A Preliminary Review of Undergraduate Student Interest and Perceptions about Taking Online, Web-based Sociology Courses

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Abstract

This preliminary assessment sought to examine 1) student perception about the benefits and drawbacks of online, web-based courses in general, and 2) interest in web-based Sociology courses in particular. Online, web-based instruction is a part of mainstream education and currently universities nation-wide are beginning to turn towards online, web-based instruction as a way to reach more students. Yet, there is limited research about student perception in general and about web-based Sociology courses in particular. The results of this study indicate that student interest is highly motivated by attendance - not needing to attend a physical class, and students perceive not having regular contact with the instructor as the most relevant drawback. Results also show that overall students are interested in taking sociology online, web-based courses.

Key Words: Online, web-based instruction, e-learning, distance learning, Sociology online, student interest, student perception, student need

Introduction

As the journey into web-based instruction has occurred, I listened to numerous colleagues object to putting a syllabus online – as requested by the university, let alone that they would design an entire course on the web. The terms online, web-based and distance learning is used interchangeably in this paper.

However, what really surprised me was responses from students – the bastions of technology, i.e., *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *MySpace*, *Tumblr*, *Linkedin* and even *Wikipedia*, -- many in my traditional classes complain that they had to "download the syllabus" from Moodle[1] or that they had little interest in "completing a course lesson or assignment online."

I wanted to inform the students that the transition to online and distance learning platform would benefit them. I wanted to inform them that online, web-based instruction represents an important transformative learning evolution aimed to provide increased modalities for students. I hesitated because there are still unknown factors and variables about institutional preparedness, institutional role-players, learner outcomes and course implementation processes for online, web-based courses. Specific concerns relevant to students noted in the literature include course content and delivery, learner motivation, learner interaction (Testa, 2011), learner outcome measures, learner learning styles (Mestre, 2010), learner disabilities (Long, Marchetti, and Fasse, 2011), learner preparation, learner role, and faculty willingness, preparation and interest (Graham and Jones, 2011). Nevertheless, the Southern Regional Education Board anticipates that 16 Colleges and Universities will offer courses and programs in the *Electronic Campus* for the 2011 - 2012 Academic Year, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. State Colleges and Universities Expected 2012 Academic Year. *Number indicates actual* to Offer Courses and Programs in the *Electronic colleges and universities.*
Campus of the Southern Regional Education Board
for the 2011

Alabama 15	**Mississippi 4**
Arkansas 11	**North Carolina 12**
Delaware 1	**Oklahoma 10**
Florida 24	**South Carolina 9**
Georgia 31	**Tennessee 18**
Kentucky 9	**Texas 34**
Louisiana 17	**Virginia 10**
Maryland 10	**West Virginia 7**

Southern Regional Education Board, *Electronic Campus* retrieved December 10, 2011
http://www.electroniccampus.org/student/scripts/institutions/institutions.asp

Yet, student perceptions about these changes let alone their direct involvement tend to be post-implementation or non-existent. In spite of this, some institutions are offering online, web-based courses, arguably, just to keep up with their institutional counterparts (Burke, 2005; Hartnett, St. George, and Dron, 2011). While student interest and perceptions about online, web-based course tend to be minimized, lost in the transition, or afterthoughts, scholars (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, and Stevens, n.d; Twigg, 2001) note a few institutions offer courses with student interest in mind and work to improve the overall learning quality for students. Furthermore, Twigg (2001) suggest five essential student learner features for successful online web-based course implementation:

1. An initial assessment of each student's knowledge/skill level and preferred learning style
2. An array of high-quality, interactive learning materials and activities
3. Individualized study plans
4. Built-in, continuous assessment to provide instantaneous feedback
5. Appropriate, varied kinds of human interaction when needed (p.11)

Sahin and Shelley (2008) maintain that it is essential to understand student perceptions of distance learning. Their study indicates that a primary factor to student positive perception is their ability to utilize the technology and the selected benefits of the distance learning experience. They state, "In designing, developing, and delivering distance education courses, students' needs and perceptions should be central" (p. 217). Dupin-Bryant and DuCharme-Hansen (2005) also state that, "As the number of participants continues to increase, so to does the importance of providing effective instruction that focuses on the needs of learners." In addition, Moore, Dickson-Deane and Galyen (2011) posit that meaningful distance learning research can be difficult because of diverse learning environments, disciplines and platform characteristics. However, assessments of student interest and perception (Sahin et al., 2008) may provide insight that lead to integrated multimedia technologies that may create smoother student transitions such as faculty/news podcast, virtual classroom contact, virtual office hours, and the use of social networking.

Yudko, Hirokawa, and Chi (2008) in a study about student interest in online learning posit that the attitudes of college students foster better student understanding regarding online materials, class attendance and the effectiveness of the online content. They note that these components are essential to faculty and student preparation for online courses and education programs. Another interesting aspect of their study revealed that while students showed a favorable attitude towards combined distance-learning platforms and traditional lecture, students indicated that attendance and the technology were the biggest benefits.

Schlough and Bhuripanyo (1998) conducted a study to assess web-based instruction in the delivery of task analysis content. Students were asked to complete an evaluation form which asked if they could take the course again would they take the course on the internet or in the classroom. Seventy-seven percent of students indicated that if they could take the course over, that they would prefer to take the course in the classroom, a finding that may suggest that student interest in web-based courses can decline, if design and delivery are not addressed.

Student interest, in taking web-based courses, may also be impacted by several institutional issues and factors such as student training/orientation, course content and delivery, and instructor training and ease of use (Merisotis, 2001). Boger (2001) notes that some of the most pressing challenges for web-based course instruction and development are:

- online teaching tools;
- web-based pedagogical strategies;
- incorporating research into e-design strategies to reduce online cheating;
- learning styles of students in traditional web-based course and
- successful implementation in educational and curriculum integration. (p.2)

These factors seem relevant today because of the overall impact of student perception on the successfulness of online and web-based instruction and development. Researchers examining student ratings of internet education courses found that students rated courses high where there was web site usefulness and the instructor-demonstrated experience utilizing a technology delivery system (Stenhoff, Menlove, Davey and Alexander, 2001). Edelson (1998) found that there are rewards and frustrations for both faculty and students. Overall, some rewards include convenience, improved research and writing skills, and more student participation. Some frustrations are support issues, technical reliability, and possible heavier student course load. A study by DeBorough (1999) indicates that "good pedagogy is important to student's perceived satisfaction with distance education." DeBorough (1999) examined predictors of student satisfaction and identified five learner attributes that may contribute to student perceived satisfaction:

- previous experience with courses taught via technology
- self-ratings of competence with technology
- frequency of between class usage of communications technology
- age of the learner
- remote -site group size

Furthermore, Edwards, Perry and Janzen (2011) suggest that student perspectives remain essential elements to distance learning evaluation and educator effectiveness. Their findings reveal similar students' perspectives about online exemplary educators and their face-to-face educator counterparts. A couple of exemplary qualities noted were teacher ability to challenge and affirm learners and the ability to establish clear classroom presence. What does all of this mean to online web-based distance learning? It may mean that student assessment can play an important feature to online, web-based distance learning implementation now and in the future. What does it mean for Sociology? It may mean that Sociology, as well as other social sciences have great opportunities to explore the impacts of a new educator and learner platform.

Sociology Online, Web-based Course Trends

Some scholars suggest that the rapid development of e-learning and internet-based university courses may pose special challenges and questions for some Liberal Arts disciplines (Van Slyke, Dick, Case, and Ilie, 2010) regarding their implementation, effectiveness, and efficiency. Yet, more and more colleges and universities offer and deliver courses through the internet. One reason, Sociologist may consider increasing their embrace of this opportunity is the possibility for more meaningful discourse about learning environments that use online audio-visual material, databases, simulations and tutored exercises for both faculty and students. For these reasons and others, web based course can provide essential additional opportunities for Sociologist as Jaffe (2003) notes:

> As instructional technologies reshape the pedagogical landscape of higher education, it is imperative that sociologists, both as teachers and researchers, theorize and analyze pedagogical developments. Sociologists should be participating in both the scholarship about, and the scholarship of, teaching and learning. Sociology instructors are equipped with the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological tools to study and interpret the impact of technology on pedagogical places and practices. (p. 233)

Moreover, web-based sociology courses may enable students of various majors to explore the in-depth possibilities of understanding and solving life and society's most pressing institutional problems by providing direct research opportunities (Little, Titarenko, and Bergelson, 2005).

Many students, across disciplines, might benefit from a web-based sociology course due to the process, rigor, critical thinking and discovery often associated with the discipline. Students can readily view and witness examples of sociological theory, concepts and research, and may gain an appreciation for the necessity of expanding the circumference of their knowledge and improving their grasp of theories, facts and processes. Students may also retrieve vast learning materials that are difficult, expensive and unavailable in the traditional classroom setting (Edelson, 1998). With the move from formal classroom instruction to the web (virtual classroom), students may be able to complete assignments with more flexibility and gather content sources easier. Students may be able to create, share knowledge and capitalize on the vast resources facilitated by the web.

However, Koeber and Wright (2008) suggest caution in using technology that may cause students to disengage. In a study of an Introductory Sociology course, Koeber et al. (2008) compared student course evaluations from a traditional classroom and a distance learning course that used video conferencing. The results indicated that students gave more favorable teacher evaluations to traditional classroom facilitation versus distance learning facilitation when video conferencing was involved. Even so, findings indicated students found the technology a plus and rated the teacher higher. According to a study by Little, Titarenko, and Bergelson (2005) student interest and participation in Sociology can be positively, affected through web-based instruction and the internet offers access to invaluable information, resources and real time responses. For that matter, the internet may alleviate one of the biggest challenges of in-class instruction, lack of student interest and participation.

Research by Little et al. (2005) provides key elements necessary to develop web-based Sociology courses:

> Sociology courses are particularly suited to taking full advantage of the cross-cultural possibilities presented by online distance education. Our course on social control offered opportunities for students to read about and exchange views on a broad range of subtopics from imprisonment to video surveillance and the prevention of terrorism. We can readily imagine equivalent success with many sociology courses, such as Family Sociology, Social Stratification, Gerontology, or Sociology of Education, which inherently deal with social policy issues that can be illuminated by a cross-cultural perspective. (p. 358)

Other course components could include subject related course documents, journal assignments, external website links, integrated video, discussion board and a virtual face time classroom. Likewise, according to Jaffe (2003)

> Active learning involves student interaction with the subject matter through problems, exercises, and assignments that allow knowledge building and construction. Mediation entails interaction between the instructor and the students in framing problems, responding to queries, and weaving the threads of discussion. Collaboration consists of the interaction among students through questions, answers, information sharing, group work, and mutual evaluation.
> (p. 232)

As a result, students may develop an increased awareness of the changing dynamics of social structures and social life, appreciation of theoretical perspectives about social problems, and improve critical thinking skills. Ultimately, sociology web-based courses can be an effective means for faculty and students to broaden worldviews, observe examples of competing dynamics, analyze evolving relationships and employ new analyses to an ever-changing world.

Methodology

The Institution

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette is a selective-admission, state-supported university of approximately 16,300 undergraduate and graduate students. Online, web-based courses have increased from five (5) in 2004, to forty (40) in 2011. These courses are primarily offered in Business Management, English, Music, and Health and Wellness. For this preliminary assessment, fifty-seven students enrolled in (Summer 2010) two traditional classroom instructed Sociology and Criminal Justice courses completed a one-page questionnaire (shown in Table 2) which asked some basic demographic data and two main questions about taking a web-based sociology course: 1) student perception about the benefits and drawbacks of online, web-based courses in general and 2) interest in web-based Sociology courses in particular.

Table 2. Web-based Course Assessment

Part I.

1. Major _____

2. Age _____

3. Academic Rank _____

4. Are you employed? **Yes or No**

5. Marital Status _____

6. Do you have children?
- ❑ Single
  ____ Yes *(please indicate how many)* _____
- ❑ Married
  ____ No
- ❑ Separated
- ❑ Divorced

7. Annual Income

_____ Under $10,000.00

_____ $10,000.00 – $20,000.00

_____ $20,999.00 - $30,000.00

_____ $30,999.00 - $40,000.00

_____ Above $40,999.00

Part II.

1. Have you ever taken a web-based course?
- ❑ Yes (*If yes, please name the course*)
  _____
- ❑ No

2. If web-based courses were offered, would you take one?
Yes or No

3. What do you think are the benefits of taking a web-based course? (*check all that apply*)

____No Attendance Requirement
____ Grading Fairness
____No Direct Contact with Instructor
____No Direct Contact with Students
____Fewer Assignments
____Less Difficult Assignments
____No Benefits
____Other _____

4. What do you think are the drawbacks of taking a web-based course? *(check all that apply*)
____No Attendance Requirement
____ Grading Fairness
____No Direct Contact with Instructor
____No Direct Contact with Students
____Too many assignments
____More Difficult Assignments
____No Drawbacks
____Other _____

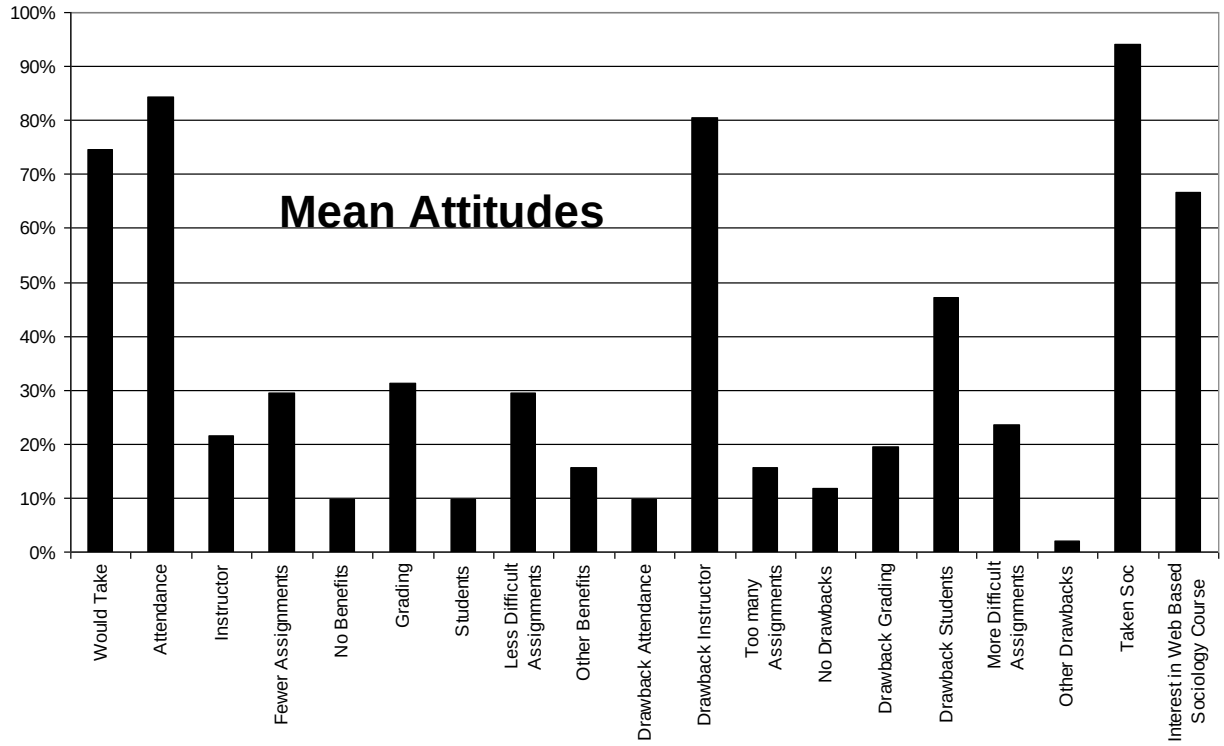
5. Have you taken (or are you taking) a sociology course?
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

6. Would you be interested in taking a Sociology course if offered on the web?
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

Completed instruments were divided into groups by demographic variables (student major, age, academic rank, employment status, marital status, family size and income) and by reported academic major to determine if mean answers about web courses would be different between groups (one-way ANOVA).

Findings

Figure 1. Findings Undergraduate Student Interest in Sociology Courses on the Web



Results for the entire sample are presented in Figure 1 above. As noted, most of our respondents had taken or were taking a sociology course at the time of the survey and indicated interested in taking another. Most would take a web course and thought there were advantages such as not needing to attend classes (attendance) at a particular time and place. However, most also saw potential drawbacks in not having regular contact with the instructor. Many items on the instrument yielded no significant difference (sig < 0.05) between groups. But, the ones that did were telling as reported here. Those who had taken web courses before, were interested in taking a sociology web course, as were the majority of those who never took a web course (100% to 60%). None (0%) of the people who had never taken a web course were able to see any particular disadvantage in doing so other than those that were suggested in the instrument.

In addition, non-nursing students saw no other drawbacks (0%) than those that were listed. About a tenth of those who had taken a web course saw drawbacks that were not anticipated in the instrument (11.11%) as did the same percentage of nursing students. This finding may be explained by the additional finding that nursing students were significantly more likely than others to have taken a web course (44% to 12%). Eighty eight percent of liberal arts majors were interested in taking a web course as opposed to 60% of other majors.

Business majors were significantly less likely to see potential benefits in web instruction than other majors (9.8% as opposed to 33.3%). Business majors were also less likely than other respondents to consider the lack of contact with an instructor to be a drawback (50% to 84%) as were students who were employed less likely to see the lack of instructor contact as a problem (14% to 44%). Married people were more likely to have concerns about instructor contact than non-married students (33% to 20%). Interestingly, science majors were worried that web courses had too many assignments, more so than other majors (67% to 13%).

Summary/Conclusions

In all the excitement, to offer online, web-based courses, student interest and perceptions are beginning to emerge as important and critical themes. Overall, there are combinations of factors that may contribute to student interest, exploration and participation in online, web-based courses. Thus, students should be included as active stakeholders in the actual development of online, web-based courses and distance learning. Student interest, in online, web-based courses, may also be improved by providing direct video training modules featuring students who have taken online, web-based courses. Social networks such as *Facebook*, *Linked in*, *MySpace*, and *Twitter* can be used to orientate students about the opportunities and benefits of online, web-based courses.

One of the first actions educational institutions should take towards online, web-based instruction is an assessment of student interest and perception. The assessment may assist educational institution faculty, staff and administrators with relevant and vital insight into course design that creates greater interest and smoother transition for students. The combination of these practices and processes may create a non-threatening participatory environment and experience that can revolutionize the way students interact with the subject matter, the instructor and other students. Finally, we suggests that institutions take these and other pre-implementation approaches that consider student perceptions and direct involvement as necessary components to successful institutional online distance learning transition.

Notes

1. Moodle is a course management system designed to help educators who want to create quality online courses. The software is used all over the world by universities, schools, companies and independent teachers. Moodle is open source and completely free to use. Retrieved December 17, 2011 from http://moodle.com/

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