

Student Reactions to a Sudden Shift to Online Course Delivery During the Early Stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. The global pandemic of 2020 forced universities to abruptly shift to online education mid-semester, presenting a unique opportunity to study students' experiences of the same classes both in-person and online. This paper presents the results of a student survey conducted at a private, medium-size university in the Northeast U.S., in which business students expressed their attitudes towards both in-person and online portions of their coursework in Spring 2020. Respondents reported predominantly negative attitudes towards online learning formed during early stages of the pandemic due to the misalignment of initial in-person learning objectives with course design and delivery, and pandemic-related stress, including lack of social interactions with faculty and peers. This study provides educators with insight into what the experience was like from students' perspectives.

Keywords: online learning, student attitudes, business school, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

The involuntary transition to online learning in Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic proved difficult in many respects both for the students and the instructors. The purpose of this study is to capture student experiences during this short period in the history of higher education, as well as to gain insight into the factors, tools, and techniques that affected student learning experiences should a

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similar transition be needed in the future. We surveyed undergraduate business school students at a private, medium size residential university in the Northeast U.S., where classes are typically held in person.¹ Most students choose to attend this university due to its small class sizes and low student-to-faculty ratio.

All classes shifted to online learning in mid-March of 2020 and each respondent experienced both in-person and online instruction in the same class, taught by the same instructor. The survey contained questions related to both in-person and online course design and students' attitudes towards the sudden shift to online learning. The responses provide insights on student engagement, effectiveness of instruction, and general challenges brought about by this sudden transition.

Results of our study show that while 39% of the respondents liked the flexibility of taking classes online, only 5% said they would prefer to take all classes online. Students indicated that they learned less and yet achieved better grades when classes shifted online. While we acknowledge that the sudden transition to online learning caused significant stress to students which influenced their perceptions, it is informative that the overwhelming majority of students reported the loss of the intangible benefits obtained from their interactions with classmates and professors. Several respondents cited a loss of a "human connection" and "feeling isolated" (consistent with DeSanctis & Sheppard 1999), even though many faculty members held synchronous classes and longer virtual office hours during the online portion of the semester. The survey also revealed that during the second half of the Spring 2020 semester students struggled with staying focused, both because of additional distractions faced when learning from home, and because they lost motivation from not being in the classroom.

When asked about the role of specific learning resources while being in the online classes, 75% of respondents found it helpful when the instructor writes out notes while screen sharing, 58% found online publisher resources (such as MyLab and Connect) to be helpful, 53% found live online discussions to be helpful, and 46% found narrated PowerPoint presentations to be helpful. Interestingly, only 30% of students report that they learn more from open book and open notes exams, and only 20% find working in online groups to be helpful.

By learning students' immediate post-emergency feedback, this study draws attention to the areas of online instruction that will still need improvement, while also suggesting that despite the growing prevalence of digital learning, on-campus education still provides intangible value through personal interactions

1. Prior to the pandemic the university in this study offered 15-20 online classes each fall and spring semester. The university ran approximately 1,200 undergraduate classes each semester. Therefore, online offerings constituted at the most only 1.7% of all classes offered each semester. As a result, an average student at the university was not likely to take an online class prior to Spring of 2020.

and student motivation, particularly for the student demographic that prefers more individualized attention.

2. Background and Related Literature

Our study is motivated by two main questions. One, what components of online education do students value? Two, what factors affected student attitudes towards online as opposed to in-person learning during the pandemic? In this section, we present a brief overview of the literature related to these two questions.

Neither students nor instructors are novices to online learning, as online courses have expanded in recent years. In the fall of 2018, 35% of all undergraduate and graduate students in the USA took at least one online class, and 16% took all classes online (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Allen and Seaman (2013) report that the number of students taking at least one online class has increased threefold since the 2000s. From 2002 to 2012, the number of online bachelor's degrees awarded in the nation climbed from 4,000 to 75,000 (Deming *et al.* 2015). A modern university offers multi-modal educational experiences, where not only different courses, but a single course may deliver content in multiple ways. Research also shows that students, increasingly more exposed to online learning, assess their learning experience using the same mental framework (Dziuban & Moskal 2011).

Components of Online Teaching and Learning

Similar to a face-to-face course, an effective online course begins with instructors formulating objectives and appropriately designing courses to meet those objectives. However, an effective online course calls for special treatment of content and selection of appropriate teaching, assessment, and student feedback methods (Nilson & Goodson 2018; Orelanna *et al.* 2011). Unfortunately, most of the "specificity" required from an effective online course was not possible in the Spring 2020. However, numerous instructors intuitively (or knowingly) used some of the best practices in online learning when shifting their instruction online, as reflected in the responses to our survey.

At the *course design stage*, studies of online teaching discuss *modes of content delivery* that are most effective for learners, including the use of online resources and course interactivity. During early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic there was a high risk of misalignment of course objectives with teaching, learning, and assessment methods. Faculty members, guided by course objectives set for the face-to-face courses switched to a wide range of delivery methods: lecturing live over Zoom, producing narrated slides, and/or recording video lectures that students could use asynchronously.

Some modes of online content delivery are more effective in keeping students' interest and promoting learning. Guo, Kim and Rubin (2014) analyzed

6.9 million video watching sessions from four math and science courses on the edX MOOCs (massive online course) platforms. They note that shorter videos are more engaging; most students stay engaged for about 6 minutes regardless of video length and that students are also more likely to engage with post-video assessment problems if videos are shorter. Additionally, slides or videos with an instructor's talking head are more engaging than slides alone, Khan-style tablet drawing tutorials are more engaging than PowerPoint slides and videos produced informally are preferred by students as opposed to more professional studio recordings.

Clark and Mayer (2011) in their book on e-learning share insights on the ways materials can be presented in an online class. They stressed that supplementing text presentation of course material with audio and graphics results in more active and effective learning. They also point out that explaining visuals is better done with an audio narration only than with the audio combined with on-screen text.

When it comes to the use of *online resources*, the sudden transition to online learning pushed many instructors to rely on online materials (e-textbooks, websites, scanned documents, etc.) during Spring 2020. However, Baron (2015) finds that reading online is associated with greater distractions, increased multi-tasking, and skimming instead of in-depth reading.

An effective online course must also include multiple opportunities for *active learning*, including interactions with the instructor, content, student-to-student interactions. Meaningful student-to-student interactions include sharing viewpoints, discussion, debates, peer review, and group work (Nilson and Goodson, 2018). While in face-to-face classes there are many organic opportunities for such interactions, in online classes they have to be carefully planned (Orellana *et al.* 2009). Anderson (2003), when discussing distance learning, proposed that at least one type of interaction (student-instructor, student-content, student-student) must be at a high level for a deep and meaningful educational experience. Croxton (2014) underscores the importance of interactivity in the classroom for student learning and satisfaction with the course. Feelings of social belonging and being a part of the community are also vital for student persistence and completion of the course (Croxton 2014, Drouin & Vartanian 2008).

Researchers acknowledge that *online tests* have to be thoughtfully embedded into a course structure. In their review of online testing literature, Boitshwarelo *et al.* (2017) recommend that online tests should be used strategically to facilitate learner engagement and that they are most effectively used to assess foundational knowledge. Online tests require creative thought, effort, time, and appropriate tools within and outside the learning management systems.

At the *course implementation stage*, studies note the importance of quality of learning environment and course delivery. Studies, including Ambrose *et al.* (2010), and our experience, tell us that students learn best when they are in a safe,