

Student Perceptions of Hybrid Courses: Measuring and Interpreting Quality

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ABSTRACT. One popular teaching approach is a hybrid format balancing traditional face-to-face classroom instruction with online components. The authors used strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats methodology to examine if hybrid formats meet student expectations and the M. T. Miller and D. E. Husmann (1996) classification system to identify elements affecting the perception of quality. Results indicated that hybrid classes continued to exhibit the same weaknesses of the online format, and the addition of face-to-face interaction did not minimize weaknesses. The authors present a rationale for the variability of student responses, the same element as a strength and weakness. The authors discuss (a) opportunities for and threats to academic institutions and (b) areas for future research.

Keywords: distance learning, higher education, hybrid, student perceptions, SWOT analysis

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Keegan (2002) defined *distance education* as “teaching and learning in which learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching” (p. 20). In such learning environments, there is a quasi-permanent separation between the instructor and student with information and communication technology facilitating the interaction. Higher education institutions are proving to be fertile learning environments for distance learning. Carlson (2004) reported that slightly more than half of all colleges rate online learning as “essential to their overall strategy” (p. A30). In all, 90% of 2-year public institutions and 89% of 4-year public institutions offered some form of distance education in the academic year 2000–2001 (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Pethokoukis (2002) indicated that enrollment in online courses in the United States has increased by 33% per year up to 2002. Hatfield (2006) reported approximately 3.2 million students, or 1 in 6, completed at least one online course during the fall of 2005.

Researchers have cited less time in the classroom, less money on travel, more course availability, decreased student inhibitions through removal of psychological and social barriers to interaction, and increased flexibility as online advantages (e.g., Beard & Harper, 2002; Carrell & Menzel, 2001; Chamberlin, 2001; Guidera, 2004). The lack of student-to-instructor and student-to-

student interaction is often cited as a disadvantage (e.g., Beard & Harper). In addition, other disadvantages include privacy issues, technological difficulties, and a focus on technology rather than content (Plotrowski & Vodanovich, 2000).

The Hybrid Approach

The majority of college students today have grown up with the Internet, e-mail, and instant messaging. In their culture of instant gratification, students seek immediate feedback on assignments and demand constant access to grades and class materials. Even among institutions that do not choose exclusively online courses, many are using course delivery platforms, such as Blackboard Learning System, to communicate electronically with students outside of class for grades, assignments, and updates. Other colleges and universities use a combination or hybrid approach offering classes partially online and partially in class. Researchers refer to this combination or hybrid approach as *blended learning* (Bersin, 2004; Mackay & Stockport, 2006). Blended learning is expanding, and debate on the quality of education, particularly regarding student learning and satisfaction, continues (Noble, 2003).

Quality in Education

Concern for quality in learning programs is at an all-time high, but there

remains no clear definition of what this quality encompasses. A review of the literature reveals a growing interest in the application of quality management philosophy to the education sector (Almala, 2005; Banta, 2004; Ortiz-Rodriguez, Telg, Irani, Roberts, & Rhoades, 2005).

Today, most strategists agree that the main reason to pursue quality is to satisfy customers. In essence, quality is “meeting or exceeding customer expectations” (Kano, Seraku, Takahashi, & Tsuji, 1984, p. 41). Kano et al. proposed three classes of customer needs: (a) *dissatisfiers*, those needs that customers expect in a product or service and, if absent, whose lack make customers dissatisfied; (b) *satisfiers*, needs that customers want and that, if fulfilled, create satisfaction; and (c) *delighters* or *exciters*, new or innovative features that customers do not expect but that if valued, lead to higher perceptions of quality.

The learner’s or student’s perception offers crucial information in assessing and defining quality. However, measuring learner perception is not a new concept. Ramsden and Dodds (1989) regarded learner’s perceptions of content in teaching as central to the evaluation of a course. Meeting or exceeding the expectation of students in the use and application of technology affects their perception of the quality of education. Drago, Peltier, Hay, and Hodgkinson (2005) compared the effectiveness of online education with that of traditional programs. In the 2005 *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, more than 40% of responding institutions reported that student satisfaction with online courses was similar to satisfaction with traditional courses (Simonson, 2005).

Miller and Husmann (1996) identified elements affecting the quality of distance education, including consideration for course delivery, instruction quality, student participation and involvement, course and program administration, and the culture of learning and teaching. On the basis of their findings, those researchers divided the elements into three broad categories: learner’s responsibility, educator’s responsibility, and administration’s responsibility. Researchers and educators can view (a) learner’s responsibility as the level of responsibility assumed by

learners in acquiring specific competencies, (b) educators’ responsibility as the design and delivery of the material, and (c) administration’s responsibility as the technical considerations of the course (Husmann & Miller, 2001; Miller & Husmann, 1996).

Distance learning has received mixed results from researchers studying students’ satisfaction with it. Klesius, Homan, and Thompson (1997) found that learner satisfaction with distance education was equal to satisfaction with traditional instruction. However, Ponzurick, France, and Logar (2000) reported lower overall satisfaction with the distance education format and found that the traditional face-to-face instruction format was the preferred method of delivery.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

SWOT analysis is an analytical technique allowing participants to indicate, in a free-form manner, the attributes that they consider important. SWOT is an acronym for its principal components: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Glaister & Falshaw, 1999). Kay (1995) defined the SWOT analysis as “simply a list” (p. 268). In itself, it is not an analysis; but as a tool, it can aid in effectively performing a broad analysis. Environmental scanning and situation analysis are other terms that researchers and educators often substitute for SWOT analysis and help to describe what a SWOT analysis does. Because of its categorical structure, Bullington (2005) agreed that SWOT analysis can be effectively used in an early environmental analysis.

SWOT analysis was performed originally in complex business environments to formulate business strategies. Lai and Rivera (2006) suggested that SWOT analysis is a powerful technique for facilitating discussion and identifying key criteria and issues in problem solving and situation analysis. Although its use originated in the context of strategic management, those researchers argued that its flexibility can be used in a wide range of disciplines.

The SWOT analysis technique is largely popularized for its efficiency and

its logical and straightforward categorization of numerous issues. Although the methodology does not offer solutions or implementation strategies for change, researchers have primarily used SWOT analysis as a first step in organizing the large number of issues that often surround complex problems and decisions. As prior researchers have suggested (e.g., Bullington, 2005; Lai & Rivera, 2006), a SWOT analysis of hybrid classes is both suitable and useful.

METHOD

Previous researchers have considered specific positive and negative aspects of distance education. However, few have allowed students to identify the elements that they perceive as most relevant (Ortiz-Rodriguez et al., 2005). Studies on student perceptions of online education have typically included questionnaires or surveys in which the concept of quality is indirectly communicated to the students through the survey items. Because these instruments come from administrators or faculty to the students and follow a prescribed format, it is difficult for researchers and educators to determine if students perceive the same quality elements as do administrators and faculty. We selected SWOT analysis as the methodology to study student perceptions of the quality of hybrid classes because of its efficient free-form nature, ease in the basic scanning of a situation, and ability to provide a macro situation analysis of an educational delivery process, which could lead to more in-depth study.

Analysis of Student Perceptions

We surveyed students in three sections of two senior-level core business classes—leadership and quality management—at a small, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-accredited Southeastern public college about their learning experience in the hybrid environment. We conducted the survey online using the WebCT Vista platform and administered it during the final week of the semester in 2006. Students were given the following instructions:

Let’s use the strategic planning tool of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities, and threats) analysis to rate the hybrid and online courses. This tool helps managers and leaders plan for the future while assessing the current situation. Strengths and weaknesses are internal while opportunities and threats are external. For example, a strength of the hybrid class may be that you save gas money while a weakness, for the instructor at least, is we don't get to see you as often as we'd like. What other SWOTs can you identify?

We exposed all students to the SWOT concept in their prerequisite principles-of-management course and used the tool in prior case analyses. In addition, all students completed a computer applications course as a prerequisite and had used the WebCT Vista instructional platform in at least one other business course application.

In all, 58 students, 20 men (35%) and 38 women (65%), out of a possible 61 students (95.08% response rate) provided 351 usable responses. Students comprised (a) 23 traditional students (approximately 40%) under age 25 years and (b) 35 nontraditional students (approximately 60%) over age 25 years who were working full-time, many of whom were married or had children. We encouraged students to participate in the survey but did not grade them on their responses. The questionnaire asked students to check a range of age values, and because of this there were no mean values or standard deviations.

Four independent coders who were all familiar with the SWOT concept (two business faculty members and two senior-level business students who also served as student assistants in the business division) coded responses. In some cases, students mistakenly listed internal strengths and weaknesses as external opportunities and threats. These responses were recoded for the correct classification in the SWOT analysis framework.

Using the variables previously identified by Miller and Husmann (1996), we further classified the SWOT responses according to key content areas related to learner's responsibility, educator's responsibility, and administration's responsibility. In specific, learner's responsibility included interaction with faculty and with other students in the hybrid class. The educator's responsibility included variables relating to

delivery and content of the course. We further broke down delivery into variety and flexibility and evaluated content for both amount and depth. The administration's responsibility included classroom space, time or schedule, resources available, and technology.

RESULTS

Learner's Responsibility

Table 1 includes a breakdown of the absolute number of strength and weakness comments related to learner's responsibility, which we defined as the level of responsibility assumed by learners in acquiring specific competencies. The comments were separated by the type of interaction with the professor and with other students. The table also includes a percentage of the responses in this category in comparison with the total number of SWOT comments (346). Researchers and educators can view the percentage as a proxy for the importance of the issue to the student in the hybrid, distance-learning environment.

We list student comments regarding the learner's responsibility in distance education. The headings that follow reflect the general nature of the total comments:

Interaction With Faculty: Strength

More time to think through questions and give thorough answers.

Easier interaction with the professor.

Interaction With Faculty: Weakness

Much less human interaction (student to professor).

Reduced personal interaction may lead to miscommunications. Not enough one-on-one time with the professor. Students lose focus that being in a competitive classroom provides.

Not enough face time with the teacher . . . some people learn better when someone is showing them the material rather than having to read it themselves.

I'm not sure if we're getting enough information from the professor. Students may not perform as well because of more freedom and less student-professor interaction.

TABLE 1. Comments on Hybrid Learning, for a Total of 346 Comments

Category	<i>n</i>	%
Learner's responsibility		
Interaction with faculty strength	4	1.0
Interaction with faculty weakness	52	15.0
Interaction with students strength	11	3.0
Interaction with students weakness	30	8.5
All interaction	97	28.0
Educator's responsibility		
Delivery variety strength	2	0.5
Delivery variety weakness	1	0.3
Delivery flexibility strength	57	16.0
Delivery flexibility weakness	34	10.0
Content amount strength	2	0.5
Content amount weakness	4	1.0
Content depth strength	10	3.0
Content depth weakness	6	2.0
All delivery and content	116	33.0
Administration's responsibility		
Space strength	5	1.4
Space weakness	0	0.0
Time strength	44	13.0
Time weakness	5	1.4
Resource strength	33	9.4
Resource weakness	1	0.3
Technology strength	7	1.9
Technology weakness	38	10.8
All space, time, resource and technology	133	38.0

Note. All categories include strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats comments.

Interaction With Other Students: Strength

You are able to learn from other students' comments and threaded conversations.

Business contacts from other students could allow for additional contacts in the job search process.

Some strengths of the hybrid class are that it provides flexibility for students to interact with other students and to complete assignments

Interaction With Other Students: Weakness

Do not get to know classmates as well as in a normal class.

Less opportunity for true study groups because students could be in different areas of the state.

Educator's Responsibility

The educator's responsibility is the design and delivery of the course material. We further separated these responsibilities into variety, flexibility, content amount, and content depth. Table 1 includes a breakdown of the (a) total number of comments relating to the strengths and weaknesses of the components of educator's responsibility and (b) percentage of the overall SWOT comments. Selected student comments regarding this aspect of distance learning follow and reflect the general nature of the total comments:

Delivery Variety: Strength

This is an excellent opportunity for students to be exposed to a new way of learning. You are exposed to learning interactively and in the classroom setting all at once.

More flexibility regarding the completion of assignments.

Delivery Variety: Weakness

May not be an effective method of learning for some students.

Delivery Flexibility: Strength

More actual involvement with the online class—you can attend a 75-min class period without ever learning anything. Many students daydream, plan their weekends, study for their next class, etc.

Being able to receive the answer right away when you are stuck on a problem.

Delivery Flexibility: Weakness

More time to procrastinate.

There is less time with the professor. It also seems almost rushed the one day a week we have in class.

Administering classes is more burdensome on the professors who must use extra time to set up, post, and answer student questions via e-mail. Also, student questions cannot be addressed immediately and those who have problems that cannot be resolved online have to meet with the instructor who may be in a different city.

With busy households, it takes a bit of juggling to get enough quiet time to review the material. When I am in class I can devote all my attention to the subject.

Content Amount: Strength

The online portion of this class requires every student to answer the questions placed before the class. You have to read the other student contributions or read your book to find the answer. You have to participate if you want to make the grade.

More outside study material is available.

Content Amount: Weakness

Not being taught exactly what the professor wants us to know—if you have a book that is boring, you still have to read every word in it without having the teacher's opinion and examples to make the material easier to understand.

A major weakness is the online component combined with the encyclopedia that we call a textbook. We actually need to meet in class three times a week to discuss it fully.

Content Depth: Strength

In a regular setting, we would have only discussed things in the allotted 1 hr and 15 min time slot. Now we have time to process and read everyone else's comments. The hybrid class is giving us an opportunity to develop independent thinking skills. It is also giving us the opportunity to learn the discipline by giving us deadlines for our discussions. I feel like I have had an opportunity to learn something new.

Students develop more critical thinking skills in the class because the professor is not teaching it all the time.

Content Depth: Weakness

Learning focus could be easily confused.

Format invites questionable academic practices, reading everyone's discussion answers before submitting your own work, paraphrasing, partial plagiarism, and outright copying of complete works.

Do not get to learn what the professor deems important from the lecture.

Administration's Responsibility

The administration's responsibility encompasses the technical aspects of the

course. These elements include technology, use of space, use of time, and use of institutional resources. Table 1 includes the numbers of comments relating to the institution's administrative responsibility and the percentage of the total SWOT comments that they represent.

Selected student comments relating to this aspect of course content delivery follow and reflect the general nature of the total comments. There were no comments regarding weaknesses related to the use of space.

Use of Space: Strength

Less classroom overloading.

Increased efficiency due to better classroom utilization (opening up more rooms).

More potential for growth despite limited facilities on campus.

Use of Time: Strength

Inclement weather conditions do not affect class attendance.

Better utilization of time.

While the class itself costs the same, the opportunity cost of taking the class is much lower.

Use of Time: Weakness

Burdensome for teachers.

More work for educator (i.e., presentations, maintenance, etc.).

Use of Instructional Resources: Strength

Fairly paperless. Less for students to keep up with or lose.

Everything is organized for you once it is set up.

Use of Instructional Resources: Weakness

Decreases in funding could alter the amount of technology needed to continue online/hybrid classes.

Technology: Strength

Online classes are only truly helpful if the student has Internet access at home.

Gas savings, you can use time for other activities (work, rest, other school work) and allows students to complete assignments on their own time and transportation problems are nonexistent (just access the Web).

The Internet creates opportunity for increased participation (homebound, handicapped, limited mobility) while decreasing demand on increasing infrastructure (parking, classrooms, student facilities, and resources).

Technology: Weakness

Without online access at home, students are still required to travel to the college or some other place that provides access.

Technology could be a big problem with your final grade (crashes or computer viruses for example).

Everyone may not have access to the Internet.

Opportunities and Threats

With the opportunities and threats that they mentioned, student respondents confirmed the pros and cons of online instruction and hybrid courses that previous researchers have validated (Ortiz-Rodriguez et al., 2005). For opportunities, students indicated a potential increase in revenues for the institution from the addition of nontraditional students enrolled in the hybrid classes. Students also recognized potential for additional class offerings using the same on-campus space. Along with more classroom space, more parking was available, and the college could expand without investing in costly new facilities. With the hybrid option, there was also a potential to increase the number of individuals with a college education in the workforce. Students suggested a final opportunity: The professor could teach more classes or larger classes, with both options enabling (a) more students to be enrolled simultaneously and (b) higher college revenues to result.

Considering the external perceptions of the hybrid-learning courses, we found that students mentioned several threats:

1. Employers may not view the hybrid program as the same as traditional education because of a reduction of student learning and retention.
2. Loss of prestige in the local community—viewed as a diploma mill.
3. Some may be turned off by the class and pursue degree or requirements elsewhere. Business community may not fully support online or hybrid classes or degrees.

Students pointed to decreased revenue on campus because those who spend money in the cafeteria, library, bookstore, or other kiosks on campus are no longer doing so. Students expressed concern

that the learning setting could become too impersonal and could decrease retention and limit the enrollment of new student populations. In addition, online courses may not be viewed as having the same level of quality among students or—more importantly—among the employers who hire them.

In summary, external threats included the potential for a substandard education and for the external community to view the college as a diploma mill. This perception could lead to a tarnished reputation. The present study confirms the findings of Carr-Chellman (2006), who listed several challenges that academic institutions should consider when crafting their distance education offerings. The research findings by Hamzaee (2005) indicated that institutions should consider prospective employers' degree of perception and recognition. Noble (2003) also warned of an erosion of the foundations of education by some online-learning programs.

DISCUSSION

Although Chamberlin (2001) suggested that a hybrid course can take advantage of the pedagogical strengths of on-campus and online teaching, the present findings do not suggest the same conclusion. This study's results indicated an almost equal number of strengths (175) and weaknesses (171), suggesting the presence of trade-offs in the hybrid course format. Students appear to perceive this pedagogy in a positive and negative light. Students listed some of the strengths simultaneously as weaknesses. It is interesting that the top two strengths—delivery flexibility and time utilization—were juxtaposed with corresponding weaknesses of lack of faculty interaction and technology challenges. The time saved in not having to drive to and attend class and the flexibility to work at a student's own pace are key benefits. However, time is expended in having to individually e-mail or contact the professor with questions and in having to troubleshoot technology problems. Thus, flexibility is seen as important, but it remains both a strength and a weakness.

It is interesting that these results do not describe completely opposing and

exclusionary forces. Rather, they suggest interdependent elements of hybrid delivery. As with any dichotomy, the students' perspective may have influenced their determination of an issue as a satisfier or a dissatisfier. An individual student may articulate one element as a strength and a weakness. For example, a student may enjoy less time in the classroom and identify this as a strength but at the same time recognize less time in the classroom as a weakness affecting his or her learning from the professor and other students. Dissatisfiers such as technology and Internet access may also exhibit elements of a satisfier in the learning and mastery of computer skills. It appears that many elements of the hybrid course delivery are not autonomous and may subsume and support each other.

Using quality nomenclature, student customers identified a number of satisfiers from the hybrid course delivery format. These variables, including better use of time and increased flexibility, did create more student satisfaction. Dissatisfiers largely dealt with technology and Internet-access issues. However, in this study, there were no delighters or excitors, which researchers have considered features leading to higher perceptions of quality (Kano et al., 1984).

Conclusion

Researchers and educators can conclude that the hybrid delivery corresponds to the *stuck-in-the-middle* strategy, an organizational strategy that was neither low-cost nor highly differentiated and that Porter (1990) criticized as being ineffective and as threatening organizational growth and survival. Although Porter's research referred to the overarching strategies of corporations, the same analogy could be applied to the hybrid-teaching environment, which is neither totally online in an asynchronous delivery nor totally in class in the traditional synchronized-learning format. The hybrid format is stuck in the middle of two disparate pedagogies or extremes and appears to suffer from both the strengths and the weaknesses at either extreme. From this analysis of hybrids, researchers and educators can conclude that the model is the best and the worst of both formats.

This conclusion differs markedly from those of prior research, suggesting the hybrid format to be a means of minimizing the weaknesses of distance learning (Bersin, 2004; Mackay & Stockport, 2006; Noble, 2003). Thus, the contribution is to highlight the level of strengths and weaknesses of distance learning from the students' perspective. In addition, the SWOT analysis methodology enabled a free-form, brainstorming opportunity rather than the use of pre-determined Likert-type scales to guide student responses into forced comparisons. The use of the Internet to gather responses potentially encouraged more truthful and open responses.

Future researchers should validate these findings with additional student respondents in hybrid environments. Student satisfaction and perceptions of educational quality could be compared by age, gender, traditional student versus nontraditional student, and race or ethnicity. Studies could include motivational levels, learning styles, personality profiles, communication styles, and other individual differences. SWOT analysis of faculty, administrators, and technology staff could compare the data with those of students. Analysis of the opportunities and threats that administrators experienced could be of interest. Polling employers on differences in performances among students who have studied in the traditional classroom setting versus those of the hybrid or online setting would expand the body of knowledge.

Although in the present study we focused on student satisfaction, future researchers should consider student success and performance. For example, exit exams (e.g., Educational Testing Service) could compare the learning of students who completed technology-enhanced courses (either online or hybrid offerings) with the learning of those students who completed traditional courses.

NOTES

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