A STLR Project: Spring 2020
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE LEARNING

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Introduction

The purpose of this STLR research project was to engage undergraduate students in research of other students’ experiences in the online learning environment. CeCE has several quality measures in place to help ensure quality online learning experiences, but little data on how students perceive their online learning experiences. Two key findings were the value online classes play in helping students complete their degree and the important role faculty play in students’ perceptions of online learning.

This project supported the tenet of Research, Scholarly, and Creative Activities by engaging students in the research process.

We acknowledge funding from UCO’s Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) for this project.
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Summary of Findings

Students choose online classes for these reasons:

1. Flexibility
2. Scheduling conflicts
3. Full-time jobs
4. Only option available
5. Less or no commute

Suggestion students have for faculty teaching online classes:

1. Be present and more interactive.
2. Provide a balanced workload.
3. Be more understanding and flexible.
4. Give clear instructions.
5. Provide more and/or prompt feedback.
6. Respond to emails in a timely manner.

Advice students have for other students taking online classes:

1. Schedule your time/get a planner.
2. Don't procrastinate/keep up with assignments.
3. Check D2L often.
4. Online is not easier; be prepared for more work.
5. Ask questions/reach out for help.
6. Read the syllabus.

Student Preferences

Students who identified as taking mostly online or fully online classes had higher ratings than students who took mostly face-to-face classes (F2F)* in the following categories:

- Amount learned and retention of content
- Opportunity for interaction and effectiveness of interactions

*Responses from F2F students were nearly twice the number of responses from mostly online and fully online.
Methodology

With STLR funding, CeCE hired two undergraduate students to assist with this research project. The main goal of the project was to better understand students’ experiences in the online environment. The requirement for the students was that they had taken at least one online class. Our project occurred during the Spring 2020 semester. All data collection was completed prior to Spring Break (transition to alternative delivery methods). Together we decided on a mixed-methods approach, with an online survey to be distributed to all students taking online classes in Fall 2019 with a request for an in-person interview. The interviews were conducted by our student researchers.

Project Timeline

Participants

The online survey was sent to all students who had been enrolled in at least one online class in Fall 2019. We received 181 complete responses. In addition to age, gender, school classification, we classified students’ modality as either:

1. Mostly taking F2F
2. Mostly taking online classes
3. Fully online

Participants were 80% female and 20% male.
# Demographics

## Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Num</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
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<td>8.3%</td>
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## Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-22</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-29</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
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<td>40-49</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

## Modality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Num</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mostly F2F</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>69.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly Online</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully Online</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
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</table>
Results from Close-Ended Survey Questions

Participants were asked to answer the questions based on the following scale:

1=Strongly Disagree
2=Somewhat Disagree
3=Neither Agree nor Disagree
4=Somewhat Agree
5=Strongly Agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online courses are easier than face-to-face classes.</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students learn less in online classes than face-to-face classes.</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online classes require more of a student's time than a face-to-face class.</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are less willing to speak their mind in an online class than in a face to face class.</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face classes provide better opportunities for students to interact with each other than in online classes.</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions between students and faculty are more effective in face-to-face classes than in online classes.</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face classes provide more opportunities to relate content to real life.</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses provide more flexibility to complete class requirements.</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students retain more information in an online class.</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are more resources for students in online classes than face-to-face classes.</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Results from Open-Ended Survey Questions

Why do you choose online classes?*

1. Flexibility.
2. Scheduling conflicts.
3. Full-time job.
4. Only option available.
5. Less or no commute.

Sample responses:

*As a working adult with a family, online classes give me more flexibility as to when I "attend" class. So that I can both complete my degree and work full time simultaneously.*

*I choose online courses because they enable me to be more involved on campus and in my organization as well as work more.*

*It is a part of my program. I live in Norman and don't want to make the drive. I also enjoy taking online classes over on-campus classes.*

*I only choose online classes when they are not important for my major. Classes that I feel are important for my major I take in class.*

*It helps me take the full credit load so I can work more hours in the day to pay for college.*

*most frequent responses on open-ended questions*
What is one suggestion you would give to faculty teaching online classes?*

1. Be present and more interactive.
2. Provide balanced workload.
3. Be more understanding and flexible.
4. Give clear instructions.
5. Provide more and/or prompt feedback.
6. Respond to emails in a timely manner.

Sample responses:

*Be active in the classes, comment in discussions threads, post videos to introduce modules, do weekly posts to touch base. Just be present in the course and let students see that you are taking time to be there like we are.*

*Ensure that your students know that you are here for them.*

*Put in grades often and provide quick and polite responses to emails and more students will succeed in your class because they feel that you care.*

*I think maybe just have more interaction with students? I have never spoken to my online teacher, but it’d be nice to still interact with them, because online classes have flexible scheduling, but getting to know professors is really important.*

*Be flexible and considerate with students doing online classes. They are mostly taking them because they are juggling work and school and it’s not because they are trying to take the easy way out.*

*most frequent responses on open-ended questions*
What is one piece of advice you would give students taking their first online class?*

1. Schedule your time/get a planner.
2. Don't procrastinate/keep up with assignments.
3. Check D2L often.
4. Online is not easier; be prepared for more work.
5. Ask questions/reach out for help.
7. Read the syllabus.

Sample responses:

Write down every assignment and due date into an agenda. You won't have a professor or classmates to remind you about assignments.

It's harder than you think it is and you have to be super self-motivated to do things on time.

Reach out to your professor, if you miss a due date or are not understanding material, email them, or if they have office hours, see them in person.

If you are not responsible enough to stay on top of checking D2L frequently each week, you are bound to miss deadlines. Do not take an online course if you lack autonomy and responsibility.

Read over the syllabus thoroughly and watch tutorials within the first week.

*most frequent responses on open-ended questions
**Statistically Significant Findings**

There were no significant differences based on year in school or gender.

There were statistically significant differences* between the Mostly F2F group and the Mostly Online/Fully Online groups in their answers to the questions listed below. These were based on the scale:

1=Strongly Disagree  
2=Somewhat Disagree  
3=Neither Agree nor Disagree  
4=Somewhat Agree  
5=Strongly Agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mostly F2F Mean</th>
<th>Mostly/Fully Online Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Students learn less in online classes than face-to-face classes.</em></td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Face-to-face classes provide better opportunities for students to interact with each other than in online classes.</em></td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Interactions between students and faculty are more effective in face-to-face classes than in online classes.</em></td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Face-to-face classes provide more opportunities to relate content to real life.</em></td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Students retain more information in an online class.</em></td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05
Interview Responses:

The interviews followed a semi-structured format with the following questions guiding the interview:

1. How many fully online courses have you taken?
2. What do you think are the strengths of online courses?
3. What do you think are the weaknesses of online courses?
4. What do you miss, if anything, about face-to-face courses when you are in an online course?
5. What do you miss, if anything, about online courses when you are in a face-to-face course?
6. Did you think students have the opportunity to interact with other students in online classes?
   a. Tell me about this.
   b. How important is this to you?
7. Do you think students are more comfortable asking questions in an online class?
   a. Why or why not?
8. Do you think the formation of study groups is helpful in an online course?
   a. Why or why not?
9. What suggestions would you give to a student who is taking an online course for the first time?
10. What suggestions would you give to faculty teaching online courses?

Most of the answers corresponded with the findings that were in the survey. In particular, students emphasized flexibility and ease of access in the benefits as well as the reasons to take online classes; and most mentioned the interaction is what they missed and was also a weakness.

Regarding ease of access:

*No matter where I go, as long as they have Internet access, I can see everything that I need for class. So even if I lose my backpack, everything’s on D2L, so it’s ready to go. You don't need anything other than a computer and that’s it.*
On interaction:

*I definitely miss the interaction the most, because I like to be able to talk to professors and ask questions when you don’t understand a concept instead of just breezing by it. But when it’s online, you don’t have that interaction. They just become a part of the class, not an actual human that you are able to interact with and build relationships and mentor maybe.\* 

*All of the courses I’ve taken, they’ve done a really good job at giving you suggestions on pairing up, going through the course list, emailing your peers, setting up study times, just to get that interaction and get more out of the class.*

There were a couple of questions not addressed in the survey that are listed here:

**Do you think students are more comfortable asking questions in online class? Why or why not?**

More of the interviewees agreed, although they mostly refer to the use of email (as opposed to discussion boards). We concluded this from these responses:

*Absolutely, there is less fear in asking questions. In person, afraid they will look stupid, especially if email to professor, only the professor knows.*

*Yes, via email, especially introverts*

**Do you think the formation of study groups is helpful in online courses?**

There were mixed responses to this question:

In the affirmative:

*Yes, UCO should have ‘UCO-sanctioned study groups’ for different programs.*

*Yes, I think it would be beneficial.*

And in the negative:

*Not for me...I like to keep to myself.*
Discussion and Implications

While many of the close-ended responses leaned more favorably to F2F, this could be due to the fact that there were twice as many students who identified as “mostly F2F” that answered this question, indicating their personal preference for F2F classes.

For online students, the value of online classes was in large part due to the flexibility and convenience. Overwhelmingly, students say they choose online classes for the flexibility it offers them, especially if they are working full-time. The ability for students to continue working and go to school at the same time helps keep students on track to degree completion.

Many students missed the interaction with their professors and other students in their online classes. This was also reflected in many of the “suggestions to faculty” and in the positive comments regarding online classes. A few strategies for faculty based on what students appreciated:

- Including a picture of yourself (or a video is even better).
- Provide weekly overviews of course content and assignments.
- Add your personal expertise to content through text or video.

This interaction (or lack of) may have also influenced the results regarding students learning more and/or retaining more in F2F classes. In the interviews, there were several who noted that interaction played a key role in their learning:

- **So the idea is the more peers you have and the more people you talk to, the quicker you’re going to pick it up and actually be able to attach the knowledge to something, rather than just cramming for a test and then losing it...For me, that’s how I lock it in.**
- **I think it's pretty important [interaction with other students] because I think there's a lot to learn from other people’s perspectives, and you gain a lot more when your friends with your classmates or professor.**
The “advice to other students” responses made it clear that students who have taken an online class understand the importance of time management and a need for self-discipline. To help students be more successful in online classes, faculty can emphasize the need to stay on track and provide weekly reminders.

**Conclusion**

Online classes offer the flexibility and convenience that many students need to complete their degrees, so it is important that we continue to look for ways to improve them and help students be successful in them. A key ingredient to student success is faculty and how they interact with students and facilitate interaction among students. Many students indicated how important it was to know there was a human on the other side of the screen--for both learning and encouragement.
Appendix

Student Perceptions of Online Learning

Online Survey

Close-Ended Questions:

Please answer the questions below based on the following scale:

1=Strongly Disagree
2= Somewhat Disagree
3= Neither Agree nor Disagree
4= Somewhat Agree
5= Strongly Agree

1. Online courses are easier than face-to-face classes.
2. Students learn less in online classes than face-to-face classes.
3. Online classes require more of a student’s time than a face-to-face class.
4. Students are less willing to speak their mind in an online class than in a face to face class.
5. Face-to-face classes provide better opportunities for students to interact with each other than in online classes.
6. Interactions between students and faculty are more effective in face-to-face classes than in online classes.
7. Face-to-face classes provide more opportunities to relate content to real life.
8. Online courses provide more flexibility to complete class requirements.
9. Students retain more information in an online class.
10. There are more resources for students in online classes than face-to-face classes.

Open-ended questions:

- Why do you choose online classes?
- What is one piece of advice you would give students taking their first online class?
- What is one suggestion you would give to faculty teaching online classes?
Demographic questions:

What year are you in school?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate student

How old are you?

- 18-22
- 23-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- Over 50

Which do you consider yourself?

- Fully online student
- Mostly online classes with a few face-to-face
- Mostly face-to-face with a few online classes

Adapted from: