done in a traditional setting into an online environment (Williams & Gil, 2018). Situations like the one where students at George Washington University sued the institution due to the lower quality of online learning (McKenzie, 2018) serve as an example that educators need to be keenly aware of the quality of educational experiences in the digital world. This study is designed to explore the intersections between perceptions and practices that educators who teach online hold in relation perceptions and practices of students who are taking online courses.

Literature Review

Distance education is defined as “teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special in-

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stitutional organization” (Moore & Kearsley, 2011, p. 2). Some institutions would be considered single-mode institutions in distance education, meaning they exclusively offer education via distance and there is no traditional, face-to-face instruction. Other institutions are categorized as dual-mode, providing both distance education and traditional, face-to-face class options (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

Online education is one subset of distance education. While online learning is relatively new, given the development of technology, distance education is well established. “Although its beginnings are disputed, the history of distance education is well documented, especially in the 20th century” (Sumner, 2000, p. 267). Online programs came about as early as the 1980s, with Western Behavioral Science Institute in California launching a new program, and in 1985 Nova Southwestern University in Florida followed suit with a graduate program (Miller, 2014), prompting a significant growth of online programs in the 1990s (Chao, Saj, & Tessier, 2006).

For the past fourteen years, distance education enrollment has continued to increase, despite the fact that, since 2012, overall enrollments have been declining (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018, p. 3). The Babson Survey Research Group found that in the fall of 2016, there were 6,359,121 students taking at least one distance course, which represents 31.6 percent of all students. With the development of online education as an option in distance education, there has been increased attention given to standards, motivations and best-practices within online education (Chao, Saj, & Tessier, 2006; Moore, 2014; Lee, 2017). There is still a gap, however, in understanding how *perceptions* among educators and students may influence practices in online education. This led to the following research questions:

RQ1: What perceptions are held related to the concept of online education among faculty and students?

RQ2: Why do students and educators believe online education is growing so steadily in the current higher education environment?

RQ3: In what ways do perceptions of online education impact expectations and/or sense-making of the learning experience among faculty and students?

One of the biggest concerns related to online education is quality of experience and, as a result, the impact of learning. For example, Bidwell (2013)

found that 42 percent of students believe they learn less in an online course compared to a traditional class (§ 4). This is supported by what Gallop Research found when, despite the flexibility and value provided by online education, the majority of people identified online programs as “only fair” or “poor” (Saad, Busteed, & Ogisi, 2013, § 3). In addition, when it comes to employability after obtaining a degree, 56 percent of employers prefer candidates to have a traditional education (Bidwell, 2013, § . 2). Finally, while a majority (72.4 percent) of academic leaders hold the perception that online education is either equal or superior to traditional education, only 29.1 percent of chief academic officers think that their faculty “accept the value and legitimacy of online education” (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 5-6). Given these perceptions, it can raise the question of why online education seems to be flourishing.

Perhaps the most prominent benefit is the potential online education has to address economic concerns. While the lifetime earning gap between high school graduates and college graduates continues to spread, the cost of college tuition is increasing exponentially faster than inflation, resulting in student loan debt rising as a national concern (Nguyen, 2015). Additionally, while some perceptions related to quality of online education seem to be held tightly by educators, students, and the general public, studies have indicated that learning outcomes from online education have the opportunity to be just as strong as a traditional classroom (Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Nguyen, 2016; Kim, 2017).

Trends, standards and best practices.

Despite the potential economic benefits, there are some significant concerns that scholars have also identified in online education. Some of these concerns include “teaching effectiveness, faculty-to-student ratios, attrition rates, student satisfaction, and institutional resources invested in online delivery,” (Chao, Saj, & Tessier, 2006, § . 1). When students are enrolled in an online course, they seem to have a higher likelihood to withdraw from the course (Community College Research Center, 2013). Part of the efforts to address concerns involve exploring student satisfaction, which relates both to learning outcomes and student retention. For example, convenience is the most cited reason for being satisfied with an online course, and lack of interaction is the most often cited reason for dissatisfaction (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz,

2014). Even though research indicates that students enrolled in online courses are more likely to drop out of a specific class compared to in-person counterparts, other studies indicate that long-term degree success of online students may actually be greater compared to traditional students. Online students in community colleges who “take some of their early courses online or at a distance have a significantly better chance of attaining a community college credential than do their classroom counterparts” (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014, p. 103). Further supporting the positive outcomes for students, online education has the capacity to “change cultural norms, enhance learning cultures, and improve communication skills” (Hamdan, 2014, p. 1) as well as the potential for faculty to encourage the development of personal learning environments among students via technology use (Kim, 2017).

To help develop a positive experience for students and educators, scholars recommend specific development opportunities for faculty who teach online (Baran & Correia, 2014). Studies indicate the very experience of being trained to teach in a digital environment as well as the act of teaching online can ultimately influence perceptions in areas such as: 1) the quality of online education; 2) the role of intellectual property right in distance education; 3) and general attitudes toward online education (Windes & Lesht, 2014). Thus, motivations, behaviors and perceptions vary not only by student profiles but also by faculty profiles. This led to the following research questions:

RQ4: What do students perceive as requisite qualities to succeed as an online student?

RQ5: What do faculty and students perceive as requisite quality to succeed as an online faculty member?

RQ6: What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of online education?

Despite the amount of research focused on online education, there seems to be a growing need to understand both practices that enhance perceptions of quality and excellence in online education as well as influences that impact behavioral intentions to participate in online education. This study is designed to bridge that gap.

Method

To address the above research questions, an online survey was used that employed a series of qualitative questions derived from previous findings related to online education (Saad, Busteed, & Ogisi, 2013; Cole,

Shelley, & Swartz, 2014; Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2013). The surveys were launched via Survey Monkey, a national survey tool, during the spring 2017 semester. The first survey was designed for faculty who teach online courses and the second was designed for students. While most students had participated in an online course, as expected in alignment with national trends, the sample also included students with no online course experience. Students who had not taken online courses were directed to specific sections of the survey instrument in order to only gather data related to perceptions of online education as opposed to items related to personal experiences in online education. Participants were recruited via email and social media through the networks of the primary researchers, using online educator communities, and through students recruiting peers to participate. These participants were gathered from throughout the United States and from a variety of institutions. There were 107 participants (32 educators and 75 students) representing private and public institutions as well as a range of university sizes. No participants were compensated for their participation in this study.

Participants

There were 32 educators, 62.5 percent female (n=20) and 37.5% male (n=12), who participated. Out of those educators, 65.63 percent (n=21) were full-time faculty and 34.38 percent (n=11) were adjunct faculty. There were 75 students who participated, with 74.67 percent (n=56) reporting as female and 25.33 percent (n=19) reporting as male. Every class rank was represented. The highest represented groups were juniors (n=20, 26.67 percent) and seniors (n=20, 26.67 percent). The next highest representative groups were graduate students (n=13, 17.33 percent) and sophomores (n=13, 17.33 percent). The least represented group were freshman (n=9, 12 percent). A variety of majors were represented including communication, business, public relations, journalism, education, and graphic design.

Instrument

The survey instrument for educators contained demographic information, 10 open-ended, qualitative questions related to pedagogical practices and perceptions of online education. The survey instrument for students mostly mirrored questions from the faculty survey, though the questions were tailored for student participants. Additional items explored the

topic of online learning experiences and perception of online education overall. For students who indicated they had never participated in an online environment, items explored their reasons for not taking online classes.

Coding

Two researchers independently read the qualitative responses for both student and professor, and then applied the constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process allowed for coding of emergent themes, which is an appropriate method because, despite the growing body of research exploring online education, there is limited research on the specific perceptions and practices among online educators and students. This analysis provided the following overarching themes among educators and students.

Analysis

Definitions. To explore foundational perceptions and understanding related to online education, participants were first asked to define online education. As expected, it is apparent that online education is associated with the use of technology as a learning method. For example, one student participant said: “Online education is taking courses online, completing and submitting all class assignments online, and interacting with a teacher either through online videos or notes or another form of added assistance.” Faculty responses noted not only the integration of technology but also the pedagogical uses of technology as an online educator. Technology was not the only theme, however. For some student participants, definitions had relational dimensions, specifically a perceived distance or lack of affinity from faculty toward students in online education environments. One participant defined online education by saying “Online education is an education structure where students interact with course material almost exclusively online with limited access to the professor and other students.” Another student provided a more extensive explanation of this distance by saying “There were a few times where I felt my teacher was not interacting with students in the same way that she would if it was an in-person class. I think the online learning set up allowed her to be more dismissive of student concerns and colder in her responses.”

Contributing factors to growth. When asked about advantages in online education, economic factors

emerged as a theme. Faculty mentioned the economic benefit of online classes by stating “It’s cheaper than on-campus alternatives” and “Cost effective for institution and students.” Students also mentioned economic factors but identified that universities often are charging more for an online course than an on-campus course. Some students identified economics costs as a reason for not taking online classes, saying things such as “they’re more expensive,” and “Online courses are slightly expensive and I personally benefit from being in a classroom with tangible lectures and materials.”

Characteristics of effective online students. The second area of analysis moved from understanding online education to understanding qualities and characteristics that make an effective online educator or student. Student participants were asked to reflect on qualities they believe are important to be an effective online student. One of the most dominant themes from this was that online students need to be disciplined. Motivation and time commitment were also repeated themes. Participants used phrases such as “An effective online student needs to be organized and self-motivated to succeed in personal study,” and “By being hardworking and eager to constantly learn even outside of the school environment can really help create an effective online student.” In addition, participants expressed that online students need to be organized, particularly given the lack of face to face time. A final theme that was significant relates to being a life-long learner or an individual who is willing to naturally pursue a learning experience with little guidance. One participant explained this idea by saying “Passion, Perseverance, and hope. We all fail at one point, but that should not be a discouragement but room for growth.”

Characteristics of effective online educators. In the same vein as the question to students related to what makes an effective online student, educators were asked what qualities make effective online faculty members. Educators had four significant themes that make an online educator effective. First, they are subject matter experts who are willing to experiment or try new things in a digital environment. Second, they have the ability to motivate and inspire. Third, they are able to effectively communicate. Fourth, they have an affinity or empathy for students. Explaining the role of both affinity for online learners alongside of the fluid nature of a digital environment, an educator responded that the necessary qualities are: “Empathy,

patience, flexibility and a willingness to partner with students to create a negotiated learning environment.”

Training and qualifications for online educators. Similar to the question that asked about effective online students, this study asked *both* students and online educators to identify qualities and training that make educators effective in an online context.

Student responses related to training for faculty largely focused on three areas: 1) the ability to use the Learning Management Software (LMS) and other technology used throughout the class; 2) an expertise in the subject of the course material; 3) and effective strategies for online communication with students both pedagogically and personally. Student responses often interconnected these three areas into one thought. Participants expressed a desire for more immediacy in communication with professors as well as strong pedagogical practices in class-related communication and feedback. In addition, students mentioned practices related to pedagogical trends in online education that can feel as if the instructor is less qualified. The concept of equity or understanding how to create a similar educational experience as that of a traditional, face-to-face class translated into a digital environment was repeatedly stressed as necessary training for faculty.

Similar to the student participant perceptions, educators' responses had three significant themes emerge related to what faculty need training in prior to teaching online. First, educators need training on the LMS for the institution. Second, they should be prepared to translate content into a digital environment, supported by strategic pedagogical practices that are likely distinct from face to face pedagogical practices. And third, effective communication habits that support student learning should be taught to online educators. Many faculty responses combined an understanding of the LMS system with the way pedagogical practices may be supported or mitigated in an online learning environment.

Student Perceptions about Online Education. Student participants identified a primary theme of flexibility or convenience as an advantage to online education. Participants expressed sentiments such as “Classes can be taken at the convenience of the student. They sometimes offer more time to complete assignments than a traditional classroom setting,” and “Flexibility on location and time. It gives those that live a distance away and that work full time the ability to attend.” Being able to self-regulate the learning

pace and define the learning environment was also an advantage that came up repeatedly among participants. One participant explained “Can complete work at any time from a comfortable environment, lowers social anxiety threshold, removes costs associated with arriving at a classroom.” Another student shared that online education is “great for people who want to get an education while working and having a family.” The accessibility for nontraditional students who have heavy commitments emerged when participant made comment such as “It's very easy for non-traditional students to get a degree” and “It is flexible for people that need to work or trying get back to school.”

Perhaps the strongest theme to emerge from the student participants related to disadvantages of online education is the perception of lack of relationships. This applies to both relationships with faculty and students, as well as peer to peer. Participants made comments such as “In some courses online you don't have an instructor, you have to learn all the material on your own,” “Having to do everything on your own,” and “No human contact, harder to ask questions or ask something to be explained in a different way.”

Another key disadvantage that emerges was the lack of interaction that students believed caused an inability to gain additional information or get assistance in learning from faculty. One student explained this by saying “there is less direct instruction and therefore, it feels like less learning at times.” Another participant categorized the lower communication and pedagogical challenges as being part of a lower-classification of class in the mind of the instructor: “They [online classes] are treated as lesser of a class, so the students are not given the appropriate amounts of energy in trying to succeed in these classes at times.”

Additionally, technology issues represented a significant disadvantage for students. One student explained “Disadvantages would include risk of having technological issues with the electronic devices that are used to access the online education.” Another participant expressed a disadvantage as having “Less awareness about when assignments are due or what is expected — They cannot be accessed without internet, so it sucks when the power is out or the internet stops working. (Which happens a lot more than expected).”

Faculty Perceptions about Online Education. Online educators had several themes that emerged as advantages of online education. Themes included the capacity to reach more students, the ability to help students have self-efficacy in their educational jour-

ney, and accessibility for students related to time and content.

In terms of reaching more students, faculty expressed both a belief in getting valuable, discipline specific information to a wider audience as well as the general ability to fit more students into classes. One online educator explained “It’s cheaper than on-campus alternatives.” Another educator said “You can learn from anywhere. As a professor, I don’t have to be in the same place -- I can teach from anywhere, and my students can engage from where they are, making it accessible, convenient and with few barriers to learning.” In terms of helping students own their own educational journey, one educator said “It challenges the student to take responsibility for their own educational growth and development. That’s the primary advantage.” And a second explained online education “connects with students who have emotional difficulty with traditional classroom formats; it has the ability to reach students in places far from a traditional campus.” Finally, faculty identified the convenience of pedagogical options related to time, reviewing content, and engagement in class information with students as an advantage. One faculty explained, “We can discuss highly charged topics such as race, gender, and politics with a frankness that would be virtually impossible in a physical classroom, especially in a large class.”

Online educators primarily identified four areas that are disadvantages in online education: 1) Lack of social and nonverbal communication; 2) student motivation and responsibility; 3) time constraints and investments; 4) and technology issues. In terms of communication, educators used explanations like “loss of face-to-face interaction, loss of building strong relationships, more difficult to sit down with student and work through problems together” and “When teaching an in-person class, I can read body language and adjust my teaching accordingly. I miss this in online classes.” Additionally, another faculty participant explained that even formalized class communication can be challenging without being in the same physical location, “Communication can be challenging when you can’t see body language or anticipate group questions about work, assignments.” In terms of student motivation and discipline, one faculty member said “Some students are not disciplined for the “freedom” of not having to go to an actual classroom to complete the course.” Finally, in terms of time and technology, faculty expressed the limitations that can be faced in on-

line learning. Faculty pointed out that these issues can relate to communication, such as one faculty member who said “The time delay in communication, feedback, and answering questions” was a disadvantage.

Effective Pedagogical Practices in an Online Environment. Students identified classes where they learned the most as having two primary factors. First, regular activities or assignments that provided an environment for engagement while allowing for the flexibility of learning styles. Second, students identified faculty who intentionally connected, designed classes in easy to understand ways, invested time in communication, and worked to make the online class engaging as a primary reason why they succeeded.

Faculty were also asked to identify “the most effective strategies” they use when teaching online. Educators also had two primary areas that came out: Pedagogical practices that required consistent attention by students and intentional communication between peers and faculty within a class. For example, one educator said:

I have learned that many people who enroll in online classes are doing so for the sake of convenience, which means they tend to avoid optional participation that they feel is inconvenient. However, crossing the barrier of mediation is crucial for building the personal connection that is necessary for students to bond with the university and do well over time (and not drop out).

Another faculty explained why personalized communication is particularly important: “I choose words carefully that suggest a human connection and constantly exhort and motivate students toward the value of independent thought and personal contribution of ideas.” Other faculty identified how the same learning obstacles that students face in a traditional class (like how to do group work) may be heightened in an online environment. One instructor explained that moderating learning groups which are faculty facilitated can be a beneficial approach. “Student’s struggle with groups in any leaning environment so whether online or in class, I facilitate/ moderate their first group assignment.” Other instructors identified the need for scaffolding in an online course such as clear instructions, rubrics, examples, and resources.

Discussion

Conceptions of Online Education: Several interesting themes emerged that displayed perceptions of on-

line education that may impact the overall behaviors and participation in online education (ex. Faculty are removed from the class and not as involved since it is online). Because students may be enrolling in online courses with these perceptions already in place, it is important for faculty to be even more intentional about developing class culture and communication in an online environment. As may be expected, the idea of technology is deeply connected to online education. Faculty and institutions must effectively leverage their LMS and additional technology components in order to have an intuitively designed course. Universities should be equipped not only to develop a course online but also to support students throughout the educational experience with tech support, which faculty may not be qualified to do, and which would detract from the faculty member's attention to their primary role of helping students learn.

Participants in this study identified that students are the stakeholder group that has the strongest belief that online education is beneficial, likely due to the reasons identified above with flexibility. However, when asked whether, if given the option, they would take an online class over a traditional course, the majority of student participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This seems to imply that the *benefit* of online education may be influenced by factors unrelated to the quality of learning, such as constraints with jobs, family commitments or locations. In addition, based on the qualitative data, faculty cited the financial benefit of students taking online classes but the student participants mentioned the increased cost related to online education. This seems to reveal two important areas. First, online education does have a financial benefit to universities as they are able to gain increased revenue. Some universities have a higher tuition rate for these online classes than the in-person ones on campus. Second, faculty seem unaware that taking online classes can actually be an increased financial burden for students. However, both faculty and students acknowledged that online learning is a way that people can work, have flexibility, lower costs in commuting/rent/travel, etc. This study reveals that there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of the financial and economic factors contributing to online education, rather than simply explaining it as a more affordable way for students to learn.

Qualities to Success in Online Education: Building off of perceptions related to the nature of online

education, the next questions explored what kind of educators and students may flourish in an online environment. While some of the qualities identified seem to be able to be learned behaviors (communication practices, time-management and organization), others seem to be a requisite within the individual (motivation and flexibility).

Both educators and students identified the need to be flexible, highly motivated and to have a desire to engage in an online learning environment as core components to thriving in online courses. As online education continues to mature, technology issues and pedagogical practices may develop to a place that requires less personal drive by both students and faculty in order to flourish. However, the current state of online education seems to indicate that it is important to address this area. Universities should consider whether a faculty member has this drive and desire to teach online, rather than simply requiring a translation of a course to go online and assigning the original instructor. Individual faculty should engage this topic at the beginning of a course to create an awareness among students that, potentially, may produce a stronger learning environment overall.

One of the most cited needs among students and faculty was a robust capacity to communicate in online courses. At face value, it may seem that simply having faculty model strong communication habits would be enough, but digital communication training may actually be needed. Ideally, training should include formal habits (for example, how to give substantive feedback in a timely way for assignments online, best-practices in setting reminders for assignments or providing class announcements, etc.) but also informal practices such as establishing virtual office hours, sending emails to students who are not only struggling (preferably before it is a significant course concern) but also to those who are doing well (which can continue to motivate highly engaged learners).

In conclusion, while it is often perceived that the hard skills (technological information or the ability to leverage technology) are the primary inhibitors to online education, this study reveals that soft skills related to communication and perceived immediacy between faculty and peers is quite significant to the overall conceptualization, expectations and sense-making of online learning environments among both faculty and students.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Education

When reviewing what faculty and students identified as advantages to online education, there were similarities in themes. For example, flexibility was a significant area of value. This study, however, further explored *why* flexibility matters. Students identified the growing demands that are faced among students who no longer match the traditional, university-residential, undergraduate profile. As educators, online education can provide flexibility related to economic factors, life-stage demographics, and it also has the capacity to allow students from around the world to attend institutions of their choice without facing geographic limitations.

Additionally, self-regulated learning is a significant value. Students repeatedly mentioned the capacity to make the educational journey fit within their schedule. In the same vein, educators identified how self-regulated learning is not simply about doing work when students want to, but also about providing the capacity for students to review material on-demand, reflect in more intentional ways, and participate in ways they may not be able to in a face-to-face setting.

The disadvantages identified in this study seem to mirror topics from the perceptions about online education and needed qualities to succeed. Communication and lack of relationship were significant concerns among both students and educators. The feelings of not authentically knowing each other, being isolated, or being unsupported were noteworthy. While face to face education has the potential to help mitigate these challenges, when an online student is not organized or does not care, the capacity to truly gain knowledge seems to be reduced.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study was a strong step forward in exploring how perceptions influence the practice and experience of educators and students online, it would benefit by having more participants. Additionally, by incorporating more methodologies such as focus groups or in-depth interviews, additional details may surface that give a fuller-picture to some of the themes. Future studies would benefit from experiments that may be able to support specific communication practices that can be leveraged either or certain pedagogical practices that are particularly useful in an online environment. Additionally, it would be interesting to develop a case study of a university provid-

ing a comprehensive support system that represents best-practices in the areas of communication behaviors and technology support for online instruction.

Conclusion

The future of online education appears to be one of the fastest growing trends in the academy. While past studies have cited challenges, this study supports the idea that many of the current obstacles in online education are able to be addressed through enhanced support and communication habits. This study indicates that key perceptions may actually relate not specifically to learning outcomes but truly are about communication, technology and relationships. When these are addressed, students and faculty will be able to thrive in new and dynamic ways within online education.

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