
Evaluation of Hybrid Online Instruction in Sport Management

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Abstract

The movement toward hybrid, online courses continues to grow in higher education in general and in sport management curricula in particular. However, questions remain as to the effectiveness of this direction. The rapid growth may be market or economically driven as contrasted to student learning centered. The purpose of this study was to collect insight into the value of hybrid courses in sport management, from the student perspective and achievement. This study gathered information from students in a regional, state university to evaluate two courses taught hybrid style and the same taught traditional lecture, in a sport management curriculum. Students identified both desirable and undesirable attributes with hybrid courses. There was no significant improvement in content mastery or in end of course teacher evaluation scores when contrasting teaching techniques.

Introduction

The movement to incorporating online and hybrid courses continues in higher education in general and in sport management curricula in particular. In *Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008*, Allen & Seaman (2008) found that the explosive growth of online education shows no sign of slowing as the number of online students has grown to more than 3,938,111 or 21.9% of the total college population. The growth of online students grew in 2007 at a 12.9% rate while traditional student populations grew at 1.2% rate. Online hybrid education for undergraduate sport management students was the focus of this particular study. Hybrid courses have been defined as those that combine online components with traditional, face-to-face experiences (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, and Liu, 2006). Specifically, the researcher attempted to examine the value and effectiveness of teaching sport management courses, which are pragmatic and technical by nature, using an online hybrid format. The pragmatic nature of sport management courses often examines legal issues, finances, marketing, communication and social concerns in sport. Frequently, this area of study is administratively housed in education schools and thus has the advantage of partnering with and learning from contemporary teaching philosophy and direction.

Even with the popularity of online courses and degree programs, many questions remain as to the perception, educational value, and integrity of these programs. Hannafin, Hill, Olive, Glazer, and Sharma's study (as cited in Moore & Anderson, 2003) reported that the rapid movement toward online learning is not grounded in overwhelming empirical evidence that demonstrates effectiveness or benefits for the student. McKenzie, Ozkan, & Layton (2006), hinted that much of the growth is driven by administrative quest for market share or economic consideration, as contrasted to being driven by student learning outcomes and user satisfaction. Dringus (2000) editorialized that many of the evaluation procedures in online learning are more about experimenting with and examining the technology as contrasted to measuring educational outcomes. Is the new direction toward various forms of online instruction in higher education market driven, economic driven or related to other issues instead of being based on student achievement and learning? This question needs to be answered universities consider expanding

online and hybrid programs. In the sport management curricula area, hybrid courses are increasing and complete degree programs are available.

Song, Ernise, Singleton, Hill, & Myung (2004), after a study of student perceptions of internet learning, suggested that we have not arrived at the ideal hybrid model that integrates available technology with learning goals and expectations. They stated that the quest for the ideal hybrid experience needs continued exploration. Otherwise, they suggested that educators are merely trying to fit technology into education instead of using technology to better meet educational goals.

When examining the literature for student perceptions of the strengths of online instruction, several consistent reactions appeared. They relate to communication, convenience and motivation. Petrides (2002) and Vonderwell (2003) found that some students reported that online, asynchronous learning encouraged more reflective thinking and introspection. King and Hildreth (2001) extend the value of asynchronous learning by noting college level students feel more comfortable communicating in this environment. Online instruction utilizes a student-centered, individually controlled environment to facilitate learning without the bounds of classrooms and time schedules. King and Hildreth found no significant difference in the content mastery between traditional lecture style science classes and online style. However, they found many students, who indicated a dislike for science, were motivated in the science courses by the online atmosphere.

Regarding online hybrid courses and personal relationships, Petrides (2002) further supported the value of online learning by reporting that students identified flexibility and ease of working in groups as a unique value to online learning. Poole (2000) added another variable to the argument for online learning, his studies found the convenience factor to be of significant importance to students. Riffell and Duncan (2003) found that the hybrid online format, combining internet and face-to-face, actually increased the students perception of the relationship with the professor. The students in the hybrid format also indicated improved communication with the professor, as contrasted to traditional lecture formats.

Some have used the argument that online learning encourages retention and therefore graduation rates. Herbert (2006) however found no significant differences between course completers and non-completers when online courses were contrasted to traditional, face-to-face courses.

When examining the literature for notable weaknesses of online learning, Muirhead and Betz (2002) noted that when quality feedback is not available, technical problems exists, or instruction is not clear, dropout rates are high in online courses. Contrary to the findings of Riffell and Duncan (2003), who touted the relationship component of online learning, Song, et al. (2004) found that students biggest disappointment with online or hybrid learning was related to communication and community. They found that students were disappointed in the delayed response time to their questions or postings by their professor and that students longed for a feeling of community with fellow students, which they reported was absent in online coursework. Woods (2002) and Vonderwell (2003) reinforced the difficulty of creating a community feeling among students in online learning settings. However, Rovai (2001) found that the issue of community could be improved when student-teacher ratios are kept under 30:1, when teachers use collaborative learning, group facilitation, and when the teacher creates an environment where learners feel the presence of other students while working online. Rovai suggested that the feeling of community could be enhanced by professors and students providing each other timely and more immediate feedback, and by giving all equal opportunity to post or participate in the online exchanges.

The endorsement of hybrid courses has grown in mainstream universities as the best alternative between complete online and face-to-face instruction. The University of Central Florida for example, boasted of more than 100 hybrid classes in 2002 claiming that the success rate in this format of instruction was better than in traditional, face-to-face courses (Madison, 2002). In this study, Madison defined success rate by a reduction in drop outs. Madison even noted that traditional universities such as Harvard were considering policy changes that would allow for the integration of hybrid options.

The host institution of this researcher has adopted and encouraged the expansion of hybrid courses for both the general curriculum and for specific majors. This encouragement has been through both verbal encouragement and financial incentives for the faculty. The sport management major in particular, made up of over 125 undergraduate students, has integrated this format into a significant number of courses. Therefore, the purpose of this particular study was to examine both student perceptions of hybrid instruction and student content mastery achievement in hybrid courses as contrasted to traditional lecture format courses. Also, the researcher examined the traditional end of course teacher evaluation scores of the two contrasting teaching techniques.

Methods

This researcher gathered information from undergraduate students in a regional, state university enrolled in traditional lecture style classes in the 2006 and in hybrid classes in 2007. The subjects were students enrolled in two classes in 2006 using the traditional style and in the exact same classes in 2007 using a hybrid-online method. The information gathered assisted the researcher to evaluate both student performance and student reactions to hybrid instruction in an undergraduate sport management curriculum. The study was limited as only one section of each course was offered annually, thus restricting the ideal control group, treatment group environment. The researcher examined (a) content mastery as measured by final course grades, (b) student perception of effectiveness as measured by university-wide end of course evaluations and (c) subjective hybrid instruction reactions, using a seven item questionnaire (see Appendix A).

Subjects

The subjects were 62 students enrolled in three credit hour courses in 2006, (a) *Legal Issues in Sport Management* and (b) *Sociology of Sport*. These courses incorporated traditional, face-to-face lecture style of instruction. The treatment group consisted of 54 students enrolled in the same two classes in 2007 that utilized a hybrid-online format. This format utilized discussion boards, live classroom, posted notes and power points. In this study, the hybrid courses utilized a 51% online and 49% face-to-face format.

Instrumentation

A quantitative measure examined was the end of course grade earned by the subjects. This was used to measure content mastery, as the same written exams and grading procedures were utilized in both the 2006 traditional and the 2007 hybrid classes. This variable was evaluated using a *Chi Square* test to see if there was a significant difference between the end of course grades of traditional lecture format students contrasted to students in hybrid courses.

In all four classes, students were given a standardized, end of course teacher evaluation

instrument. This instrument was administered in all classes throughout the researcher's university. This generated an overall effectiveness score between 1 and 5 for each course, with 5 being the most desirable. These ratings gave the researcher a quantitative evaluation measure of the (a) effectiveness of the instruction, (b) student content mastery, (c) perceived challenge of course and (d) student motivational aspect of the course. The mode responses to each of these four evaluation areas were calculated and descriptively analyzed.

In the two online hybrid courses in 2007, students were also given an end of course, subjective, seven item evaluation instrument (see Appendix A) to assess their perception of the value, quality, and motivational characteristics of hybrid courses. This tool allowed for the qualitative analysis of the hybrid courses. The responses of the students to the seven questions were rank ordered for analysis. The researcher reported the three most frequently occurring responses.

Results

To assess the impact of hybrid instruction on content mastery among undergraduate sport management students, the end of class grades of the two classes that experienced the traditional lecture format (n = 62) and the two classes that experienced the hybrid instruction format (n = 54) were evaluated. There was no significant difference in the grade distribution using the *Chi Square* analysis at the 0.05 level of confidence (see Table 1). In both teaching formats, the mean grades were virtually identical, 2.68 for the traditional instruction student and 2.64 for the hybrid instruction students.

Table 1

End of Course Grades for Traditional Lecture vs. Hybrid Online Instruction in Sport Management

Format	Mean	SD	χ^2	Asymp.Sig.
Traditional lecture (n = 62)	2.68	.74160	30.129	ns*
Online hybrid (n = 54)	2.64	.78084	22.889	ns*

*p< .05

When examining the results of the university-wide, standardized course teacher evaluations, designed to measure class effectiveness (see Table 2), there was nominal difference in the mode responses of students in the four areas that specifically related to hybrid instruction. In the areas of (a) effective instruction, (b) content mastery, (c) a challenging course, and (d) motivation of the course, the mode responses were similar in both the traditional lecture and the hybrid format. However, in the area of content mastery, the students experiencing hybrid instruction reported a slightly higher mode rating of 5.0 as contrasted to a 4.0 in the traditional format. This was on a 1.0 to 5.0 scale, with a 5.0 being the optimal score.

Table 2

End of Course Standardized, University Evaluations of Class Effectiveness

Areas of Evaluation	Mode, traditional format utilized in 2006 (n = 62)	Mode, hybrid online format utilized in 2007 (n = 54)
Effective instruction	4.0	4.0
Content mastery	4.0	5.0
Challenging course	5.0	5.0
Motivating	4.0	4.0

Note. Mean scores ranged from a low possible response of 1 to a high of 5.

To analyze student perceptions of online hybrid instruction in sport management, the 54 subjects that participated in the two hybrid classes during the fall of 2007 completed a seven item questionnaire (see Appendix A) at the end of the course. The responses were rank ordered by frequency and the top three were identified. The subjects indicated that all had experienced at least one online course prior to this class, with the range of experience between 1 and 4 classes.

Table 3

Student Evaluation of Hybrid Instruction in Sport Management

Areas	Rank ordered, top three responses
Prior online experience	All had online experience ranging from 1-4 classes
Initial reaction to hearing that class was online hybrid	Want clear instructions Expect course to be more demanding Likely to be very impersonal
Hybrid online course expectations	Harder to stay motivated Cannot learn as well from peers Course will not be as thorough
Entry expectations as to difference between online hybrid and traditional face-to-face	Not as effective as traditional lecture Harder to be motivated to do work Content learning was weaker
Influence on motivation, learning participation	Will weaken relationships Will be harder to develop relationships Will encourage email communication
Influence on relationship with professor	Make the relationship more distant More difficult to develop relationship Less likely to talk with professor

The two most common pre-course, initial reactions to hearing the classes were online and of a hybrid format were relief and freedom. The next most frequent reaction was anxiety. This seemed to be related to the student's own self-discipline concerns and their perceived ability to stay on track with the expectations of the course. The most widely expressed entering expectation for the course was related to the need for clear instructions from the professor. This was followed by an expectation of a difficult course and an impersonal community feeling.

After completing the online hybrid course, the student reactions in this study were mixed. The

most common response at this point was that it was harder to stay motivated in the hybrid, harder to learn from peer interactions, and yet not as challenging as a traditional course. Although phrased in various wordings, maintaining self-motivation seemed to be a reoccurring concern. Additionally, the students were not as confident in their content mastery, even though their end of course grades were just as strong as students in traditional lecture classes.

Students concluded the course feeling that personal relationships with peers and the professor were harder to develop and generally weakened thru the experience; however, they did feel that the course encouraged electronic correspondence with both peers and professors. Students indicated that most correspondence was electronic and that the hybrid format actually discouraged personal face-to-face conversations with a professor.

Discussion

When summarizing the findings of this study and the related literature, it appears that there are mixed reactions concerning online hybrid instruction in sport management curriculum, both from the literature and from the subjects of this study. This researcher suggests that the extent of online and hybrid integration should be governed by optimal learning environments as contrasted to market forces alone.

One of the reoccurring and limiting concerns with hybrid instruction is the difficulty in maintaining a communication channel that promotes a feeling of community among learners. The findings of this study parallel Song, et al. (2004), Woods (2002), and Vonderwell (2003) in the concern over a student perception of impersonal communication and lack of a community among peers. If community is indeed important for learning, as is suggested by many, then this venue will continue to be an area of necessary research.

Another limiting factor of hybrid instruction is related to student self-motivation outside of the traditional classroom, especially among the undergraduate subjects of this study. As substantiated by Song, et al. (2004), this researcher found that many students expressed a concern with their personal time management skills and self-motivation ability. Ideally, the students would enter the online experience, as Howland and Moore (2002) suggested that a constructivist learner possessing a self-directed orientation. He noted this constructivist learner characteristic as essential for online success. The student anxieties expressed in this study reflect a population that doubts their abilities in this area. Perhaps the undergraduate student in sport management curricula is not at the educational maturation point where the entire curriculum should move to a hybrid model.

It appears that most students enter online and hybrid courses with optimism and an overall positive feeling. McKenzie et al. (2006) found that the majority of students entered hybrid courses with a sense of relief and freedom. For student success to occur however, Mckenzie et al. suggested that instructors should host early training sessions for students in time management, self-motivation, and how to use the technology. This could eliminate many frustrations with hybrid instruction. Song, et al. (2004) confirmed the need to work with students in assisting them in developing these skills that are necessary for success in hybrid courses. They further stressed that students need to be assisted in connecting and developing relationships with both the professor and other students in the hybrid model. With the technologically savvy and textual culture of youth today, this task may be very achievable. Ironically, the online instruction trend naturally shifts students away from the classroom environment where community is indigenous, to one where the sense of community is a challenge, a goal, and a potential obstacle.

The findings of this particular study summarized tends to support the position of Mckenzie et al.

(2006) which questioned the rapid expansion of online and hybrid instruction without research to support the results. The focus needs to be on the learner and the learning environment as contrasted to the quest to merely use new technology and to gain market share, which so often appears to be the case.

Even though this study did not find any particularly strong content mastery improvement or overwhelming response among students to incorporate online and hybrid models, both instruction formats will play a critical role in education in the coming years. Therefore, continued research of techniques to develop community and self-motivation among students is necessary. Specifically, various technological options such as discussion boards, live chat, and others need to be examined with the questions of how they can help create a community online and how they can help motivate the undergraduate student. Perhaps this study needs replicated examining the differences in evaluative responses of students based on the online teaching experience of the instructor. The future will be technologically driven; we need to proceed with both wisdom that is the result of investigation and research.

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Appendix A

Student Questionnaire

Feedback on Hybrid Online Instruction in Undergraduate Sport Management Courses

Please share your experiences with online instruction in undergraduate sport management courses this semester. Your responses will be anonymous and only serve to improve curriculum direction in sport management.

1. Prior to this semester, what experience did you have with online education, if any?
2. What were your initial reactions (concerns, congratulations, anxiety, relief) at hearing that part of your course this semester would be online? Please explain.
3. What were your expectations of using online instruction at the beginning of the semester? How, if at all, has that changed, based on your experience?

Questions related to Course Structure

4. Compare and contrast the quantity, type, and level of work/assignments that you experienced online vs. in a traditional class setting, and with other online classes you

may have taken.

5. How did the online approach to instruction impact your motivation, class participation, and learning?

Questions related to the Cohort

6. How did the online approach to instruction impact your relationships with your colleagues, and the cohesiveness of your cohort? In short, how did the online approach impact the collegiality of your cohort?
7. How did the online approach to instruction impact your relationship with your instructor?

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