# Perceptions and expectations of online graduate students regarding synchronous events

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain an increased understanding of the perceptions and expectations of a group of experienced online student participants regarding synchronous events in the higher learning setting. Areas of inquiry posed to online student panelists included whether they expected live events to be included in their classes, and whether participants believed that synchronous events influenced learner performance and persistence. Further, queries were made relative to whether attendance at synchronous events should be required and if Webcams should be mandatory for everyone in attendance. The findings gleaned from this investigation afford practitioners further insight as to how instructional practices regarding synchronous events correspond with the expressed interests of an informed group of online learners.

Keywords: online instruction, synchronous delivery, learner expectation
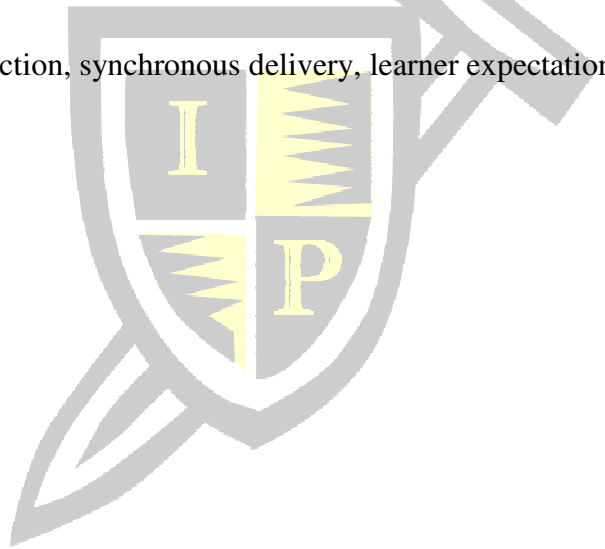
INTRODUCTION

When one considers the steady enrollment growth over the past decades, coupled with greater acceptance within the academic community, it is broadly apparent that online education is here to stay. Access to courses delivered online has sustained an increase over the past two decades, and many institutions of higher learning have reacted to meet the upsurge in market demand. Progressive schools have responded to the expectations of a growing clientele by offering a greater number of online courses, programs, and degree options. According to reports issued by the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 200 colleges and universities offer online instruction (2014) with no less than 120 schools offering full online programs options (2012). Today's online learning is very much a reaction to what students wanted and expected and, consistent with any consumer driven enterprise, student satisfaction with their learning experience has become a pervasive consideration that is particularly significant given the growing online learner demographic (Bailie, 2014).

Demonstrating sensitivity to consumer expectation, more and more higher learning institutions assess the quality of their online offerings by asking students what they find satisfying, as well as what they find to be a hindrance, in their learning experience. One facet of inquiry has focused on synchronous instructional delivery in terms of specific factors that affect student learning.   The literature is seemingly laden with suggestions that synchronous delivery can have an influence on a student's perception of quality in their online experience to include (among other things) student-teacher interaction, student engagement, and achievement of learning outcomes. Studies have concluded that the integration of synchronous events can enhance interaction between studnets and faculty which, in turn, can create a more satisfying learning experience (Altun, Kalaycı, & Avci, 2011; Snowball & Mostert, 2010).

Some learners might be drawn to the synchronous mode of online learning because of its likeness to the traditional face to face engagement they have grown accustomed to. However, others might find it something of a challenge to obligate themselves to a set time and place as demanded of synchronous delivery, viewing such a requirement to be contrary to the "any time/any place" mantra that much of today's online education was founded upon. There are some online programs that require synchronous interactivity based around real-time events that might include lectures, panel discussions or group work that include compulsory attendance. Simply put, some of the students that were attracted to the "no set schedule" approach indicative of asynchronous learning may not be able to commit to the time and place requirements demanded of scheduled synchronous events.

While the literature offers sufficient evidence that the online learning experience might profit from real-time engagement, a corresponding examination of student expectations for synchronous events that require learners to login at a prescribed place and time is called for. The question at hand becomes how student perceptions and expectations of synchronous events in online classes compare to the instructional approach that has been adopted by some institutions. The purpose of this quantitative investigation was to gain an improved understanding of the perceptions and expectations of a group of practiced online student subjects regarding synchronous events in the higher learning setting.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical premise of this investigation is reflective of the Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT), a theory that has been widely applied in the field of marketing research. Originally presented by Oliver (1980), ECT is a principle that examines how consumer expectation, when coupled with satisfaction, might serve to impact future purchasing decisions. In essence, the theory suggests that when a product or service outperforms expectation (positive disconfirmation) satisfaction will result. On the other hand, when a product fails to meet expectation (negative disconfirmation) dissatisfaction will result. Any ensuing repurchase would therefore suggest previous satisfaction (Oliver, 1980, Anderson & Sullivan, 1993, Spreng et. al. 1996). The relationship between ECT and higher education should be apparent, as administrators attempt to capture and retain an increasingly satisfaction driven student clientele.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Increased bandwidth and accessibility to the World Wide Web has paved the way for greater real-time engagement in online courses. Advancements such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) may have served to bridge one of the main concerns commonly noted by those critical of distance education – the absence of real time contact between learners and their instructors. Some studies suggest that decreased social interactivity can lead to reduced satisfaction among students including increased feelings of isolation, disillusionment, and greater risk of dropping out (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; Tello, 2007). Intuitively, one might think that when students and instructors can engage one another in real time, any sense of transactional distance would be offset by such an opportunity for live engagement. With a promise that real-time interaction might offer greater student achievement, many institutions of higher learning have looked to synchronous events expecting that it would also increase immediacy in their online courses.

Over the years, an assortment of studies have explored whether the inclusion of synchronous activities in an online course serves to increase immediacy have been met with divergent results. Offir, Lev, and Bezalel (2008) found the interaction level in online classes with synchronous engagement to be a significant factor in the effectiveness of the classes reviewed. Yet in the same year, Newman (2008) found that there was no significant difference in online communication, online learning, and online community when a synchronous communication tool was added to an online course. An earlier investigation by Allen et. al. examined previous claims that that interaction in a synchronous environment resulted in increased learning. However, the investigation deemed most of these arguments were more theoretical than empirically supported (2004).

Among the critics, Hrastinski et al (2010) noted that only "weak ties" are developed among "class-wide relations" when synchronous communication is used for lectures or large group discussions. The investigators went on to offer that these "weak ties" may also result in "decreased cognitive effort" among groups of online learners when compared to asynchronous learning activities (p. 656). In another study, Johnson (2008) rotated students between online asynchronous and synchronous discussion exercises and considered the effect on academic achievement as well as individual perceptions of which approach was more effective for their own learning. The results of Johnson's investigation found that there was no preference for one approach over the other.

On the positive side, Cao, Griffin, and Bai (2009) reported that synchronous interaction can result in increased online student satisfaction. Their study of 102 undergraduate students

found that improving individual student satisfaction with synchronous interaction had a positive impact on overall course satisfaction. Synchronous tools have also been found to be helpful in the promoting a greater sense of community in online courses. In her 2001 study, Motteram concluded that "synchronous tools are more effective for the 'social' side of education and the asynchronous tools are better at dealing with the 'academic' aspects of the course (p. 131)."

In a 2007 study, Park and Bonk assembled a list of the major benefits of synchronous delivery to include providing immediate feedback, encouraging the exchange of views and perspectives, enhancing dynamic interactions among participants, strengthening social presence, fostering the exchange of emotional supports, and contributing verbal exchange. Yet some practitioners might duly contend that each of these identified elements could also be widely evident in the asynchronous environment. Pfister and Mühlpfordt (2002) reported concerns with equalizing verbal contributions and creating coherent communication within synchronous discourse since there can be "insufficiencies" in its organizational structure.

The literature exposes many positive influences of synchronous communication in the online classroom, including aspects of student achievement, social engagement, and learner satisfaction.   Yet some challenges have also been identified in various studies. Accordingly, this investigation sought to reveal additional implications for some of the acknowledged challenges, particularly in the perception of true benefit in the eyes of those participating.

METHODS

Participants and Sampling

This investigation engaged a heterogeneous panel of experienced online students to examine their preferences and expectations toward synchronous activities. In an effort to seat an informed panel of participants, a minimum eligibility requirement of five successful online course enrollments was instituted. Participants were drawn from a graduate business program of a single regionally accredited university located in the Midwestern United States where students were required to attend one hour lectures on prescribed topics each week.

Instrumentation

The five item instrument developed for this study included a closed item response survey format, created using SurveyMonkey™. Questions were based on a four-point Likert scale with response options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Qualified participants were provided with the address to a secure Website where the survey was housed. Demographic information regarding student characteristics was obtained in the first part of the survey.

Procedure

The Dean of the Business program invited graduate faculty to post an announcement in their online courses, describing the investigation and extending an invitation for interested and qualified students to participate. In the fall of 2015 an e-mail invitation containing a brief introduction to the study and a link to the survey instrument was sent to 50 individuals who had responded to the announcement. The survey site was closed after the designated 14 day timeframe ended.

RESULTS

A panel of experienced online graduate students offered their views and preferences relative to synchronous events in their online studies. A summary of the participant demographics and the resulting data generated by this investigation are as follows:

A sample of 46 of the 50 invited participants successfully responded to each of the five items in the allotted two week timeframe. Of the 46 students taking part in this investigation, 22 were female. The age range was 23 through 46. Thirty-five of those participating fell into the age range of 29 through 31. The mean online course completion of the sample was six graduate courses.

Table 1 (Appendix) presents the response patterns of student views regarding the significance of select elements of synchronous activity in their online studies. The results indicate that the majority of the participants in this investigation expected that live events would be included in their online classes, with 46% indicating a strong agreement (SA) with the statement, followed by 37% that agreed (A). The majority of participants also agreed that synchronous events had an influence on student performance (SA = 20%, A = 50%). Student participants were dissimilar, however, when it came to the question of whether synchronous events had an impact on persistence in enrollment, with 57% of the responses cast being either disagree (D = 40%) or strongly disagree (SD = 17%).

The students' surveyed were overwhelmingly opposed to the notion of mandatory attendance at synchronous events, with a resounding 66% (D = 49%, SD = 17%) responding negatively to such a requirement. With regard to the possibility of Webcams being required of all synchronous event participants, a decisive 77% of the participants did not favor this approach.

Limitations

Any research endeavor will have limitations which should be acknowledged. This study was limited by several factors including the survey delivery method, sample size, and potential questions of validity and reliability. The data for this study were collected over a span of two weeks in the Fall term of 2015. Forty six participants representing the graduate business program of a single institution completed the online instrument for this endeavor. Accordingly, the results of this investigation are not generalizable to a larger student population. Lastly, as surveys rely on a self-report of participant reactions, the results of this study are valid only to the extent that the subjects truthfully disclosed their perceptions and expectations.

DISCUSSION

The focus of this study was an examination of the perceptions of a group of experienced online graduate students regarding their personal views and expectations related to synchronous events in the higher learning setting. A total of 46 students completed the five item Likert style survey. The results demonstrated that those surveyed held a high expectation for synchronous events to be included in their online studies, and the group offered a favorable response when asked if synchronous events have a positive influence on learner performance. However, more than half of the participants did not agree that asynchronous events impacted enrollment persistence of online learners. Also, the majority of respondents did not favor mandatory

attendance or the compulsory use of a Webcam for synchronous activities associated with their online learning.

An interesting finding was that, although a common expectation expressed by online students might surround an interest in increased opportunities for real time exchanges between their faculty and fellow students, most of the participants in this study were not supportive of being required to attend. This may very well be a result of the fact that all of the subjects seated for this study are currently enrollment in a program where weekly attendance is mandatory, and that demand on students (when asked) might be considered superfluous. In addition, while the interest of participating in a live event might appeal to some (and might even be believed to positively influence performance), not all students welcome the thought of being obligated to appear by way of a Webcam. Perhaps it is human nature to be self-conscious about how one looks on camera, and this might be a reason why some online students prefer to be "cam shy." These two aspects of this study seem to be worthy of further qualitative investigation.

The findings of many investigations have surmised that the integration of synchronous activities into online courses can have an impact on course outcomes, although the result might not always be what instructional designers or faculty had originally envisioned. Instinctively, one might presume that the inclusion of synchronous activities in the online classroom would serve to bridge feelings of isolation held by remotely placed participants. When asked, the learners included in this study affirmed that there can be desirable results stemming from synchronous involvement, with some limits.

There are those that have questioned why it is that some institutions have elected to require attendance at synchronous events. Was the decision based on empirical evidence concluding that live engagement actually enriched the online learning experience? Perhaps some have based the decision to require attendance on an administrative instinct seeking to offset a perception of transactional distance inherent to distance education. Or maybe stakeholders were in some manner compelled to require student attendance at live events to guarantee an improved return on investment for the purchase of a commercial application to deliver synchronous events. Despite the circumstances for attaching conditions to synchronous event participation, whether it is required attendance or webcam use, decisions on how live events might be most effectively leveraged toward improving the learning experience should be validated with those that are the most impacted by the practice.

Practitioners of online education should purposefully evaluate the intended outcomes of synchronous engagement in relation to the resulting learning experiences of students. Future research efforts should also focus on continued ways to examine how the personal interests and expectations of online students compare to the instructional protocols that have been created.

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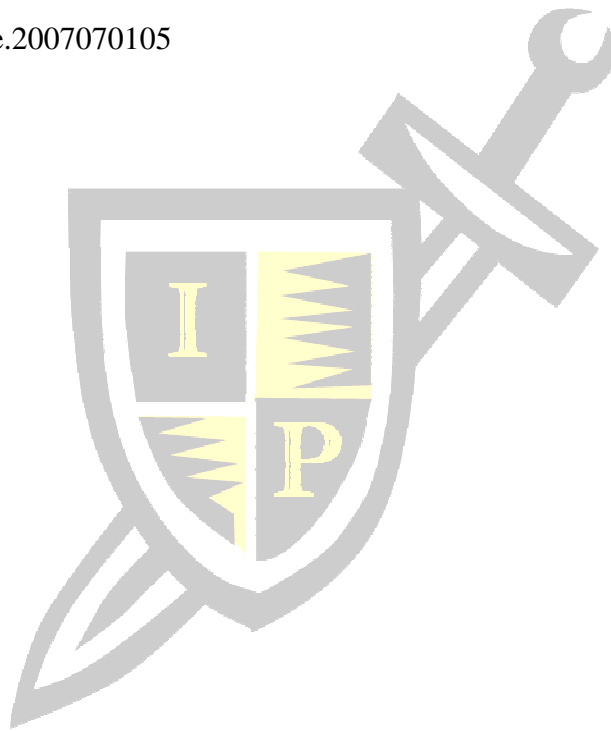
APENDIX

Table 1

Online Student Perceptions & Expectations
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 Synchronous Events
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In general, online learners expect that their courses will include synchronous events	Strongly Agree 46% (n=21)	Agree 37% (n=17)	Disagree 15% (n=7)	Strongly Disagree 2% (n=1)
Synchronous events have a positive influence on online learner performance	Strongly Agree 20% (n=9)	Agree 50% (n=23)	Disagree 18% (n=8)	Strongly Disagree 12% (n=6)
Synchronous events have a positive influence on online learner persistence	Strongly Agree 13% (n=6)	Agree 30% (n=14)	Disagree 40% (n=18)	Strongly Disagree 17% (n=8)
Attendance at synchronous events should be mandatory	Strongly Agree 10% (n=5)	Agree 24% (n=11)	Disagree 49% (n=22)	Strongly Disagree 17% (n=8)
Webcams be mandatory expectation for everyone attending live events	Strongly Agree 7% (n=3)	Agree 16% (n=7)	Disagree 56% (n=26)	Strongly Disagree 21% (n=10)