

College Students and Academics: Online versus Face - To – Face

Evan Gresko, Tommy Maher. Derek Warren, and Natalie Cerrato

Introduction

For many years now colleges have been able to offer completely online courses in addition to the traditional face to face classroom setting. These courses have been offered in many different formats, such as live video calls, or prerecorded lectures that students were able to watch whenever they pleased. So theoretically when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, it should have been an easy transition to doing classes fully online. This however has not been the case for everyone. Now more than ever online learning is in the spotlight due to what is going on in the world around us.

Literature Review

Our class decided to research how the behaviors of college students differ in online classes vs. in face-to-face classes. This was research we were most intrigued to learn about due to the relevance of the topic, with all schools engaging in some sort of online classes in the past year with the pandemic going on. Everyone in class could relate to the topic, especially considering our Communication Research Methods class is completely online.

Our research question for this study is: How do behaviors of college students differ in online classes versus face-to-face classes? We wanted to see the effect online learning has on students' academic performance, attendance, feelings about/interest in, and communication behaviors inside and outside of the classroom. This is important to this study because it helps us understand how students' school life has changed from the effects of COVID-19, not only in the classroom, but out of the classroom as well. The intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theories had the biggest correlation to the results and responses in this study. Intrinsic motivation theory is the act of doing something without any obvious external rewards. Extrinsic motivation theory is reward-driven behavior, meaning there is an external reward for their actions. This helps to frame our ideas by seeing how attention and satisfaction are perceived by students because we can then relate those two reasons such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Paying attention and doing well in a class depend on the reward given when students do this. When it comes to online learning intrinsic motivation was much more relevant because students who paid more attention in person would not be recognized and rewarded because the professor could not see who was fully focused. In traditional learning there was an external reward of the teacher's approval for paying attention making it more rewarding for students to pay attention. In online learning that was not possible, so it came down to students finding intrinsic motivation and their own internal reward for paying attention and retaining information. It connects to our variables by telling us if students were able to use more intrinsic motivation or if they had a harder time doing so. "Comparative studies between online and on-campus students are common using this approach (Wighting, Liu, & Rovai, 2008) and findings indicate that online students are more intrinsically motivated than their on-campus counterparts" (Hartnett, 2016, p.1). Most students preferred traditional learning proving that most students found it easier to have extrinsic motivation than intrinsic motivation.

The concept of this study was to find how grades, participation, attendance, and socializing were affected by switching to online learning. These were variables which included grades, participation, attendance, and socializing with other students. We measured grades by asking students how their GPA was affected by switching to online classes. We measured participation by asking students how often they actively participated in online classes and if they felt less motivated to participate in online classes. We then questioned the students whether they attended online class less or more than in traditional class. Finally, we asked how close or distant they felt from students in their class and being able to communicate with them. “Finally, by establishing frequent, ongoing communication with learners, where they feel able to discuss issues in an open and honest manner, practitioners are in a better position to accurately monitor and respond to situational factors that could potentially undermine learner motivation” (Hartnett, 2011, p. 33). Better and ongoing communication with other students, as well as teachers, has shown to better help both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learning in general. When it comes to online learning this has been challenged making the motivation lean more on a student’s intrinsic motivation, but having the best communication possible through online learning can help raise this motivation overall.

From our research we were able to come up with two main arguments. The first is that students think asynchronous learning is better due to the flexibility in their schedule it gives them. Students that preferred online learning over face to face cited that it was due to the flexibility it gave them in their schedule. With lectures being prerecorded, students felt it gave them the time to watch them when they were available, allowing them to fit school around their busy schedules instead of the other way around (Jayaratne & Moore, 2017). By giving students this flexibility, it allows them to be more self-efficient and allowing them to be more focused and productive while in class (Thai, De Wever, & Valcke, 2020). However, our second argument shows why face to face learning is more effective.

Our second argument is that due to the differences between online and face to face learning, students feel out of their comfort zone, and find it harder to succeed in school. Students cited they find it difficult to stay engaged and be motivated to do all their classwork and turn it in on time (Ferlazzo, 2021). One of our main points in investigating the differences between in person and online learning is how engaged in participation students are. Even though students may appear to be paying attention in online classes, there are still many different things distracting them, resulting in them not being as engaged as they should be (Kahn, Everington, Kelm, Reid, & Watkins, 2016). There are many things that can distract students in these online courses that would not be the case in a traditional classroom. During online courses students have easier access to be able to check different apps on their phones, watch shows on TV, or play games on all sorts of devices. In a face-to-face class setting, students would not be able to take these devices with them to class or would be ruppermanded by professors if they did. Studies have shown that this multitasking results in lower academic performance, as the distractions prevent students from achieving the grades they would if they were fully focused (Lepp, 2020). We think these studies show that students are not able to achieve what they would in a traditional classroom, in these online settings they are now being put in.

Methods

Participants

The target population in our research project consisted of our purposive, and snowball sampling in which we wanted to see how online learning differs from face-to-face for student academics, and their perceptions of it as college students. The students needed to complete at least one online course, at any university to partake in our research project to gather information. The survey was shared via email, text message or anyway through social media to students who agreed to fill it out and take part in the anonymous survey. Within the survey, the students had to fill out a questionnaire and some of these questions had to deal with demographic information. Pulled from the survey we found that most of the students who filled it out were between the ages of 19-21 years old with a majority of students being 20 years old (40%). Then we noticed that 59% were females, compared to 41% males, 92.4% were White/Caucasian, and most were Sophomores (38.1%) with a GPA between 3.5-3.99 (51.4%).

Procedure

Our survey, and interviews remained completely anonymous on who was asked questions, and identity information. The survey was created by students who were given a topic to better research and understand. As college students, a lot of us are on the same page when it comes to our opinions on learning online versus face - to - face and what we feel about it. When we were given the topic of academics from both scenarios, we created questions pertaining to how they felt about learning from both options, where they have the most attention, flexibility on both, where they can receive more help, and relationship status with peers/professors. Once the questions were created, they were distributed mostly via social media, through platforms such as email, and text message. Our interviews were conducted by asking people if they would agree to have an interview with full closure that they would remain anonymous, with preset questions, and a recorder in the back to type up a transcript as well to refer back to at later times. Most interviews were done on a one and one, where no one else was in the room where the interview was taking place.

Measures

Our study consisted of questions relating to the effects of COVID-19 on learning and how switching to online learning has affected students. We asked questions relating to preference, flexibility in schedule, difficulty of learning and completing assignments, and what strategies they have used to help them do better in online classes. This mostly consisted of open-ended questions and nominal questions to understand a bit more about the demographics of the population we were surveying. Our survey consisted of 10 questions that were open ended questions to let the interviewee speak freely on their opinions. The nature of questions asked for opinions on how they felt about online learning versus traditional learning and whether they retained information. It also asked how their personal schedule has changed and what they do differently to study and retain information.

Results

With conducting multiple interviews and surveys, we received very useful data from our participants. We found multiple correlations between our interviews. For the most part, online learning negatively affects student's lives. The researchers found that students did not prefer online learning over face - to - face because of the common technical difficulties they had to deal with over the past year. Another aspect that was troublesome for students was making personal connections with their classmates and professors. Our interviewees talked about missing the synchronous conversations they would have with their class instead of constantly having to email professors or talking through a microphone or chatroom. Similarly, they also did not have the chance to meet new people in their classes. Most of the interviewees mentioned not being able to connect with their peers outside of the classroom because the only interaction they had was through a screen for an hour to an hour and a half. With most of the responses being negative, we did receive positive feedback about online learning as well. The interviewees did agree that having the ability to have class wherever they chose was convenient. Another aspect in which most interviewees agreed upon was their academics strived over the past year. This has a direct correlation with the statistics from the survey, with 51.4% of students having a GPA of 3.5-3.99. However, most of their responses with online learning relate to negative feelings. Fortunately, our classmates obtained quality data from our survey. Some outstanding statistics favored face - to - face learning rather than online learning. Our survey concluded that online learning is not effective, with a scale of one through five, students gave an average of 2.88 saying that online learning is effective. On the other hand, using the same one through five scale, students believed that in-person classes were more effective, with an average of 4.59. Correlating to online classes being less effective, there was an average of 1.73 when it came to students paying attention in online classes. Lastly, the survey responses indicated that they prefer face - to - face classes over online learning with an average of 4.35. Out of the 105 students who took this online survey, 98.1% were enrolled as full-time students.

Discussion

The results we collected from multiple interviews and surveys was very useful to determine how students perceive online learning. We can see that most students prefer the traditional way of learning rather than online learning. Over a year now, students have been fully online or experiencing hybrid courses, and they are starting to feel exhausted from seeing their peers and professors through a screen rather than in-person. However, some students did agree that online learning is an effective way to continue education during a stressful time, such as a pandemic. Students and professors are becoming more comfortable with being online and experiencing the change in education. A silver lining of this pandemic is that professors and students will use what they learned from online classes in the future to communicate with each other. An example of this would be a student having to miss a class, but being able to watch a recorded lecture of what they missed that day. Thus, professors and students are more comfortable and flexible with technology, so they can use what they learned this past year for the future.

Conclusion

The focus of this study was to understand the perceptions of students and professors with online learning versus traditional learning. We can comprehend that most students are in favor of face - to - face learning for multiple reasons. The pandemic changed the education system in a way that will aid everyone in the future. The results of the interviews and surveys illustrate that online learning is difficult and nonpreferred. However, the knowledge professors and students gained this past year will always be beneficial.

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