STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN ONLINE COURSES A Qualitative Research Synthesis

Stephanie J. Blackmon and Claire Major
The University of Alabama

As online learning continues to grow, it is important to investigate students' overall experiences in online learning environments. Understanding students' perspectives on their online classes or programs moves beyond the sole question of student satisfaction to more nuanced questions about how factors inside and outside of the classroom impact the online classroom. This qualitative research synthesis explored students' experiences with online learning. For example, some students were satisfied with their online courses but still struggled with balancing online courses and work responsibilities. Other students found that enrolling in an online program related to their jobs was very beneficial.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of online learning during the last decade has been remarkable. While in 1998 there were too few students enrolled online to count, according to a survey of more than 2500 intuitions, by 2009 more than 5.6 million students were taking an online course (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Nearly 30% of students were taking a course online. The same study also found percent of enrollment growth was 21%, while overall growth in higher education was only 2%. Moreover, the 21% growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the less than 2% growth of the overall higher education student population. These numbers indicate that online learning has become an important mode of delivering instruction in higher education.

Although the numbers of students taking online courses are growing, research indicates that the students are in many ways the same students who take courses offline (Doyle, 2009). Students tend to be relatively similar when comparing race, gender, socioeconomic status, and physical distance from the institution. Students who take online courses tend to be slightly older than those students taking all courses offline (Doyle, 2009). Several important studies have documented that these students have good learning outcomes in online courses. Such research most frequently compares online to offline courses in experimental

• **Stephanie J. Blackmon** is a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL. E-mail: sjblackmon@crimson.ua.edu

The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 13(2), 2012, pp. 77–85 ISSN 1528-3518

or quasi-experimental studies (Bernard et al., 2009; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004; Lockee, Moore, & Burton, 2001). The studies clearly suggest that online and offline instructions often have similar or slightly more positive outcomes in the primary areas of cognitive gain (Means et al., 2009; Sitzmann, 2006).

While we know a good bit about the numbers, characteristics, and outcomes of students who take courses online, we know less about their experiences. It is critical, however, to begin to understand these students' experiences with online learning since such information could benefit the field of higher education in a number of important ways. Students who have positive experiences are more likely to reenroll in online courses in the future, so an institution that seeks to increase online enrollment would benefit from such information. Data about student experiences also can provide information to help institutions and faculty design and deliver better courses, which could help improve student learning in these courses. Such data also could help institutions and faculty to determine what challenges students online face, which could in turn improve persistence and retention in online courses. It is an important avenue of inquiry.

The purpose of this study, then, is to investigate students' experiences in these online courses through a synthesis of existing evidence. In particular, we plan to accomplish the following objectives: (1) identify qualitative studies that have investigated student experiences in online courses; (2) extract findings from these studies; (3) synthesize findings into a new whole; and (4) consider the implications of the findings for policy and practice.

Theoretical or Conceptual Frameworks/Perspectives

We will use the concept of constitutive abstraction outlined by Cooper (2002) as the theoretical framework to guide our investigation. Cooper (2002) asserted that "technology enables a more constitutively abstract mode of engagement with the world" (p. 4). In the technology-mediated environment, then, being is established sans concrete reality: Being is deconstructed and reconstructed in the new environment. Technology enables social integration to shift from face-to-face communication to more disembodied forms of communication, so participants in the online environment can engage outside of one another's presence (copresence). Therefore, Cooper emphasized that although technology can make social relations more abstract, the physical disconnect simultaneously can make for more intimate connections. We will employ the theoretical framework to help us interpret our data and develop themes.

METHODS

Our study provides an investigation of the question of how students experience online learning, and we use qualitative research synthesis. Qualitative research synthesis is an important tool for higher education researchers for myriad reasons (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). It can help to manage and make sense of the growing sea of research reports. Synthesis can also be cost-effective, as it helps to optimize findings from individual studies. It also allows practitioners and policymakers to build theoretical perspectives based on a range of research, which they often prefer over relying on one particular study (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010).

We began the study by framing one broad research question: How do students describe their online learning experiences? This question allowed for a broad initial search for studies. We began our search with online databases like Educational Resources Information Center), Academic Search Elite, and Google Scholar, and specifically searched for the terms "online learning" and "online courses." We did not include articles that studied distance education more broadly because such studies typically do not specify the type of distance education; there are different forms of distance education (e.g., televised instruction

versus online learning). We also limited the search to those questions that are of concern to students, and did not focus on organizational issues like expenditures, tuition, et cetera. We searched specifically for research articles, rather than opinion pieces, and limited the search to articles published since 1998 (when the personal computer became more accessible, when learning management systems became more common, and when, consequently, the growth of online learning really began). Finally, we limited the search by educational level and focused only on articles that were categorized as "higher education," "post-secondary education," or "2-year colleges." We also hand-searched tables of contents of several key journals and reviewed the set of articles to scan bibliographies, in an ancestry approach to uncovering articles. We appraised the quality of articles through application of a question set to examine congruence of research question to design; methods of data collection, handling, and analysis in the original studies; as well as an indication of researcher positionality of the original authors.

Data Sources

Given the explosion of online learning during the past decade, it is hardly surprising that there has been an attendant explosion of research on this learning approach. The initial search resulted in close to 50 potential studies. The hand searching and ancestry searching yielded additional articles. We limited the review to peer-reviewed, published articles, which adds a built-in layer of quality control. Articles that did not include interview data and comments from students were omitted from this study. The final number of studies included in the review was 10 (Dickey, 2008; Hara & Kling, 2000; Holley & Taylor, 2008; Howland & Moore, 2002; Lyall & McNamara, 2000; Melrose & Bergeron, 2007; Motteram & Forrester, 2005; Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008; Whipp & Lorentz, 2008; Zembylas, Theodorou, & Pavlakis, 2008).

Melrose and Bergeron's study examined how instructor immediacy influenced students' experiences in an online environment. Dickey's study discussed how the cognitive apprenticeship model influenced students in online learning courses. Hara and Kling's study investigated students' frustrations and encounters with online learning courses, while Zembylas et al. conducted a similar study investigating adult learners' emotions in an online setting. Motteram and Forrester discussed students' perspectives on starting a graduate online program in education. Holly and Taylor explored students' experiences in an online nursing course, and Howland and Moore studied students' perceptions and experiences in online courses. Shieh et al. investigated students' and instructors' perceptions of an online course. Lyall and McNamara looked at influences on students' learning in online courses, and Whipp and Lorentz explored how help from instructors impacted students' online learning experiences.

Data Analysis

To analyze the results, we began locating and deconstructing findings contained in the articles. This meant summarizing the articles and extracting findings. Once extracted, we marked findings as unequivocal, credible, or unsupported. We then created a matrix to track the articles and their respective findings. Synthesis of findings involved aggregation of unequivocal and credible findings into more comprehensive units and themes and identification of subthemes. Interpretation involved explanation of the aggregated findings, guided by the application of a theoretical framework.

Noblit and Hare (1988) proposed three ways to position the studies in relation to each other:

1. Reciprocal translation analysis requires direct comparison of studies. The researcher identifies key themes or concepts and makes judgments about the ability of one study's concepts to capture

the concepts of another study. Then, the researcher chooses the "most adequate" method to describe the phenomenon (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).

2. Refutational synthesis sets studies against one another; one study can refute another, with the researcher attempting to characterize and explain the contradictions.
3. Line of argument ties studies to one another through noting how one study informs another (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 63). For this study, we engaged with a reciprocal translation of findings into each other.

FINDINGS

Several themes emerged during our research synthesis. The five major recurring themes about student experiences from each study include ability to balance school and life, time management skills, acceptance of personal responsibility, instructor (in)accessibility, and connection with peers. These themes could be directly traced to those that were attributable to the student and those attributable to the professor.

Student Factors That Influenced Experience

Several factors over which the students themselves had control influenced their experiences.

Ability to Balance Between Educational Access and Family Life

Several students were grateful for the opportunities that online learning presented them for access to higher education. Interestingly, the most common potential barrier to educational attainment that students mentioned was family, and that also was the factor that made them most grateful for the opportunity and the experience. The students in the studies we reviewed most often spoke of access in terms of being able to go to school and still maintain and balance a family life. For example, a student from Zembylas et al.'s (2008) study expressed: "I feel joy, enthusiasm and satisfaction about the opportunity presented to me through distance learning to improve my education and professional development; something I wouldn't have been able to secure differently because of my family responsibilities" (p. 112). Another student from the same study indicated:

> I feel great relief because this programme does not require physical presence. To me that is the most important advantage of distance education.… It also makes me happy that I can study in my own space; whatever time I want, I can also take a break and spend time with my children. That way I can better combine student and family life. (p. 112)

As another example, a student from Zembylas et al.'s (2008) study said: "I would say that I am thrilled to be studying at the Open University and at the same time satisfied and relieved because I see that my triple role of family man, working man, student is difficult but not unattainable" (p.113).

For some students in Lyall and McNamara's (2000) study, family members, partners, and sometimes friends, served as support for their online studies. The study indicated that the support was sometimes "passive, such as not interrupting during study sessions, but often it was active, such as giving encouragement or helping the student memorise material" (p. 111). On the other hand, life issues often interfered with educational access and opportunity and vice versa, thus influencing student experiences. A student from Hara and Kling's (2000) study indicated that the accessibility of online learning can overshadow other responsibilities: "If I have one complaint about this class, it is that time goes so quickly. I can be hooked up with a computer for a whole day and then realize that I haven't had a dinner or I haven't prepared my lesson plans" (p. 563). A student from Howland and Moore's (2002) study mentioned the myriad responsibilities

students have to balance outside of the online classroom, stating: "In addition to taking this course, I have a 50-hour per week job, a wife who also works about 50 hours per week and is often on-call nights and weekends and two children under 5" (p. 191). Maintaining a balance was critical to students.

Ability to Manage Time

Some students expressed concern about their abilities to manage time. The challenges seemed to arise from the amount of communication that attended the online course. Their sense of their own abilities in this area influenced their experiences. For example, a student from Motteram and Forrester's study indicated:

> It's very difficult to organise your workload during the week ... the amount of traffic that comes in, maybe not for every tutor, but certainly I feel I can log on very early in the morning at home, come to work, log on again. Evening, I do it before I go home, and then I go back home and then I might be logging on again. And I can be clearing emails which have to do with distance learning at each of those points during the day. Personally, I tend to get drawn into that because I don't like to have a load of unfinished business.… E-mail has provided us with opportunities to provide more effective support.… But at the same time … it's an opportunity and it's a threat … I suppose it is just challenges of the system for a tutor when you are juggling those types of things. (p. 290)

However, many students in Lyall and McNamara's (2000) study, despite various work hours and schedules, felt that they would be able to successfully manage their schedules and their studies. The students did not ignore the fact that time management played a large roles in dealing with work and school, but they, overall, felt like the combined tasks were feasible.

Acceptance of Personal Responsibility and Learning Autonomy

Students in several of the studies commented that online courses left the onus on them to learn and get involved; they felt some responsibility for course outcomes. Those who had this sense of responsibility seemed to have more positive experiences. For example, a student in Holley and Taylor's (2008) study stated, "I think [my classmates] get out of a class what they put into it," (p. 264). Overall, students from Holley and Taylor's study felt their online course experience was enhanced by the increased level of autonomy, stating, "online, you cover the entire book" (p. 264). Another student from the study felt that the online course was more detailed and allowed her to learn more that her peers in traditional courses (p. 264). A student from Howland and Moore's (2002) study expressed, "It encouraged me to learn on my own, or use other resources, to conquer whatever dilemmas I have" (p. 187). In Dickey's (2008) study, one student explained the course experience as follows:

> A lot of it was trial and error. I tried multiple things and if I didn't like it, I changed it. I used Web Wizard in Microsoft to teach myself what to do. Through exploration [*sic*] and hands on practice. I experimented.… Trial and error. Pretty much all of it [*sic*]. (p. 513)

Instructor Factors That Influenced Student Experience

Instructors also had a strong influence over student experience, in large part through their accessibility and through their efforts to provide opportunities to connect with peers.

Instructor (In)Accessibility

Instructor accessibility was an important theme that emerged from the data, and whether an instructor was present and accessible had a

strong influence on the student experience. Some experiences were positive. For example, some students in Whipp and Lorentz's (2008) study had positive experiences with instructors. One student described a professor as "[bending] over backwards to help," and another student said that a professor, "was always quick to respond within 24 hours" (p. 186). Similarly, a student from Dickey's (2008) study expressed: "The directions the professor provided really helped me in learning and building skills. When I found an obstacle, I asked for your [professor's] assistance" (p. 512).

Unfortunately, not all students had positive experiences with their instructors, and thus their online experiences suffered. The lack of contact with the professor left Paul, a student from Melrose and Bergeron's study (2007), uncomfortable. He explained:

> Instructors I felt comfortable with set the stage about who they were right off the bat in their introductions. That was very important to me. But, there were other instructors who were quite invisible. You didn't see them. They said that right in the beginning. That that was their style, to stand back unless they were asked questions. That behavior right away I felt like, well they were not that interested in us and I was less likely to approach them. (p. 137)

Paul, in some respects, was isolated from those instructors who he thought willingly withheld interactions with students. However, Paul implied that he would have been comfortable approaching a professor whose presence was much more accessible. A student from Shieh et al.'s (2008) study lamented not having more interaction with the professor. The student stated:

> You know the announcements part [in the Blackboard system]; it is the same one that she [the instructor] put on there. So I feel she is not even there. If she would say ... "OK, this is happening here and here. What do you think of this? I'll be in my room at this time. Good luck, you guys. Have a nice vacation," or whatever, [she would be] more in there, and interacting. (p. 65)

Sometimes instructor inaccessibility appeared when students were unable to understand what professors' assignment expectations. For example, a student from Hara and Kling's (2000) study noted that the instructor's sometimes-ambiguous instructions left her feeling a little uncertain about her assignments:

> Though I understand each sentence and word in the e-mail that the instructor sent us, I don't know how to use the instructions to compose the programming.... So, when I submit my assignment, I always put a note to her, "please let me know if I need to do more ..." to make sure I do the things I am supposed to do, because I don't know exactly what the instructor wants. (p. 569)

Another student from the same study stated: "I think the biggest problem [in this course] is the instruction of our assignments. I usually don't understand what she wants, either e-mail or from the website" (Hara & Kling, 2000, p. 570).

Opportunities to Connect With Peers

Some students felt that they had good opportunities to connect with peers. A student from Motteram and Forrester's (2005) study said, "As a result of my Web site posting, another student studying in Switzerland contacted me and we exchanged emails and will probably meet later on" (p. 286). Another student from the same study noted:

> It was pretty important to know that there were people out there who were feeling the same thing.… It was a little bit scary. I was thinking can I do it; can't I do it? … This might sound a little bit perverse, but it was reassuring to know that other people were feeling the same thing; that it was quite normal. (p. 288)

In Zembylas et al.'s (2008) study, one student expressed:

> If I had been told at the beginning of this course that I would have formed such strong relationships with some of my classmates, I would never have believed it! It's paradoxical, but I feel that I have managed to create stronger relationships in the context of this online program than I ever did in my face-to-face classes. (p.113)

Some students, however, did not feel that they had a chance to make connections with other students in the online courses, which left them feeling isolated. Zembylas et al.'s (2008) work provided some examples of how students experienced that isolation. One student stated:

> I feel isolated; I do not know my fellow learners well and I do not have the courage to phone them, to see if they feel the same distress as me, the same fears. I do not even dare to phone my instructor.… The nature of distance learning makes me see everything from a distance. (p. 114)

A student from Hara and Kling's (2000) study described a range of emotions, including isolation: "I have felt it … panic … isolation … frustration … anger" (p. 568). However, that same student expressed the desire to "keep trying" (p. 568). In Motteram and Forrester's (2005) study, one student noted, "We need a tutor that cares about her/his students. We need to be in contact just not to feel isolated" (p. 288). Several instances of isolation were related to lack of communication or connection in the online classroom, another important theme from the study. A student from Lyall and McNamara's (2000) study did not feel connected to the online course and stated, "I would just chuck the whole thing away … it's too hard to keep going if you haven't got a really good reason to" (p. 111).

Similarly, Carol, a student from Melrose and Bergeron's (2007) study, shared, "Maybe the instructor could pull people together in the groups. Newer students don't have the background, help us share some little personal thing and then we can build on it to get to know each other" (p. 7). A student from Holley and Taylor's (2008) study said, "I haven't talked with much of anybody this semester" (p. 262), and a student from Whipp and Lorentz's (2008) study stated that he or she "didn't feel connected" (p. 184). However, students from Holley and Taylor's (2008) study "expressed ambivalence and confusion" when interactive assignments were introduced (p. 263). For example, one of the students stated, "Honestly, I never went to read anybody else's [post]. I probably wouldn't read mine, either" (p. 263). Even the instructor noted that students were reluctant to participate in interactive assignments. A student from Motteram and Forrester's (2005) study noted, "Contact with other students wasn't terribly important because I have got friends here who are doing Masters degrees with other universities and I can talk to them about things" (p. 289). Similarly, a student indicated:

> The reason for me doing a Masters is purely a selfish thing that I am actually doing it for me. So it wasn't so essential to feel that I am a part of a study group or a student community to be quite honest. (p. 290)

Another student from the same study noted:

> I really do feel that I am part of that community and I have felt better as the course has gone on. At the start of it, it was a bit of a strange feeling, but now I feel very good about the whole things. (p. 290)

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that the studies taken together suggest that students take online courses for a number of personal reasons. Several factors influence their experience, some of which students control and some of which faculty control. Students have to balance work and family, to manage time, and to make a personal commitment. Instructors should work to establish presence in the absence of physical copresence, work to build intellective relationships with students, and work to create a sense of community. It is a balance of student and

instructor factors that influence faculty and student experiences.

Our theoretical framework would suggest that it is the absence of physical copresence that changes the nature of interaction. The students thus experience their learning environments in a more abstract and intellective way. In some cases, students seemed to miss the physical markers and cues that made social connections easier to negotiate. Others seemed to thrive in the new environment. While some of the responsibility rests with the student, much rests with the instructor to create vibrant online experiences that allow for new intellective skills to be developed and used.

Our synthesis provided an examination of students' experiences with online learning. It is important to begin to uncover students' experiences with online learning because doing so can help to show effective online practices, student perceptions of online learning, and student satisfaction in the online environment. All of these can provide information about whether students will likely continue to accept online delivery of instruction and factors that will influence their persistence and retention in these courses.

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