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Faculty and Student Perception of a Hybrid Course Design

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of a hybrid course design to address the needs of working adult learners in an MBA program. The choice of a hybrid course design allows for the retention of the face-to-face component of traditional courses, while addressing the need for flexible scheduling of working adults. The purpose of this descriptive study was to examine the perceptions of faculty and students in a cohort-based program of study utilizing a hybrid course design. A sample of 150 students and 13 faculty members were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the hybrid course design. The survey addressed four primary areas including course design and content, interaction/collaboration, assessment, and overall learner and faculty perceptions. The results of the study show that, as a whole, students and faculty perceive the hybrid course design is an effective means of delivering course content. Findings from this research would be useful for those who teach or those who are considering teaching courses utilizing a hybrid course design.

Faculty and Student Perception of a Hybrid Course Design

In today's competitive educational environment, students are looking for alternative educational opportunities. Due to the diverse backgrounds, occupations, and time constraints of students in today's environment, it is necessary for course delivery methods to accommodate these diverse needs without sacrificing rigor necessary for accreditation. Traditionally, course design utilized face-to-face instruction, which allows for a great deal of interaction between the student and the instructor, but this method requires a significant commitment of time to in-class presence. As the Internet became a popular medium for information transfer, students began exploring the options available for online courses and degree programs. However, a purely online course eliminates the face-to-face interaction desired for effective teaching and learning. To capture the advantages offered by both delivery methods, some schools are now creating courses using a hybrid course design. This method appears to offer "the best of both worlds" (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002).

The most recent National Center for Educational Statistics report on distance education found that "66 percent of 2-year and 4-year Title IV degree-granting postsecondary institutions reported offering online, hybrid/blended online, or other distance education courses" (Distance education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions, 2008, pg. 2) during the academic year 2006-2007. Furthermore, 61% of these same institutions offered online courses, with 35 percent offering hybrid/blended courses, and 26 percent offering other types of distance education courses.

Researchers (Ackerman, 2008; Aycock, Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Hensley, 2005; O'Malley & McCraw, 1999; Shachar & Neumann, 2003; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006) in online learning often present the pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of various aspects of face-to-face, totally online, or hybrid (blended) individual course design and delivery including increased flexibility and student access the lack of face-to-face contact with students, the need to adequately assess learning in on-line courses, and the overall perception of hybrid courses among students and faculty. However, much of the information is purely anecdotal (Reasons, Valadares & Slavkin, 2005). Reasons et al. note, "There is a lack of definitive longitudinal research supporting hybrid course designs" (p. 85). To address this gap in the literature, this study examined the effectiveness of a hybrid course design model within an entire program of study using a sample of 150 MBA students and 13 faculty members involved with the MBA program over a five-year

period. The authors examined four areas of program design and delivery including course design and content, interaction/collaboration, assessment, and overall student and faculty perceptions of hybrid courses.

Literature Review

Many colleges and universities have chosen to adopt distance and on-line education as a strategic move to adapt to the needs of today's students. Formal education is moving away from faculty-centered and lecture-based designs to a more student-focused, computer-mediated educational delivery system. Early efforts to reach distance-based learners were made primarily through closed-circuit television and correspondence courses. However, with the advent of the Internet, the educational system entered a new age of course delivery. Today, online educational courses include both synchronous and asynchronous delivery methodologies.

Although wholly online courses offer greater convenience and flexibility, evaluation of learner outcomes and satisfaction levels found that something was missing (Hensley, 2005). Wholly online courses did not provide the critical interaction between professor and student that has been deemed as essential for effective learning (Shachar & Neumann, 2003). This reduced interaction between faculty and students, as well as student- to-student interaction contributes to a loss of perceived community (Rovai, 2002) and feelings of isolation (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins & Shoemaker, 2000).

To minimize the negative aspects of distance and wholly online courses, many educational institutions have adopted a blended or hybrid course design. Colis and Moonen (2001) define blended learning as a mixture of traditional face-to-face and online activities. In this model, instruction occurs in both the classroom and online. Blended courses offer the convenience and flexibility of wholly online courses without the loss of faculty and student interaction. Research that focuses on faculty and student perceptions report that this course design is considered the "best of both worlds" (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004).

When designing a hybrid course, there are numerous aspects that require attention for learning to be successful. These include a balance between online and face-to-face course components, the need for clearly defined course requirements, the need to design elements that will engage the desired depth of critical thinking and learning, and the determination of which assignments are best executed face-to-face and which can be executed online (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002). Hensley (2005) noted that faculty must determine which of their course goals and

objectives can be accomplished online, design online assignments to meet these goals and objectives, and ensure integration between the online and face-to-face components of the course.

Another key element of designing a successful hybrid program is the intentional integration of course activities that enhance student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction. Rovai (2002) notes that it is not only the quantity of interaction that is important, but also the quality and timeliness of interaction. He suggests that it is essential for online instructors to build and nurture a sense of community in online activities. This is accomplished by encouraging students to interact with each other in a cohesive manner and by continually reflecting on the work of individuals as well as the group (Graves, 1992). Although many online interactive learning events such as online discussion and collaborative projects do promote interaction, it is important that faculty continually reinforce, challenge and provoke learners to critically reflect on course concepts and construct new bases of knowledge as they interact in these events (Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006). To achieve high levels of interaction and collaboration, faculty must guide, support, and nurture a learning environment (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), while also challenging learners to take responsibility for their own learning (Bonk, Kyong-Jee, & Zeng, 2004).

To develop a supportive and effective learning environment where students actively engage in learning opportunities, it is essential that distance education programs, including hybrid design models, create effective mechanisms to assess learning outcomes. Research (Shachar, 2008; Shachar & Neumann, 2003) on the assessment of course outcomes suggests that performance in online and hybrid courses was not significantly different from that achieved in traditional face-to-face settings.

One key to effectively achieving high quality outcomes of learning events in hybrid courses is the instructor's ability to manage student assignments, provide relevant and timely feedback, and concerns, and assess student learning against course outcomes (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). A variety of assessment methods can be used including peer evaluations, assessment by the professor, exams, collaborative projects, and the use of rubrics (Dziuban et al., 2004; Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). Regardless of the assessment techniques utilized by the instructor, it is important to recognize that students' willingness to accept responsibility for managing their assignments and their persistence in pursuing learning outcomes are also key to their performance in an online or hybrid course (Lynch & Dembo, 2004; Stode et al., 2006). Lynch

and Dembo (2004) note that successful learners are active in their learning environment, continually monitor their progress toward their learning goals, and integrate appropriate strategies to achieve their goals. Assessing learning outcomes in a hybrid course design requires an integrative and collaborative interaction between the student and the instructor.

Although distance education has existed for more than a century, student and faculty perceptions about the value and quality of distance-based instruction, compared to that received in more traditional face-to-face settings, continue to be an issue. Shachar and Neumann (2003) in their meta-analysis of the differences between traditional and distance education found that students involved in distance-based education classes academically outperformed those engaged in traditional face-to-face classes. While this is positive news, other researchers (O'Malley, 1999; Stodel et al., 2006; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006) found that students engaged in a strictly online courses varied in their academic performance. They also found that students perceived there was a lack of social and teacher presence necessary for effective learning.

Rovai and Jordan (2004) found the concern regarding student and faculty presence (i.e., interaction) was lessened in hybrid or blended courses. Their results showed that students felt “the face-to-face weekend classes were a valuable component both academically and in building professional relationships and a strong sense of community” (p. 10). They also found that students engaged in hybrid or blended courses praised the flexibility offered by these courses and the benefits that this course design allowed in enabling them to regulate their own learning. In another study on blended learning, Dziuban, Moskal, and Hartman (2005) note the one consistent finding was the level of student and faculty satisfaction with this course model.

Although continued research in this method of course delivery is needed, it appears that students and faculty perceive there is value in the hybrid course design. Researchers continue to find that hybrid designed courses allow for engagement and collaboration between students and faculty (Rovai, 2002), while also placing learning ownership and success in the hands of the learner (Bonk, Kyong-Jee & Zeng, 2004; Lynch & Dembo, 2004).

Methodology

There is limited longitudinal research on hybrid course design, consequently the purpose of this descriptive study was to examine the perceptions of faculty and students over a five-year period in a cohort-based program of study using a hybrid course design. The sample of this study consisted of 150 current and former students and 13 MBA faculty members.

Data Collection Process

All current and former MBA students and all MBA faculty members had an opportunity to participate in the data collection process associated with this study. The researchers sent an e-mail to all students and faculty members explaining the purpose of this study. Consistent with Milligan College's Human Subjects protocol, respondents were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation. Furthermore, participants were assured that the information obtained from this research would be confidential and used in this study in summary format only.

Measures

Researchers used two self-report surveys developed using the Zoomerang survey software to gather data about student and faculty member perceptions of hybrid course design. Both the student and faculty surveys contained 19 questions addressing perceptions on hybrid course design. The student survey also included two demographic questions and the faculty survey included two demographic questions and two questions pertaining to faculty teaching preferences. Both student and faculty surveys employed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5), to strongly disagree (1).

To ensure clarity in the survey instrument, researchers used the following definitions to describe course design and delivery.

- Traditional course – A course where little or no online technology is used. Content is delivered in a face-to-face classroom setting.
- Hybrid course – A course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. A substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has a reduced number of face-to-face meetings.
- Online course – A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. These courses typically have no face-to-face meetings.

The final survey response rate for the student survey was 70.66% (106 of 150). The response rate for the faculty survey was 84.61% (11 of 13).

Demographics

The sample makeup was 51.9% (55) males and 48.1% (51) females. Of those, 17% (18) of the respondents were between the ages of 20-30; 43% (46) of the respondents were between the ages of 31-40; 37% (39) respondents were between the ages of 41-50, and 3% (3) were over 50 years old. Seventy-three percent (8) males and 27% (3) females completed the faculty survey. Of

those, 9% (1) respondent was between the ages of 31-40; 45% (5) were between the ages of 41-50, and 45% (5) were over 50 years of age.

Table 1: *Demographic Profile of Respondents*

Demographic	Students		Faculty	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Sample Size	106		11	
Gender				
Male	51.9	55.0	8	73.0
Female	48.1	51.0	3	27.0
Age				
20-30	18	17.0	0	0.0
31-40	46	43.0	1	9.0
41-50	39	37.0	5	45.5
>50	3	3.0	5	45.5

Results

For reporting and comparison purposes, the results below will include data gathered from both students and faculty. Tables 2 through 6 present the mean responses to the 5-point Likert scale to determine perceptions of faculty and students on hybrid course design. When comparing means, it is difficult to assess the significance of the differences and the normal tests for significance are inappropriate for this study. For the purposes of this study, we utilized a coding technique similar to one used by Meyer (2007). Examining the data, we assumed that differences in means of less than or equal to one-tenth ($\leq .1$) were essentially equal, thus we designated them as such using the “=” symbol. Differences in means greater than one tenth, but less than three tenths ($>.1$ but $<.3$) were classified as *nearly equal*, and designated them as such using the “ \approx ” symbol. Mean differences greater than three tenths ($>.3$) were classified as *not equal*, and designated them as such using the “ \neq ” symbol.

Table 2: *Mean Response for Course Content and Design*

Item	Student (n=106)	Faculty (n=11)	Differen ce
Online learning allows for the presentation of course content in a logical, sequential manner in ways that facilitate learning.	4.02	4.18	0.16 ≈
Online content (including reading, research, review, learning new concepts, and assessment) is as demanding as content delivered in traditional face-to-face courses.	4.45	4.45	0.00 =
Technology (Angel or Blackboard) used for assignment completion (i.e., discussion boards and exams) is easy to use and understand.	4.35	3.73	0.62 ≠
As a whole, course assignments or assessments support the objectives of the MBA program.	4.44	4.45	0.01 =

Discussion

Students and faculty involved in online learning face similar challenges. For faculty it can be the ability to design a course that flows logically and contains sufficient content and quality to meet the learning goals of the course without falling into the “course-and-a-half syndrome” (Skibba, 2006). For students it can be the ability to understand how and why each of the course requirements fit into the big picture for the course and support their learning goals (Skibba; Stodel et al, 2006). For this study, students and faculty indicate that the course design and content of classes in the MBA program provide challenging and demanding content that facilitate learning. The differences in opinion were small or non-existent which suggests that the blending of both online course activities and face-to-face learning events provides a more robust educational experience. The key to achieving outcomes such as this is the ability to develop courses that focus on the learner (Dziuban et al., 2005) and create learning opportunities that challenge student’s knowledge base (Stodel et al., 2006).

The only area where a difference of perception occurs is with the use of technology. Although computer-related challenges occur with the technology, students found that the technology used by the program was sufficient and easy to use. Faculty, however, perceived that the technology used for assignment completion was somewhat difficult to use and understand. One explanation for this inconsistency in perception may be the lack of user friendliness of the

online learning platform used in this program. Once designed and uploaded, student interface with the learning platform is easy and straight forward.

Table 3: *Mean Response for Interaction/Collaboration*

Item	Student (n=106)	Faculty (n=11)	Differen ce
Residency activities were a valuable component in mastering course content.	4.41	4.36	0.04 =
The amount of communication and interaction between student and faculty in a hybrid course was sufficient for effective learning.	4.08	4.27	0.19 ≈
Quality of instructor response in a hybrid course is appropriate to facilitate learning.	4.29	4.27	0.02 =
Technology based communication is as effective as face-to-face communication for responding to questions.	3.58	3.73	0.15 ≈

Discussion

The lack of social teaching presence in hybrid courses is a real challenge for both students and faculty (Rovai , 2002; Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Cutler (as cited in Rovai, 2002) notes that creating a “mutual sense of interaction ... is essential to the feeling that others are there” (pg. 18). Dziuban et al. (2005) note that web-based resources and course management systems increase the ease of student and faculty interaction with the end result being that students are more actively engaged in the learning process. In the MBA program, students and faculty perceive that the level of communication and interaction was more than adequate for effective learning, in mastering content, and in creating a sense of community. Although there was little difference in perception regarding the influence that technology had on communication, it should be noted that both faculty and students were neutral in their perception of the effectiveness of technology based communications. These results are consistent with Rovai (2002) who notes that computer based communications are often perceived as less personal forms of communication and thus contribute to diminishing social presence when compared to face-to-face communication.

Table 4: *Mean Response for Assessment*

Item	Student (n=106)	Faculty (n=11)	Difference
Required assignments in a hybrid course encourage critical thinking.	4.28	4.36	0.08 =
Required assignments in a hybrid course encourage the application of knowledge and skills learned in class to current business problems.	4.21	4.45	0.25 ≈
The feedback from instructor on graded assignments in a hybrid course enhances learning.	4.11	4.36	0.25 ≈
Instructors in a hybrid course clearly communicated the requirements for the successful completion of assignments.	4.35	4.82	0.47 ≠
Instructor response time to student questions in a hybrid course was appropriate to allow students to complete required assignments in a timely manner.	4.09	4.73	0.63 ≠

Discussion

Dziuban et al. (2005) note that blended courses enhance the development of a community of inquiry. They suggest that this type of course design fosters critical thinking by encouraging collaborative learning. The results of this study suggest that both students and faculty perceive the assignments and learning events in the MBA program contribute to student learning. The areas of disagreement lies in the area of instructor communication related to assignment requirements and response time to questions on assignments. This perception difference is consistent with previous findings of Stodel et al. (2006). Stodel et al. found that student perceptions of faculty feedback on assignments and the timeliness and content of faculty response to student questions was inconsistent with the perception of faculty on these items. Stodel et al. suggests that student expectations may be inconsistent with the reality of an online learning environment. The findings of this study support this contention and may present a future area of research.

Table 5: *Mean Response for Perceptions*

Item	Student (n=106)	Faculty (n=11)	Difference
Participation in / facilitation of online discussions in a hybrid course is easier than in a traditional face-to-face class setting.	3.08	2.27	0.81 ≠
Hybrid courses meet the need for flexible access to educational opportunities.	4.60	4.64	0.01 =
I believe that using a hybrid course design is more effective than traditional teaching methods.	3.31	3.27	0.04 =
I prefer hybrid courses to traditional face-to-face courses.	3.79	3.18	0.61 ≠
I believe that students can make the same grade in a hybrid course as in a traditional face-to-face course.	4.29	4.36	0.07 =
Students can learn the same amount in a hybrid course as in a traditional face-to-face course.	3.86	4.27	0.41 ≠

Discussion

Overall perceptions by faculty and students on a hybrid course design in the MBA program offer paradoxical views. The results on the value of a hybrid course designs for flexibility in educational opportunities is consistent with previous research (Dziuban et al., 2004; O'Malley, 1999; Shachar & Neumann, 2003). Student perceptions regarding the preference for hybrid courses over traditional course and their perceptions on the level of learning in a hybrid course verses a traditional course was consistent with O'Malley's (1999) findings. O'Malley found that although students liked the advantages of a hybrid course design, they seemed to be undecided in their preferences between online learning and traditional learning. However, faculty perceptions regarding student learning in a hybrid course is much more positive. This is consistent with the findings of Dziuban et al. (2005) who suggest that faculty are very satisfied with hybrid courses and that student learning and performance is equal to or better than traditional face-to-face course settings.

The largest difference in perception was found on the topic of online discussions. Faculty perception regarding the ease of facilitation of online discussions was decidedly negative, while student perceptions regarding the ease of participating in online discussions was neutral. These findings could be attributed to amount of time and preparation required to facilitate the

discussion, as well as student expectations regarding their participation in online discussions. Stodel et al. (2006) noted that the expectations, practices and attitudes of both students and faculty may need to be fundamentally altered when participating in online learning.

Conclusions

As a whole, this study found that faculty and student perceptions of the use of a hybrid course design in an MBA program of study is largely favorable. The positive nature of these findings reflect the growth of faculty member's knowledge over the last five years as they refined course content to match learners needs, to reinforce the goals of the MBA program, and address the challenges of teaching in an online environment. Although there were few areas of significant difference in perceptions, the areas that did exist should not be lightly dismissed. It is important that educators working in an online learning environment recognize that they must actively strive to build collaborative environments, coach learners how to learn online, as well as establish the structure necessary for online learning and manage the expectations of the online community.

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