Online Course Quality: What do Nontraditional Students Value?

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Abstract

This study analyzes nontraditional students' perceptions of online course quality. Students were categorized into three groups: traditional, moderately nontraditional, and highly nontraditional. A survey instrument designed to assess online course quality and other demographic characteristics was administered electronically. Course quality was measured using the rubric associated with the eight Quality Matters (2008-2010) standards. A total of 3,160 students enrolled in at least one online for-credit course from 31 colleges and universities across the U.S. participated in this study. Based on the results of a series of ANOVAs, it was found that both traditional and nontraditional students rated Standard 3 on Assessment and Measurement as highest among the eight standards. No significant differences between student groups were found. In addition, there were no significant differences between groups for Standard 8 on Accessibility. It was also found that Standard 1on Course Overview and Introduction was rated higher by nontraditional students as compared to traditional students. The same was noted for Standard 6 on Course Technology, where nontraditional students rated this item higher than their traditional counterparts. Similar patterns of higher ratings by nontraditional students were found for Learning Objectives, Resources and Materials, Learner Engagement, and Learner Support, Standards 2, 4, 5, and 7, respectively. Nontraditional, as contrasted with traditional, students have different perceptions of online course quality. Because nontraditional students have multiple responsibilities, they need their online courses to be well designed, consistently presented, easily navigable, and appropriately aligned.

Introduction

Online education continues to be critical to the success of many higher education institutions. In fact, 63.3% of chief academic leaders at higher education institutions report that online learning is critical to their long-term strategy. Some institutions, particularly small institutions, remain neutral about online learning's role, but there are relatively few institutions (13.7%) which indicate that online learning is not critical to their strategic goals (Allen & Seaman, 2016). With online education continuing to play a prominent role in higher education, it is important that the mechanisms underlying student success in online courses continue to be investigated.

One key area of focus is retention of students in online courses. The number of academic leaders who believe that retaining students in online courses is more of a concern than retention of students in face-to-face courses continues to grow, with 44.6% of leaders indicating this as an area of concern (Allen & Seaman, 2015). To help retain online students and ensure that their experiences are in line with their expectations, it is important to better understand students' perceptions of quality in their online courses.

Literature Review

Assessing the Quality of Online Courses

Defining and assessing quality in online courses can be a multifaceted and complex endeavor. Several factors, both those relevant to more traditional courses and those unique to online education, can impact quality and must be considered. The Online Learning Consortium's (OLC) Five Pillars of Quality in Online Education (2016) identify key areas to take into account when assessing quality online education: learning effectiveness, faculty satisfaction, student satisfaction, scale, and access. Course design is central to many of these factors and should be a focus when assessing the quality of online courses.

Perhaps the most widely recognized set of standards for judging the quality of online course design is Quality Matters (QM). The QM framework includes 8 standards, each with specific indicators associated with high-quality online and blended courses. The 8 research-supported standards in the Third Edition of the QM rubric (2008-2010) are: 1) Course Overview and Introduction, 2) Learning Objectives, 3) Assessment and Measurement, 4) Resources and Materials, 5) Learner Engagement, 6) Course Technology, 7) Learner Support, and 8) Accessibility. The QM rubric is a key part of the Quality Matters peer-review process that is designed to review and ultimately certify high-quality online and blended courses, while promoting an emphasis on continuous improvement.

The QM framework is based on online learning research, national standards of best practice, and instructional design principles (MarylandOnline, 2016). The continuous review and refinement processes used to keep the QM rubric up-to-date are explained by Shattuck, Zimmerman, and Adair (2014). There is clearly a strong basis for the criteria included in the QM rubric. Given that students are the ultimate consumers of these online courses, researchers have also investigated students' perceptions of quality in online courses.

Students' Perceptions of Quality in Online Courses

According to the OLC's Five Pillars of Quality in Online Education, student satisfaction "reflects the effectiveness of all aspects of the educational experience," and "is the most important key to continuing learning" (OLC, 2016, para. "Student satisfaction"). This is consistent with the work of Eom, Wen and Ashill (2006) which identified student satisfaction as a significant predictor of learning in an online class. Understanding student satisfaction and students' perceptions of quality is key to promoting effective student learning in online courses.

Several research studies have examined students' perceptions of quality in online courses (e.g., Chitkushev, Vodenska, & Zlateva, 2014; Jaggars, 2014; Ke, F., & Kwak, D., 2013; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Shorder, 2013; Paechter & Maier, 2010; Ralston-Berg & Nath, 2008; Robins, Simunich, & Kelly, 2013; Simpson & Benson, 2013; Young & Norgard, 2006). In an early research study on this topic, Young and Norgard (2006) conducted a review of the literature related to students' perceptions of online courses and created a survey to more fully understand issues that are important to students when considering online course quality. Their survey included questions about course design, interaction among course participants, course content, technical support, and the benefits of online versus face-to-face course delivery. They found that students recognized the importance of

having well-designed online courses and preferred consistent course design across courses. Students also valued student-to-student interactions and felt that timely instructor-to-student interaction was critical to their success in the course. The importance of technical support that is available beyond the regular workday hours was also noted by students.

More recently, Ralston-Berg (2014) published the results of a survey of students from across the United States who rated the importance of the QM criteria to their success in an online course. The initial report of findings ranked the QM statements from highest to lowest based on students' value ratings of each item. Consistent with Young and Norgard's findings, which emphasize ease of navigation, the item rated highest by students in Ralston-Berg's study was "Clear instructions tell me how to get started and how to find various course components." Other highly ranked items related to clarity of the grading policy and criteria for how work would be evaluated. The lowest rated item by students was, "I am asked to introduce myself to the course." Consistent with Young and Norgard's findings, items related to the importance of learning activities that encourage interaction with the instructor or other students were among the lowest ranked items by respondents.

The data from the Ralston-Berg (2014) survey have been further analyzed to better understand the nuances of students' perceptions of online course quality. In a study by Hixon, Ralston-Berg, Buckenmeyer, and Barczyk (2016), the impact of prior online course experience on students' perceptions of quality was examined. The findings indicated that respondents rated items differently based on their previous online learning experience, with novice learners placing greater value on netiquette guidelines than more experienced online learners. Experienced online learners (those who completed more than six online courses), on the other hand, rated items related to self-introductions, appropriateness of assessments, relevance and quality of instructional materials, and ease of navigation as being more important than did those with less online learning experience. The current study probes deeper into the Ralston-Berg (2014) data, seeking to better understand how respondents' demographics impact their perceptions. Specifically, this study analyzes the perceptions of students categorized as "nontraditional."

Defining Nontraditional Students

There is no precise definition for nontraditional students in higher education, though there are several characteristics that are commonly used to identify individuals labeled as nontraditional. A study by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2002), identified nontraditional students as individuals who meet at least one of the following qualifiers: delays enrollment, attends part-time for at least part of the academic year, works full-time, is considered financially independent in relation to financial aid eligibility, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma. Horn (1996) characterized the "nontraditional-ness" of students on a continuum depending on how many of these criteria individuals meet. In this study, respondents' age, dependents, employment status and student status are used to define nontraditional students.

Nontraditional Students and Online Education

Distance education, including online learning, has been a particularly attractive option for nontraditional students who often have numerous responsibilities that compete for their time. Online learning offers a more flexible approach to learning that may make learning possible for nontraditional students who may be unable to attend face-to-face class meetings held on a brick-and-mortar campus. A study by the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) found that "older undergraduates and those with a dependent, a spouse, or full-time employment participated in both distance education classes and degree programs relatively more often than their counterparts" (p. 3).

In a conceptual article on misconceptions about online learning, LeBlanc (2015), writing from the perspective of a university president, describes the outdated assumptions about the quality of online

learning. He debunks the notion that online education is of inherently poor quality and that institutions offering such courses must be a degree mill. He indicates that these misconceptions relate to a larger issue – the error of "viewing all higher education questions through the lens of a traditional, campus-based experience" (p. 52). Pointing out that traditional students today make up less than 20% of all college students in the U.S., LeBlanc (2015) argues that online learning has developed a robust and high quality response to the needs of nontraditional adult learners, who comprise 37 to 40 million individuals. He colorfully describes many adult learners as people who work all day, rush to class while grabbing drive-thru food on the way, and then leave class the moment it ends in the hopes of getting home before their kids are in bed. With that kind of schedule, there is little time for leisurely chats or for sitting under leafy oak trees to debate the meaning of life. LeBlanc contends that online learning is a second chance for nontraditional students to earn a degree that can change the trajectory of their lives and for the lives of their families.

An earlier empirical study corroborates LeBlanc's observations about the quality of online education. Hannay and Newvine (2006) conducted a survey of 217 individuals, who were primarily adult part-time students enrolled in university level criminal justice courses. The study aimed to determine students' perceptions of the quality and difficulty of distance education courses compared to those taught in the traditional classroom. The researchers found that students perceived that they achieve higher quality educational outcomes in the online environment. The students did not feel that they sacrificed quality learning for convenience of format. The authors contend that while online learning may be most appropriate at higher education institutions with large numbers of adult learners and nontraditional students, there may be some educational advantages for universities to integrate some of the best aspects of online learning into traditional courses.

A study by Romero and Barbera (2011) of adult online learners investigated how quality of time invested in a course affects learning outcomes. These researchers found that along with the amount of time invested in learning, the quality of students' learning time influences performance. This is an important finding because family, social, and professional commitments can compromise the quality of time spent by adult online learners. Romero and Barbera suggest that online instructors develop courses that offer some flexibility in instructional time to allow adult learners to adjust their learning times to the constraints of their professional obligations. However, they caution that learning should not be relegated to second and third priority in students' allocation of their time.

Taking a somewhat different approach to examining this issue, Thompson, Miller, and Franz (2013) used the case study method to examine the experiences of three nontraditional online learners who were unsuccessful in an online course. Consistent with Romero and Barbera's (2011) finding, the overall conclusion drawn by Thompson and colleagues about why the students were unsuccessful in their online course was that "the nontraditional students had competing demands for their attention, making it more challenging to direct their attention to the learning process" (p. 240). They added, "the students' personal lives complicated their academic lives, which in turn impacted their ability to self-regulate their learning" (p. 240). They also found that the unsuccessful students did not engage with their peers and therefore never became part of the online learning community, which further impeded their learning and motivation. Building on the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001), the authors discuss strategies for online instructors to establish social, cognitive, and teaching presence that will support the online learning experience for nontraditional learners.

The characteristics of nontraditional learners that make online education so attractive an option also present challenges to their persistence in those courses (Horn, 1996; Pontes, Hasit, Pontes, Lewis, & Siefring, 2010; Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2013). Persistence and retention of nontraditional students has been a focus of much research, and many studies have focused on the success of these students in the online environment (e.g., Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2014; Park, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Romero & Barbera, 2011; Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2013). It is important to understand the experiences and perceptions of nontraditional students in their online courses. This

study seeks to do that by addressing the following research question: What do nontraditional students value in online courses?

Methods

Respndents

Students enrolled in at least one online for-credit course at 31 colleges and universities in the United States participated in this study. A total of 3,160 students completed the survey. Several demographic variables including age, family status, employment status, and student status were salient to the analysis presented in this paper and are reported below in Tables 1-4.

Table 1
Age of Respondents

Age	N	%
18-25	750	23.7%
26-44	1341	42.5%
45+	562	17.8%
Not specified	506	16%

Table 2
Respondents' Number of Children

Number of children	N	%
No children	1715	54.3%
1+ child(ren)	906	28.7%
Not specified	538	17.0%

Table 3
Respondents' Employment Status

Employment status	N	%
Not employed	580	18.4%
Employed part-time	513	16.2%
Employed full-time	1537	48.7%
Not specified	529	16.7%

Table 4
Respondents' Student Status

Student status	N	%
Part-time	1449	45.9%
Full-time	1171	37.1%

Not specified	539	17.1%

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of 43 items derived from the rubric associated with the 2008-2010 QM Standards (3rd ed.). The full list of survey items is available in the article by Ralston-Berg (2014). The items were structured in student-centered language, which allowed the respondents to rate the extent to which each course characteristic contributed to student success. Each course characteristic was rated as a four-point Likert type item where 0 corresponded to being not at all important – does not contribute to my success; 1 corresponded to important; 2 corresponded to very important; and 3 corresponded to essential – could not succeed without it. When providing their rating to each course characteristic question, respondents were instructed to consider only the online course environment. The survey instrument also contained several demographic items and open-ended questions on course quality.

Procedure

The survey instrument was administered electronically through a unique URL furnished by a designated contact person at each cooperating institution. The respondents received the URL by means of an e-mail message or a link posted to the home page of the institution's course management system. They also received URLs by means of an announcement in an online course in which they were enrolled. Data were collected from all cooperating institutions and aggregated into a cumulative data file.

Results

Consistent with the definitions of nontraditional students discussed by NCES (2002) and Horn (1996), respondents were identified as being a traditional student, moderately nontraditional, or highly nontraditional based on their age (over 24), family status (have one or more children), employment status (employed full-time), and student status (attending school part-time). Respondents who did not meet any of these qualifications were labeled "traditional." Respondents who met one or two of these qualifications were labeled "moderately nontraditional," and those who met three or four of the qualifications were labeled as "highly nontraditional." Table 5 shows the number of respondents falling into each category.

Table 5
Nontraditional Rating of Respondents

Student type	n	%
Traditional	396	12.5%
Moderately Nontraditional	993	31.4%
Highly Nontraditional	1279	40.5%
Not Available	491	15.5%

Factors were created based on the individual survey items related to each of the eight QM standards. The number of standards included in, and the reliability for, each factor are listed below in Table 6.

Table 6
Factor Reliability

Factor	# of	α

	statements	
QM1 – Course Overview and Introduction	7	.783
QM2 – Learning Objectives	5	.868
QM3 – Assessment and Measurement	5	.737
QM4 – Resources and Materials	4	.758
QM5 – Learner Engagement	7	.794
QM6 – Course Technology	7	.860
QM7 – Learner Support	4	.885
QM8 – Accessibility	4	.800

One-way ANOVAs were computed to examine any differences between the three groups of students (traditional, moderately nontraditional, and highly nontraditional) in relation to their valuing of items associated with each of the QM standards. Respondents' nontraditional status impacted value ratings for all but two of the QM standards (QM3 and QM8), as indicated in Table 7.

Table 7
Value Ratings Comparisons by Nontraditional Status

QM standard	df	F	P
QM1 – Course Overview and Introduction	2, 2663	20.04	<.001
QM2 – Learning Objectives	2, 2664	14.35	<.001
QM3 – Assessment and Measurement	2, 2664	.07	.93
QM4 – Resources and Materials	2, 2664	28.63	<.001
QM5 – Learner Engagement	2, 665	9.48	<.001
QM6 – Course Technology	2, 2660	16.18	<.001
QM7 – Learner Support	2, 2658	10.87	<.001
QM8 – Accessibility	2, 2661	1.33	.27

Post hoc analyses were conducted to examine the statistical significance of the difference between types of students for each standard. The means and standard deviations for each groups' ratings of items related to each QM standard are listed in Table 8.

Table 8
Value Ratings for QM Standards by Student Type

QM standard	Mean	SD
QM1 – Course Overview and Introduction		
Traditional	1.78	.58
Moderately Nontraditional	1.89	.55
Highly Nontraditional	1.97	.55
QM2 – Learning Objectives		
Traditional	1.86	.70
Moderately Nontraditional	2.01	.67
Highly Nontraditional	2.07	.68
QM3 – Assessment and Measurement		

Traditional	2.42	.49
Moderately Nontraditional	2.43	.48
Highly Nontraditional	2.43	.48
QM4 – Resources and Materials		
Traditional	1.95	.65
Moderately Nontraditional	2.15	.61
Highly Nontraditional	2.21	.58
QM5 – Learner Engagement		
Traditional	1.83	.59
Moderately Nontraditional	1.95	.55
Highly Nontraditional	1.97	.57
QM6 – Course Technology		
Traditional	2.21	.61
Moderately Nontraditional	2.32	.55
Highly Nontraditional	2.39	.53
QM7 – Learner Support		
Traditional	1.67	.76
Moderately Nontraditional	1.87	.78
Highly Nontraditional	1.84	.75
QM8 – Accessibility		
Traditional	1.87	.79
Moderately Nontraditional	1.92	.78
Highly Nontraditional	1.87	.78

Post hoc analyses revealed that for standards 1 and 6, traditional students valued items related to the course overview and introduction, as well as course technology, significantly less than either of the nontraditional groups. The differences between the two nontraditional groups were statistically significant.

For standards 2, 4, 5, and 7, traditional students rated items related to each standard significantly lower than either group of nontraditional students. However, for these standards, the differences between the two nontraditional groups were not statistically significant.

Discussion

The majority of online learners responding to this survey can be classified as some level nontraditional students. This is consistent with previous research (e.g., NCES, 2011) indicating that students with these demographic characteristics are often attracted to online learning. Given the large number of nontraditional students who engage in online learning opportunities, the findings of this study provide important insights into what they value in their online courses.

The standard rated highest by nontraditional students is standard 3 (Assessment and Measurement), which was also the highest rated standard by traditional students. There were no significant differences between the groups for this standard, indicating that all learners, regardless of the type of student, highly value the clarity and appropriateness of assessments and clear criteria for grading. Given that students are often highly motivated by course grades (e.g., Kohn, 1993), it is not surprising that all students emphasize the importance of knowing how their work will be assessed and how their grades will be generated.

The only other standard where there were no significant differences between student types was standard 8 related to Accessibility. Both traditional and nontraditional students place a moderate amount of value on statements related to the accessibility of the course and instructional materials in it. Accessible materials can provide students with flexibility and alternate forms of course content. For example, audio or video transcripts can be printed for study offline or used to follow along with a narrator who is non-native or speaks quickly. In such cases, presenting the same content in alternate forms allows students to have more control and flexibility over their learning experience.

For the remaining standards, the statistical analyses indicate that nontraditional students' perceptions of online course quality differ from the perceptions of traditional students in a number of ways. The pattern observed in the data is generally the same. As levels of nontraditional status increased, so did students' value ratings of the standards. However, the differences between the moderately nontraditional students' ratings and the highly nontraditional students' ratings are often smaller and not significant.

The statements related to Course Overview and Introduction (QM standard 1), were rated lower by traditional students than by either group of nontraditional students. But for this statement the moderately nontraditional students' ratings were also significantly lower than the highly nontraditional students' ratings. The highly nontraditional students placed the greatest importance on courses providing clear instructions for getting started, stating upfront the required prerequisite skills and knowledge, and providing opportunities for introductions of the instructor and classmates. Similarly, highly nontraditional students rated items related to Course Technology (QM standard 6) more highly than the moderately nontraditional or traditional students. This finding is consistent with the work of Rodriguez, Ooms, and Montanez (2008) who noted that comfort with technology and motivation to learn technology skills were associated with online course satisfaction, which ultimately impacted students' perceptions of learning quality. Items included in standard 6 relate more specifically to the course having logical navigation, the necessary technologies being readily available, and the tools and media being appropriate to the course content and objectives. Given that highly nontraditional students likely have a limited amount of time they can dedicate to their studies, they need to be sure the time they spend is a high quality investment of their time (Romero & Barbera, 2011). Their high value for these standards emphasize their need to quickly get started in a course and know that what they need to be successful is readily available. Simply stated, they don't have time to waste, and if these standards are not met, they will waste precious time trying to figure out the course itself instead of focusing their efforts on meaningful and engaged learning of the content.

Other standards that were more highly valued by nontraditional students (both moderately and highly nontraditional) than traditional students relate to Learning Objectives, Resources and Materials, Learner Engagement, and Learner Support. Nontraditional students seem to place greater emphasis on a course being more coherent and well-aligned. The standard related to learning objectives includes items related to the course including clearly stated, achievable, and appropriate learning objectives that are aligned to the course-level objectives. Again, clear learning objectives can help provide a roadmap for student learning so nontraditional students' greater value on learning objectives is consistent with their need to move through the course as smoothly and efficiently as possible. Similarly, they feel it is more important (than nontraditional students) that the instructional materials are aligned to those objectives and the learning activities. Nontraditional learners perhaps have an enhanced understanding and value of a course that demonstrates instructional alignment. They do not want any surprises in their learning experience and they want to see how the instructional components fit together to support one another. Alignment also relates to efficiency and time spent on the learning experience. Any materials or activities not directly tied to meeting learning objectives and performing well on assessments may be perceived as "busy work" with no instructional value. Activities or assignments that do not directly tie to student success may be seen as a waste of valuable student time.

Similarly, nontraditional learners feel it is more important than traditional students to be engaged and supported throughout the course. Nontraditional students value learning activities that encourage interaction with the content and others. The value being placed on interactive learning activities seems to be well-placed as the findings of Thompson and colleagues (2013) confirm that nontraditional students' participation in the online learning community is related to their successful completion of an online course. The nontraditional students in the current study also emphasize the importance of having clear expectations for interaction and instructor availability and response time. This result is consistent with those of Young and Norgard (2006) who found that instructor-learner interaction was an important element of online course quality and an activity critical to student success. Additionally, nontraditional students want to know how to access various types of institutional support such as technical, academic, and general support services.

Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that nontraditional students differ from more traditional students in their perceptions of quality in online courses. All students place great importance on having clear statements and guidelines related to how their work will be assessed. In essence, students want to know what they need to do in order to get an A.

However, this study suggests the nontraditional students may have a better sense of what qualities a course needs to possess in order to ensure that they have a streamlined and efficient path to get to that A. Nontraditional students have multiple responsibilities and they need to ensure that the time spent on their coursework is beneficial and productive. They need their courses to be well-designed, consistently presented, easily navigable, and appropriately aligned. They want expectations to be clearly stated and should they encounter any challenges, they want to know who they can contact. In sum, nontraditional students, more than their traditional counterparts, need to be able to progress through a course efficiently to accomplish their learning goals with the limited time they have available.

This study relies on students' self-report of what they value in online courses. While such data provides valuable insights into student perceptions, it does not reflect students' actual experiences in the course or their learning outcomes. Future research should seek to triangulate these findings by comparing this perceptual data to actual student behaviors and learning outcomes. Specifically, it would be interesting to examine how nontraditional students' perceptions of online course quality correlate with student academic performance and retention in a course. Qualitative research methods could also provide valuable insights to better understand specific aspects of each QM standard that impact nontraditional students' experiences in and perceptions of their online learning experiences. Lastly, the QM rubric focuses on the design of online courses, but does not address the facilitation of instruction by the instructor. To fully understand the online learning experience of nontraditional students, future research needs to examine how course facilitation and the instructor's actions impact student learning and satisfaction.

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