How the Attitudes of Instructors, Students, Course Administrators, and Course Designers Affects the Quality of an Online Learning Environment

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Abstract

The attitude of instructors, students, course administrators, and course designers has a significant impact on the quality of a distance education program. The existing literature shows the factors that inhibit these groups from participating in this educational medium. This paper will attempt to review and assess the attitudes toward online education as they relate to the students, instructors, administrators, and designers.

There has been a substantial amount of literature regarding factors that deter instructors, students, course administrators, and course developers from engaging in an online learning environment (OLE) (Abramov and Martkovich, 2001; Beard and Harper, 2002; Giannoni and Tesone, 2003; Murray, 2001; O'Quinn and Corry, 2002). O'Quinn and Corry (2002), list several factors related to faculty concerns about teaching in an OLE. Some of these factors include; "lack of monetary support, increase in workload, lack of salary increase, lack of technological background, lack of administrative support, and concern about the quality of students who enroll in distance courses" (2002). The last point about the quality of students that enroll in online programs is an interesting one considering that the dropout rate among those enrolled online is as high as 50 percent (Murray, 2001). This leaves the course administrators and course developers in a quandary.

Since so much attention has been given to the faculty, it is this group that will be addressed first. The first paragraph presented a list of factors that might be deterring traditional faculty from teaching in an OLE. The O'Quinn and Corry list is substantive to be sure. However, there have been other theories as to why it has been so difficult for universities to lure traditional faculty to the OLE. The distance between instructor and student is one such theory. Arbaugh (2001) studied immediacy behaviors of instructors to determine student satisfaction in an OLE. These behaviors attempt "to reduce the social distance between [instructors] and their students" (2001). The results indicated that attitude toward the medium and its variables were positively linked to overall satisfaction. Instructor experience was less of a factor. Abramov and Martkovich (2001) also agree that the main factors influencing satisfaction levels are the delivery mode and the collaboration aspect.

The general conclusion one could reach from the comparisons of the above studies is that both are most likely correct. There are several factors that inhibit traditional faculty as well as behavior factors. What is missing from these studies is the attitude toward the quality of an OLE. The O'Quinn and Corry study that lists several factors that can result in a negative attitude toward an OLE is an example. The Arbaugh study concludes that if instructors can lessen the distance between student and instructor, student satisfaction will be higher. The latter study is addressing behavior after the instructor has agreed to teach the particular course suggesting that the O'Quinn and Corry list of factors was not a determinant for that instructor. What is interesting here is that neither study addresses the behavior that leads to the list of deterrents. In other words, what is the original attitude toward an OLE that leads to the list of factors?

Clearly additional research should be done in this area. However, the Arbaugh study cuts close to the point. The key lies in reducing the distance between student and instructor. At first, it sounds ludicrous. How can distance be reduced when you have students from all over the country or world in the class? To do this the instructor must reduce the size of the virtual world to the current class. If one can argue that a traditional classroom can contain some of the greatest thinking in the world, the online instructor must present this same reality to their online students. Arbaugh agrees. He states, "the fact that instructor online

experience was not a predictor of learning also suggests that not only are immediacy behaviors more directly transferable from traditional classroom proactive to Web-based courses than first thought, but they may be even more critical than technological acumen in predicting success in online courses" (2001). If traditional faculty could do this or be trained to do this, a major leap in the number of tenured faculty who teach online would vastly increase.

Since 'original' behaviors cannot be established within this paper, it would be prudent to discuss the ways in which an instructor can decrease the distance between teacher and student. One of the leading factors that lessen the distance between instructors and students is the amount of communication that is conducted. Specifically, the amount of communication that is conducted by the instructor to the student. Email is the most common form of electronic communication and should be used as required. However, it is the online presence of the instructor, the knowledge that the instructor is 'out there' that matters most to the students (Smith, Ferguson, and Caris, 2002; Woods, 2002). Spending time in chat rooms, quickly turning around assignments, and significant participation in the discussion threads are just a few of the ways of creating an online presence. The online course forces the instructor to break down the original on ground course into pieces (Smith, Ferguson, and Caris, 2002) such that each piece can be analyzed, learned separately and carefully. Self assessments can be presented to the students as a measurement of their obtained knowledge. Online databases can be utilized for research projects. Most of theses tools are already in use in a classroom environment, and are effectively being utilized in the virtual environment as well. When all of the available online tools are used and understood, quality is less of a factor than the lack of traditional faculty participation. Therefore, it is imperative that some attention be focused on the technical acumen of potential OLE instructors (Kagima and Hausafus, 2001).

This leads us back to the 'original' attitude. The live interaction that exists in a classroom where nonverbals can be measured instantaneously. The instructor capturing the full attention of all students at the same time. Being able to answer student questions immediately and without delay. These examples do present a challenge for seasoned traditional faculty members who thrive in this kind of classroom environment. There are extreme differences in modality to be sure, and faculty has to adapt a new way of teaching and communicating with the students (O'Quinn and Corry, 2002). This does not mean that this new way of teaching and communicating cannot be just as dynamic as a traditional classroom.

It is logical at his point to discuss the students who engage in an OLE. There are many reasons why a prospective student would choose to take online courses (Murray, 2001). However, it can be argued that the number one reason is flexibility. The ability to log on anytime day or night from practically anywhere is attractive. Students will work through some of the negative aspects just to maintain that flexibility. Therefore, on the end-of-course surveys, the satisfaction may be higher than deserved. That is, students often think they are getting a high quality education when they are actually getting a sub-par experience.

On the other hand, retention can also be an issue for the university. Keeping the flexibility attribute in mind, Murray (2001) points out several reasons for students dropping from an online program. The first reason is that students take online courses for the wrong reasons. They may think that since there is no set time to be in class, taking an online class is easier. In fact it is not. Often, online courses require more time dedicated to the actual course than a face-to-face session. This includes more typing and more reading. Another reason for the high drop-out rates is the lack of "auditory stimulation" in an online environment. Students enroll in an OLE knowing that the interaction will be different than that of a traditional classroom, however, it is not until they experience the different modality for the first time that it hits them. They need live, face-to-face interaction. Universities will also have a high dropout rate if there is not sufficient student support. That is, they feel they are all alone in the cyber classroom. Students crave attention from their instructors in both an online and on ground modality. If the student does not feel that the instructor has an online presence, they will lose interest in the course and drop out. Yet another reason students drop an online course, according to Murray, is due to time and family constraints. This is a variable that cannot be controlled by the instructor, the administrators, or the course designers. These constraints can only be evaluated by the individual student. Finally, students who lack technical skills related not only to basic computer skills, but also writing and typing skills may become frustrated and drop from the program.

The above reasons for low retention is substantive, but surely not all encompassing. The only way universities can track the reasons for students dropping from an online program is to conduct exit interviews and work to improve those areas. The appropriate attitude is to stop those reasons before they occur. Instructors must be trained to recognize and use communication media (outside of the provided content). Media such as email (Abramov and Martkovich, 2001) and discussion threads are two such medias that need to be mastered by the instructor. The instructor must know how to proceed as if they have students that are taking the course for the first time even if every student is already adapted. For at one point or another, there will be new students in that course. An easy way for instructors to gauge the ability level of their students is to ask every student when they post their introductions to the class to also communicate how long they have taken online courses for that university. Or what courses they have taken with that university. One way that course administrators can ensure quality for every course is to provide a kind of licensing agreement (Abramov and Martkovich, 2001). This agreement could include such points as hardware/software requirements, prerequisites that the student needs to be enrolled in the current course, course schedule, or any other points that might be suitable for the institution.

Most students will engage an OLE with an open mind putting the burden on the instructor and university to give them a high quality online experience. Therefore, the attitude of students who enroll in an OLE is less of a concern to administrators than that of the instructors or course designers. Students may approach the OLE with some skepticism regarding the structure of the online course compared to that of a traditional course. While there is some truth to this perception with regard to class accessibility, it is simply not true. Although taking courses in an OLE may seem like a less structured environment compared to an on ground course that should only be a perception. Not reality. And after a couple of courses, the perception should disappear entirely as the student gains confidence in his ability, the instructor's ability, and the support of the university.

As mentioned above, the burden lies on the university to ensure a high retention rate among students, faculty, and course designers. For example, in a review conducted by Lee (2002), the perceptions between faculty members and administrators differed when it came to instructional support. Without this support, a retention plan is useless. "A better understanding of instructional support and the environment in which it occurs creates a more reliable base from which to support distance education faculty in making a successful teaching experience" (Lee, 2002). Carter (1996) advises that "the institution must have in place before beginning the project a policy statement relating to the issue of retention and promotion for faculty teaching on the interactive system." Whatever approach is chosen, it is ultimately the course administrators who have the responsibility to manage this burden of faculty perceptions as well as the retention of students and course designers. Therefore, the attitude the course administrator has toward an OLE will directly affect the attitude of the instructors and filter on down to the students. It is most important that the course administrator believe in the OLE in terms of the service and value it is providing.

Unfortunately, it takes more than the right attitude to effectively implement and manage an online program. Everything must come together, beginning with the course designers and ending with the students. In the middle is the faculty.

While there are several strategies that administrators can use to attract and retain qualified faculty, they must first understand the motivations behind the enthusiasm or lack of enthusiasm toward teaching in an online environment. Course administrators should automatically assume that finding faculty to teach online will be difficult. In fact, administrators will have to market hard. Ross and Klug (1999) advise that "local promotional efforts are likely to be more effective in getting faculty to become actively involved in distance education – including speaking and voting favorably about distance education course and program proposals and teaching distance education courses – if they are successful in convincing faculty that distance education is appropriate, particularly at their own institutions and in their own academic areas". While this may be true, often the difficulty lies in the retention process.

Giannoni and Tesone (2003) propose using a "survey instrument" to determine the motivating factors of senior faculty to an OLE. This obviously works best at a traditional university that is trying to lure existing faculty into the OLE. There are two major classifications for this survey tool; extrinsic motivational factors and intrinsic motivational factors. Administrators should focus on finding a balance between these

two categories. In the Giannoni and Tesone research, extrinsic factors such as technical support, compensation, job security, and promotion were the highest. The high intrinsic factors included; personal satisfaction, teaching development, intellectual challenge, and recognition. Perhaps one approach administrators could take is to show prospective online faculty that the "learners are often characterized through the literature, as motivated, self-initiators, who are adept at critical thinking and are inclined to an innovative and challenging environment" (Giannoni and Tesone, 2003). These are just the kind of students that faculty, particularly senior faculty, like to have as their students in a traditional classroom (Schifter, 2000). Other tools at the disposal of administrators are previous research articles, assessment tools, extensive training, testimonials from experienced online faculty, and mission statements could be revisited (Lee, 2002; Ross and Klug, 1999; Schott and Leach, 1999).

The attitude of course administrators as it relates to students should be optimistic as well. In a study conducted by Beard and Harper (2002) focusing on student perceptions of online classes versus traditional instruction, students "expressed concern about the lack of instructor interaction and the inability to interact with other students." With such concerns, students can easily sense whether or not the administrator and instructor believes in what they are promoting. Knowing why students drop out is one way to determine how to increase and maintain a high retention rate. Another way is to keep track of successes. Faithfully reading the end-of-course surveys of both students and faculty will help determine some of the successes. Implementing a support structure for the students and instructors is another way. Above all else, keeping students enrolled will be the ultimate measure of success.

Murray (2001) has advice for those running online courses for keeping students enrolled. The first point is to train faculty. Before faculty can be effective and serve as a support structure to students, they must understand online pedagogy and the tools associated with an OLE. These tools include email, discussion threads, chat rooms, and pushing course content. Faculty must also understand how to adopt new and emerging technologies related to OLE (Kagima and Hausafus, 2001). Another retention point would be for administrators to give students a lot of upfront information and advising. Administrators must give potential students realistic expectations, and then let them decide if the modality is appropriate for them. Determining the technical skills that students possess upon entering the program may determine the success of that student in the program (Huang, 2002). There is little doubt that distance students will surely master the technical tools and "become competent and skillful users of a variety of communication tools" (Anderson, 2001). Technical support must be easy to reach and available around the clock.

Finally, a course administrator's attitude toward the course designers can either help or hinder implementation of an OLE. Most course designers will have strong technical programming skills, and will be able to meet most of the administrator's demands provided that it can be done within the confines of the hardware/software. Often, the administrator will serve more as a project manager to the designers, and therefore their attitude toward distance education could affect the quality the course designers are aiming for. The first thing for the administrator to remember is that the designers know how to create what the administrator wants. Therefore, a good set of requirements is what is needed.

The attitude of the course designers toward an OLE can be compared to the attitude of administrators. If the designers do not believe in the value of an OLE, the mission of the university will not be realized. Levy (2003) list six factors that need to be considered when planning an OLE. I will address the first four areas. The first area should have a clear vision and a plan to get there. Too often have projects (in all areas) failed because of a lack of proper planning. This will "allow money to be spent more efficiently such as buying one software package to serve multiple purposes, rather than several packages over several years" (Levy, 2003).

The second area of consideration, according to Levy (2003), is curriculum. Administrators need to work closely with designers to create 'shells'. That is, a program such as Ecollege, Blackboard, or Web CT can be used as a background while instructors fill them in with their own course content. This is one way to ensure individualism as it relates to each instructor.

The next three areas of consideration are staff training and support, student services, and student training and support. Each of these areas has already been addressed in this paper. From the point-of-view of the

course designers, they must have a clear, all encompassing plan for ensuring that these three areas are adequately met. Once again, a clear, well thought-out plan can alleviate student concerns *if* they are taken care of before the students arrive.

This paper has addressed the attitudes toward online education by four groups that are directly involved with the success of an OLE program. The first group discussed was the instructors. Perhaps the greatest catalyst in the long-term success of online education, it is the instructors that have to be more open minded and work with the institution to ensure a high quality environment. They need to realize that they can have just as much as an impact to a distance student as they can if that student was in a traditional classroom.

Just as important is the attitude of the students. Especially those students that are currently engaged in an OLE. For it is those students, once they have graduated, that will be the most important marketers for distance education. Flexibility is a major reason for a student selecting a distance program. Once they have completed course work they should be able to reflect upon their experience as favorable and valuable to their chosen field.

The course administrators have the responsibility for selling the distance program to the other three groups. It is their attitude that will filter down to the students and put a face on that institution's program. If this face is negative or perceived as negative, the challenge of recruiting faculty will no longer be an issue, as the university will not survive. The responsibility of the course administrators cannot be underscored. They are the most important factor in the short-term success of distance education.

Internet media makes it possible for universities to offer their degree programs over a distance. This will also enable universities to keep costs down and pass those costs on the students. Online education is cheaper to the university and the potential number of students that that university can enroll is virtually limitless. This will ultimately lead to more revenue. This revenue can be put back into the OLE in the form of technology updates, salary increases, and university recognition. At first, this scenario may seem idealistic and far-fetched. However, all that is required is the appropriate attitude and skills to make it happen. The accessibility of the Internet will continue to grow, it is up to the institutions to take advantage of that growth and open up the world of advanced education to those who want to use it.

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