Exploring Adjunct Instructors' Perceptions of Online Versus Traditional Learning

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Abstract

The growth of online courses has focused attention on the quality and benefits of distance education. Media has focused attention on students', employers', and even traditional professors' opinions of online courses. While the majority of online courses are taught by adjuncts, very little scholarly research has delved into their opinions regarding an online education versus traditional education. Also lacking in the literature is information about online instructors' perceptions of the online teaching position. This study provided a background as to the short history of distance education in addition to providing insight as to the value of online education to students, employers, and as a job prospect. It also demonstrated that adjunct professors viewed online education as superior and foresee the future of online education as more promising than traditional.

Keywords: education, online, teaching, university

Introduction

History of Distance Education

There are a limited number of peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles that depict a detailed history of online education. Online learning is a relatively new concept due to the age of the Internet. Correspondence programs were the predecessors to online education (Gaytan, 2008). Banas and Emory (1998) tracked distance education back to Pennsylvania State University in 1892. Beginning in the 1950s, open universities allowed millions of worldwide learner to access distance educations (Banas & Emory, 1998). In 1970, the schools began to offer

exclusively televised courses; satellite transmitted courses were available as early as 1985 (Crotty, 2012). By the late 1980s, schools like University of Phoenix and others had created what would become known as online courses ("History", 2014). This paved the way, at the end of the century, for what Crotty (2012) referred to as the remote learning craze.

With the advent of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, perceptions of online courses have received more attention (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The term MOOC was coined by a Canadian named Comer in 2008 (Baggaley, 2013). MOOCs were viewed as simpler than traditional courses. Students required no supervision and could grade one another's work (Baggalay, 2013). While MOOCs are a big part of online education at the moment, they are not included in the definition of online courses for the sake of this research. MOOCs differ from traditional online courses and may not be taught by the instructors used for this study.

Perception of Online Education

Access to online courses has increased and continues to grow (Mayadas, Bourne, & Bacsich, 2009). Much of the research has focused on students' and employers' perceptions of online learning. Very little literature exists regarding online professors' perceptions (McLawhon & Cutright, 2011). In the past, students' perceptions were often mixed (Simon, Jackson, & Maxwell, 2014). Dykman and Davis (2008) found that the structure and requirements of each online course may impact perceptions of quality. Wilson and Allen (2010) analyzed data from four courses at Fayetteville State University to determine if students' success rates were different in online versus traditional courses. According to this study, face-to-face or electronic delivery was less important than the quality of contact received from the instructor. Thornton (2013) considered instructors' perceptions and discovered theor greatest concerns involved the same social and communicative interactions, in addition to pedagogical aspects.

The perceptions of online faculty may provide some insight as to the quality of online education. If students and employers are asked their opinions, perhaps the instructors may offer a different perspective. Meyer (2012) researched online professors to discover their motivation for teaching online. Meyer (2012) discovered those professors, who taught online courses, had more time to spend on other activities such as research. Part of the problem with understanding the perception of online education is that online courses may differ from traditional courses due to the technology, abilities, and skills involved (Reid, 2012). Some professors may view themselves as facilitators rather than as a central character in class. Reid (2012) interviewed professors who believed that design of the course may promote more interaction between students and students than between professors and students. Reid (2012) also found that personality may not be a desired characteristic consideration in online education courses because that part of their personality may not be as visible. In terms of pedagogical considerations, online courses may be easily updated which makes them flexible (Reid, 2012). The ability to keep courses current and relevant may impact the quality of the material and the ability for instructors to deliver what they consider to be useful information. Reid (2012) believed it is important to understand professors' perceptions because those perceptions may impact how they handle innovative change.

Working conditions may impact online professors' opinions of the job. Beck (2007) explained that each online university may have unique training and job requirements. Some online institutions provide more guidance than others, some pay more than others, some have larger class sizes, some do more reviews, and some require more activities (Beck, 2007). These differences may make it difficult to compare "online education" versus "traditional education" from an online professor's perspective. Gilles, Detroz, and Blais (2011) conducted an

international study regarding practices and perceptions of online perceptions. However, they conceded that there is not enough information to compare so many different institutions in multiple countries. Wilkes, Simon, and Brooks (2006) asked professors to rate their perceptions of online courses. While, the majority would consider teaching online, faculty still had concerns about quality (Wilkes, Simon, & Brooks, 2006). Meyer and McNeal (2011) explained that concerns have existed since the 1990s regarding productivity and that online professors can help contribute to the discussion about how to help based on their abilities to be advocates of innovation.

Although some opponents to online education worry about how actively responsive online professors may be, Otter et al. (2013) found online professors made themselves more available to their students. McCann and Holt (2009) explained online professors were accessible and less stressed than traditional professors. In the study by Otter et al. (2013), the online professors also believed they were not weaker or less qualified than professors who taught traditional courses.

While opponents to online education may worry about quality of instruction, Fillion, Limayem, Laferriere, and Mantha (2008) found that onsite learning was no more effective than online learning. In that same study, the students were more satisfied. Perhaps some of students' perceptions of online education is based on their perception of their own skills. Shen, Cho, Tsaim and Marra (2013) examined learning satisfaction and self-efficacy in online students. In their research, they cited Bandura's (1988) definition of self-efficacy to examine strengths in technology, learning, and social interaction. They believed these factors affected students' judgment regarding their capabilities. Learning satisfaction involves students' abilities as well as

those of their instructors. Shook, Greer & Campbell (2013) found that students rated professors higher when professors posted in a timely manner and were actively involved in courses.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research questions pursued in this study include the following: How do online instructors perceive online education as compared to traditional education? What are their perceived beliefs of their students? What are their perceived beliefs of potential employers? What benefits and negative attributes do online instructors perceive when choosing to teach online courses versus traditional courses? The corresponding hypotheses are:

$H1_0$: Online educations will report online education as having the same value as traditional education.

H1: Online educations will report online education as having different value than traditional education.

$H2_0$: Online educations will report employers' opinion of online education has having the same value as traditional education.

H2: Online educations will report employers' opinion of online education as having different value than traditional education.

$H3_0$: Online educators will report they would grade the same in an online environment as in a traditional environment.

H3: Online educators will report they would grade differently in an online environment than in a traditional environment.

$H4_0$: Online educators will report they neither create nor use rubrics.

H4: Online educators will report they create and use rubrics.

$H5_{0:}$ Online educators will report they perceive online students to have the same opinion of grading in an online environment as in a traditional environment.

H5: Online educators will report they perceive online students to different opinions of grading in an online environment than in a traditional environment.

$H6_{0:}$ Online educators will report they believe they are able to earn the same money teaching online classes as traditional classes.

H6: Online educators will report they believe they are able to earn a different amount of money teaching online classes as traditional classes.

$H7_{0:}$ Online educators will report no preference for teaching asynchronous versus synchronous online learning.

H7: Online educators will report preference for teaching asynchronous differently than they will report teaching in synchronous online learning.

$H8_{0:}$ Online educators will report the quality of online curriculum to be the same as for traditional curriculum

H8: Online educators will report the quality of online curriculum to be different than for traditional curriculum

$H9_{0:}$ Online educators will report the same rating for preference for time requirements, pay, perception by others, and virtual interaction and engagement no better or worse in an online environment

H9: Online educators will report a different rating for preference for time requirements, pay, perception by others, and virtual interaction and engagement better or worse in an online environment.

Methods and Results

Participants

To determine online professors' perceptions of online courses, a survey was made available in a Linkedin group of adjunct online professors. The survey was created on Survey Monkey and included 12 questions. Two of the questions were demographic in nature (gender and years of experience). The other questions involved multiple choice responses to questions about their preferences and perceptions of online versus traditional education. This site was chosen due to the ability to reach online professors in a forum where discussion of online issues were freely addressed. It is difficult to determine the number of active members in Linkedin groups. The chosen group of online educators on Linkedin had 963 members; however, based on response within the group, many of the members did not participate on a regular basis. A total of 73 responses were obtained. Five people did not include any answers; their results were not included.

Materials

The survey (see appendix) was created by the author. The questions were piloted prior to posting within Linkedin. Several adjunct professors were asked to review the questions to avoid error or omissions.

Procedures

The survey was posted in the Linkedin forum with a note asking them to complete a quick survey regarding their opinion regarding online education. The survey required that they put in a name (real or otherwise) to acknowledge they read participation requirements; however, their input was assigned to a number to keep their data anonymous. The goal was to obtain around 100 responses based on a power analysis; sixty-eight were obtained. Several attempts

were made to obtain more responses; however, due to the nature of Linkedin groups, not all members access the area on a regular basis. Email requests were sent to group members in addition to the posting requests in the member area. After several weeks of no additional responses based on these attempts, the final amount of six-eight surveys was used for analysis.

Based on these responses, the following information was gathered regarding the gender and years of teaching online. Fifty-nine percent reported as being female and 41% reported being male.

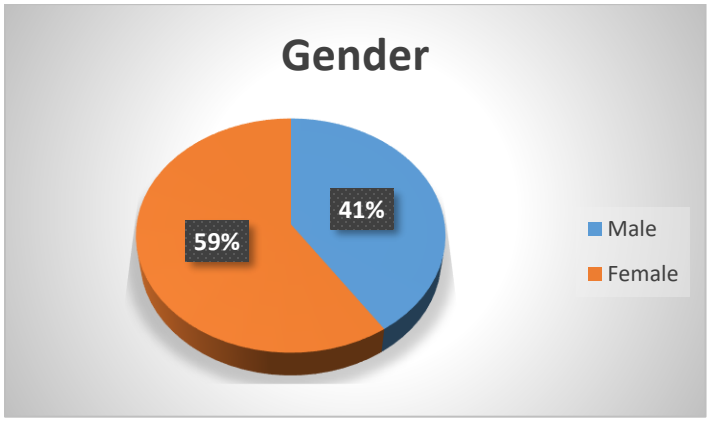

Figure 1. More females than males took the survey.

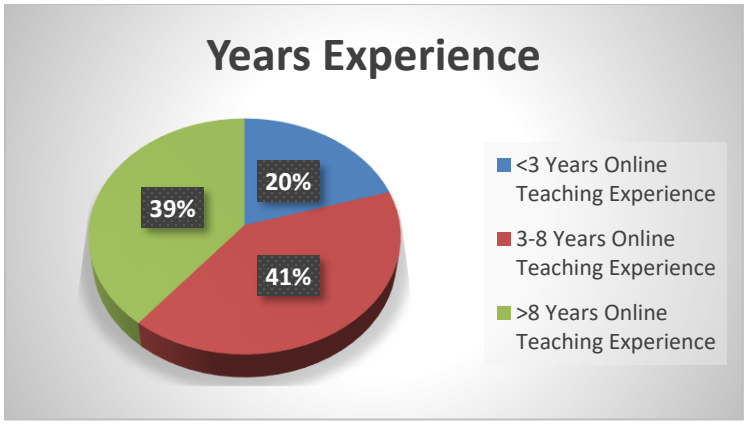

Figure 2. Most respondents reported having 3-8 years of experience teaching online.

Results

Quality of Curriculum: The majority (66%) of online instructors were of the opinion that online courses had similar curriculum quality to traditional courses. Twenty percent believed the traditional curriculum was inferior and the remaining 14% believed the online curriculum was superior (see Figure 3). A significant difference was found in the opinion of the quality of online curriculum when compared to traditional curriculum $t(68) = 1.71$, $p < .001$. Sixty eight percent of the instructors were of the opinion that employers believed that online curriculum was inferior to traditional curriculum, 28% believed employers thought it was similar, and 4% believed employers thought the quality of online curriculum was superior (see Figure 2). A significant difference was found in the perception of employer opinion of online curriculum $t(68) = 1.38$, $p < .00$. Sixty two percent believed the future of online curriculum would become viewed the same as traditional curriculum. Thirty one percent believed online curriculum would be viewed the same in the future. Seven percent believed online curriculum would be viewed as inferior in the future. A significant difference was found in the perception of the future of online curriculum ($t(68)=1.71$, $p<.001$) and thus the null hypothesis was rejected.

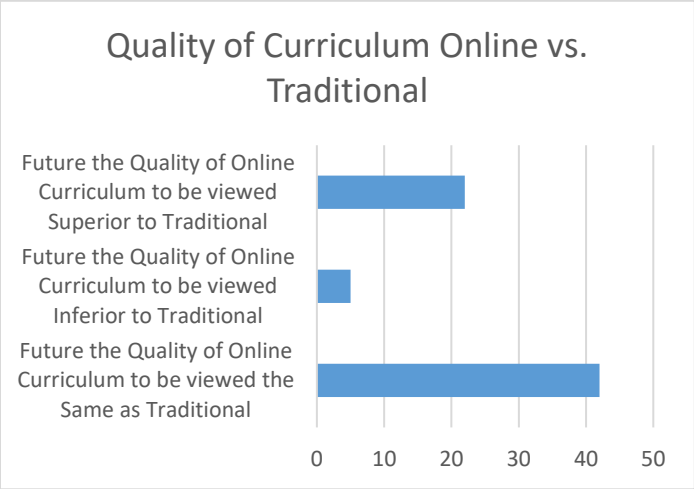

Figure 3. Reports of quality of curriculum of online versus traditional courses by online instructors.

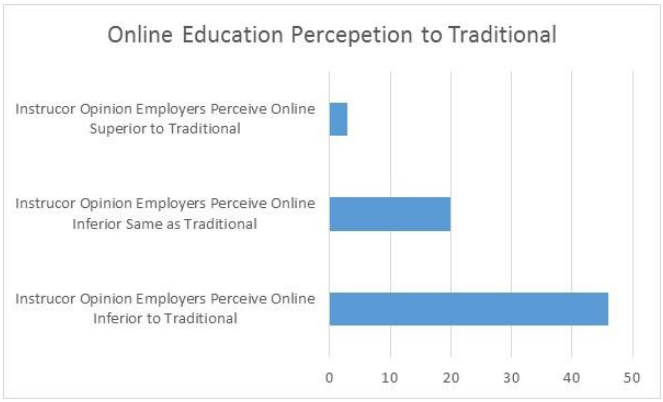

Figure 4. Online instructors report their opinion of employers' perception of online curriculum versus traditional curriculum.

Grading: The vast majority (70%) of instructors believed they would grade online courses equally as they would grade traditional courses. Fourteen percent believed they would grade easier in online courses and 16% believed they would grade harder. A significant difference in opinions of instructors in how they would grade in traditional environments versus online environments $t(68) = 2.00$, $p < .001$. The majority (46%) use the grading rubrics that were provided and perceived to be set up well. Twenty six percent created their own rubrics. Twenty percent used provided rubrics but did not believe they were set up well. Only 9% claimed to use no rubric. A significant number of online instructors reported they use rubrics in their grading $t(68) = 1.83$, $p < .001$. Most of the professors (70%) believed online students expected higher grades due to their belief that online courses would be easier. The null hypothesis was rejected with finding $t(68) = 1.99$, $p < .001$. Professors believed 27% of students expected similar grades to traditional courses and 3% expected lower grades.

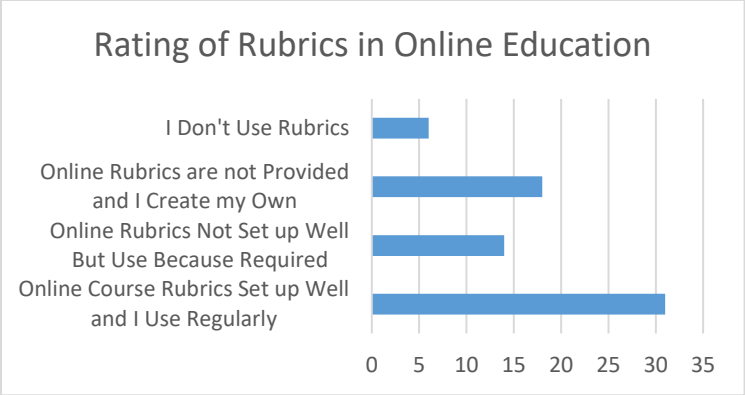

Figure 5. A significant number of online instructors use rubrics regularly.

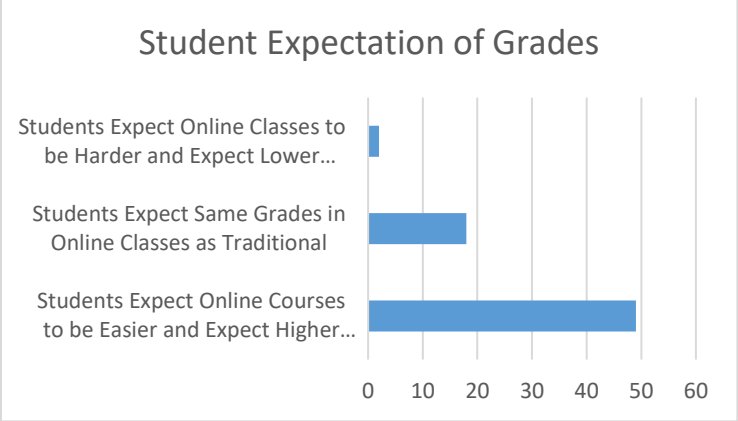

Figure 6. Online instructors perceive that students expect courses to be easier and grades to be higher in online environment than in a traditional environment.

Job Perception: Forty three percent (43%) of instructors believed they could make more money teaching online courses instead of traditional courses. Thirty four percent (34%) perceived no difference in income. Twenty three percent (23%) believed they could make more money teaching traditional courses. A significant difference in the potential to earn money in an online environment over a traditional environment was reported by the respondents $t(68) = 1.83$, $p < .001$. The majority (81%) preferred teaching asynchronous courses as compared to synchronous courses. Time requirements for teaching was listed as the worst part of teaching online with 37% choosing that option. The second worst part of teaching online was perception of online

teaching by others with 34%. The third worst part was the pay with 16%. The least bad part of teaching online was virtual interaction with students at 13%. The best part of teaching online was the virtual interaction with students at 54%. The second best part of teaching online was the time requirements with 27%. The third best part of teaching online was the pay with 11%. Finally the last best part of teaching online was the perception of it by others with 7%.

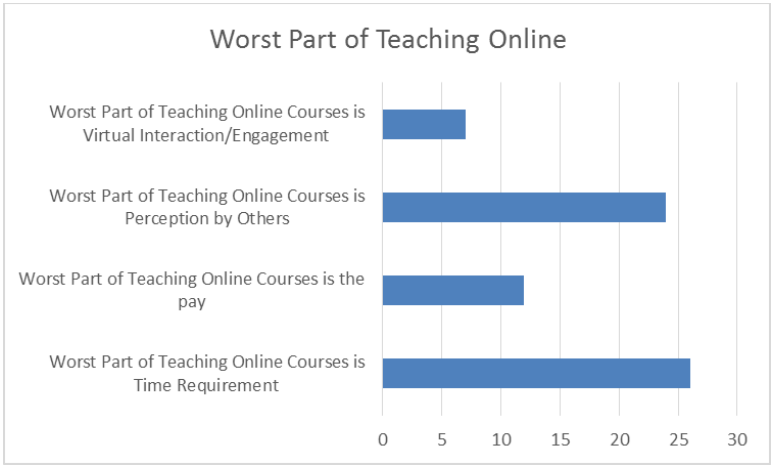

Figure 7. Most respondents reported the worse part of teaching online to be the amount of time that is required.

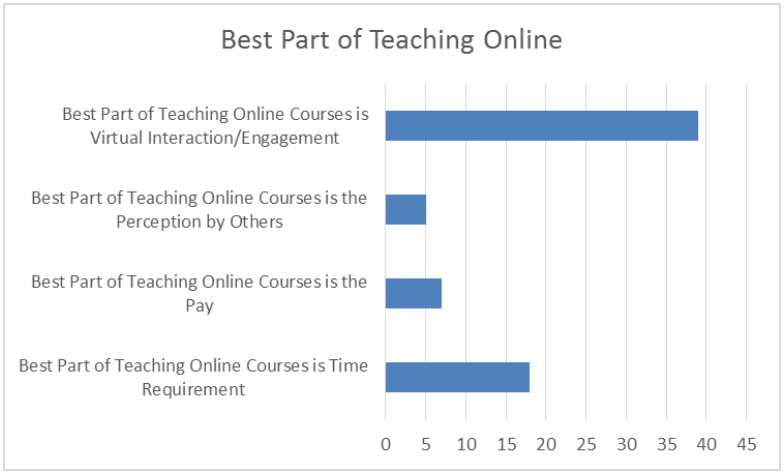

Figure 8. Online instructors report the best part of teaching online is the virtual interaction and engagement with students that occurs.

Discussion

The results of this study provide some insight as to online professors' opinions of online education. There was a mix of experience in the group with 41% having over eight years of experience, 39% having between three and eight years of experience, and 20% having less than three years of experience. Fifty nine percent (59%) were female and 41% were male. A significant difference was found in the opinion of the quality of online curriculum, perception of employer opinion of online curriculum, adjunct instructors' perception of the future of online curriculum, opinions of how instructors would grade in online environments, perceptions of potential to earn money in an online environment, and online instructors' regular use of rubrics.

These results align with the results observed by Reid (2012) who found online instructors' perceptions were an important consideration for students' success. These results add to the body of literature that Gilles, Detroz, and Blais (2011) believed needed more research due to the complexities of comparing online to traditional education. What may be most important about this study is that there has been very little research available to date to provide insight into online instructors' opinions of the perception of online education.

Limitations

The sample size is small relative to the size of the industry. A qualitative study might provide more in-depth responses that could help enlighten some of the reasoning behind some of the responses. Further research could be completed to find out why instructors had the opinions they had. Members of Linkedin may not have opinions that are representative of the opinions of the majority of online professors. Larger studies within specific universities may be helpful. Another option to consider would be to research the opinion of online versus traditional courses

based on opinions of instructors who teach both online and traditional versions of the same course.

Conclusion

Online education has a relatively short history in the field of education; however, it continues to grow at a rapid pace. The main person that students connect with in online courses is the online professor. Their opinions may help guide curriculum development. Their perception of online learning, based on this study, is not the same as their opinion of employers' perception. If universities want to continue to grow the acceptance of their online programs, improving employer perceptions may be an important avenue for their success.

Author Biography

Diane Hamilton (Diane.Hamilton@Ashford.edu) has a doctorate degree in business management. She has worked as a doctoral chair and has taught online courses for eight years. She has worked with most online delivery platforms and has developed curriculum for several online schools. She has authored three books, one of which is titled *The Online Student's User Manual*. She continues to do research in the area of online education. Her most recent study, *Exploring the Relationship between Media Choices and Teaching Experience in Online Courses*, was published in 2013.

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Appendix

The following questions were asked in the survey:

1. My opinion of online education versus traditional education is:
    a. The quality of online education curriculum is inferior to traditional
    b. The quality of online education curriculum is the same as traditional
    c. The quality of online education curriculum is superior to traditional
2. I believe employers' have the following opinion of online education:
    a. The quality of online education curriculum is inferior to traditional
    b. The quality of online education curriculum is the same as traditional
    c. The quality of online education curriculum is superior to traditional
3. If given the opportunity to teach online or traditional courses, my opinion is I am more likely to grade:
    a. Easier in an online class
    b. The same in online as I would traditional
    c. Harder in an online class
4. My opinion regarding online education rubrics is:
    a. They are set up well and I use them regularly
    b. They are not set up well and I use them because they are required
    c. They are not provided in most of my courses and I create my own
    d. I do not use rubrics
5. I believe online students have the following expectations:
    a. Students expect online courses to be easier and therefore expect higher grades.
    b. Students expect the same grades as they would at a traditional school

c. Students expect online courses to be harder and therefore expect lower grades

6. My opinion regarding the ability to make money teaching online classes versus traditional (assuming both options were provided) is:
    a. I can make more money teaching online than traditional courses
    b. I can make more money teaching traditional than online courses
    c. No difference in pay
7. I prefer:
    a. Asynchronous online learning
    b. Synchronous online learning
8. I foresee the future of online courses:
    a. For the quality of the curriculum to become viewed the same as traditional courses
    b. For the quality of the curriculum to become viewed as inferior to traditional courses
    c. For the quality of the curriculum to become viewed as superior to traditional courses
9. The worst part of teaching online courses is:
    a. The time requirements
    b. The pay
    c. The perception of it by others
    d. The virtual interaction and engagement
10. The best part of teaching online courses is:
    a. The time requirements
    b. The pay
    c. The perception of it by others
    d. The virtual interaction and engagement

11. My number of years teaching online is:

    a. <3 years

    b. 4-8 years

    c. > 8 years

12. My gender is:

    a. Female

    b. Male