

LEARNING FROM THE LEARNERS

Student Perception of the Online Classroom

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Many online learners have frustrations and concerns regarding the online experience. These concerns include institutional complaints, course-room and professor complaints, personal concerns about academic ability and time management skills, and more. This article examines the online learning experience from the student's perspective. Seven open-ended discussion questions were asked of 302 students in 16 graduate business courses, over a 3-year period. Two hundred twenty-nine students responded, identifying their observations and perceptions of their personal online learning experience. This article explores the difficulties and opportunities presented by online education, but is focused on understanding the student's perception of these issues, and their experience in the online classroom. About 75 student quotes are offered to document and flavor this examination. After grounded theory analysis, this article concludes by offering modest advice and suggestions to institutions, instructors, and students on how to improve the online learning experience for all.

INTRODUCTION

Students, perhaps more so than any other stakeholder in American educational systems, are aware that the traditional university model of set class times in brick-and-mortar classroom spaces no longer works for many. Some students, especially those who are older or working full-time and/or with family obligations, seek nontraditional programs that are more flexible and thus better suited to their overall life and lifestyle needs. Most of these students appreciate the opportunity and flexibility offered by online education, and believe

that computer mediated learning and communication is as viable for the classroom and education as it is for the workplace (Bell & Kozlowski 2002). Online education has become the norm for hundreds of thousands of students, and is no longer just a fringe option. After analyzing more than 6,000 student discussion responses focused on seven open-ended questions, the article concludes by offering modest advice to institutions, professors, and students on how to improve the online learning and teaching experience for all, based on the student perspectives shared in this article.

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RESEARCH METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

Three hundred and two students registered in 16 graduate business courses were invited to offer their perceptions and experiences with online learning. Almost all of these students had prior experience with traditional face-to-face classroom learning. This sharing of learning experience was a voluntary contribution by the students, and was not graded or otherwise evaluated for coursework purposes. Two hundred and twenty-nine students voluntarily responded, resulting in over 6,400 individual comments, of which about 75 are shared throughout this article to document the discussion (see Appendix A). The average age of the respondents is 38, including 132 males and 97 females. This data collection took place during Weeks 5 and 6 of an 8-week graduate online course, overlapped with regular coursework, and was essentially an additional classroom discussion open to all in each of the 16 cohorts.

The students were asked to respond to seven open-ended questions, and invited to share their perceptions of their online learning experiences (Appendix B). An initial submission of about 100 words was expected in response to each of the seven questions during Week 5 of the course. Students were then asked the following week to respond and discuss the submissions of others in the cohort. Thus, a total discussion of just over 6,400 comments/postings.

A qualitative methodology approach was chosen so that a rich understanding of student perceptions of the online experience could be gained by allowing respondents to give nuanced and detailed accounts of their experiences with online learning. Content analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in the data (Berg, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding process involved reading all responses several times and then categorizing units of text including sentences, phrases, or paragraphs (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). The coding process entailed the assignment of codes based on the nature of the experience or perception (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Six categories emerged from the data, and are discussed in this article.

Limitations of this research include that the students in this sample are likely older on average than most online students (age range 27–62, average age 38). All students were enrolled in the same graduate business program, and taking the same course at the same university, with the 16 sections of the course being offered over a 3-year period. The course itself was designed as a discussion-based course with two written assignments; thus, the findings are not necessarily widely applicable to all types of online programs. Students in this sample all chose to do this graduate degree online, so favorable bias toward online learning may be present from the students in the sample. Some students may have been reticent in their postings given the open access to all in the cohort. All coding was done by the author, and thus is open to possible personal bias or misinterpretation. The research can be viewed as a single case study, and so open to the limitations common in case research.

STUDENT PERCEPTION OF PERSONAL COST, FINANCIAL AND OTHERWISE

Student debt is an obvious issue, but financial cost is only part of the student's "cost" concern. Most students in this sample feel that the personal sacrifice required by traditional classroom education is too costly because face-to-face education with set class times and specified physical classroom locations does not meet their needs in terms of efficiency or effectiveness, or overall life balance.

We need different educational opportunities to meet our specific needs, especially those of us who aren't typical college-aged kids. (Student 4, Male, 43)

Online classes remove the need for travel, and thus the time needed for travel, and may

resolve even ongoing childcare or work issues caused by not being available to be in the home or the work place at certain times. Knowing that the timing and location of schoolwork can be changed to better meet personal needs reduces the stress encountered with set-time and location boundaries (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012).

General tensions and the pace of life are harder, and there are work and family constraints on your time. Night classes became more and more difficult to take. I was missing as many classes as I was attending. It was hopeless. (Student 91, M, 33)

The nonproductive travel time in the car was funded by me with fewer hours of sleep and less time with my two small children—that is a major cost to me. (Student 169, F, 31)

Yet, the need for further education is perceived as a near-constant expectation for many individual students. Required skillsets in the workplace are constantly being reset at higher levels, and so whether or not to attend school is not perceived to be optional. The challenge for adult students with work and family responsibilities is in finding educational systems that *work* for them.

I had to go back to school, no choice on that point. Honestly I wanted to go back to school. Job competitiveness forces people to pursue further education. With online I'm able to go back. (Student 89, M, 47)

Many students mentioned often feeling too tired to attend face-time evening classes.

One needs to be mentally present at a specific time, and you don't get to choose this time, and thus having energy isn't always possible. And, if you miss the class then you miss it. (Student 58, M, 56)

I was completely physically and mentally dead-tired by the time I hit the night class. Sometimes I just thought what's the point of even being here? (Student 13, F, 27)

The personal desire of simply not wanting to attend traditional classes is often mentioned as a motivator in choosing online education instead of the traditional classroom. The online option, even with flaws, is still seen as preferable to the traditional classroom setting.

I was tired of sitting and traveling to a classroom. I needed and wanted online to work for me, and it has. (Student 141, F, 32)

Nontraditional students are often transient because of work schedules, relocation, or with work-related travel, and this interferes with regular attendance at traditional classes, much less the aggravation of trying to transfer credit hours from institution to institution. A frequent student observation is the overall length of time needed to complete a degree when only night or Saturday classes are available. Missed classes and missed learning opportunities in the traditional school are often beyond student control, yet still impacts their learning and grades.

It is rare that I'd take a traditional 15 week semester and not find myself on the road for at least 2 or 3 weeks, and that just messed everything up. (Student 65, F, 41)

If you have to relocate then to have to try to transfer credits to a new school. The schools I've dealt with are not all flexible, so that is a huge problem. (Student 59, M, 42)

Finally, many students feel education with set class times interferes with both family and work life, and also constrains quality learning. Loss of family life is a cost.

Trying to juggle family, raising kids, and working full-time left little time to absorb materials sufficiently. I was always rushed: rushed to class, rushed to get home, and rushed to do assignments. I couldn't do my best work, and that was a huge frustration. (Student 31, F, 37)

The personal cost in terms of travel times and other time spent in simply managing to

attend traditional classes is a major concern for many students in this sample. The pragmatic time-flexibility in “attending” online class whenever and wherever is perceived to be as important, as is the benefit of not missing classes because of work or family responsibilities. For more than 80% of respondents, the ability to be in control of their own educational schedules, not only their class times but also their program completion time, looms large. Work-life balance issues are rarely discussed in the pedagogical literature, yet emerge as a major “cost” concern for many students in this sample. These students essentially assume the academic content is equivalent to traditional programs, thus allowing a default focus on personal cost and life balance. That education should *fit* into lifestyle, and not that lifestyle should change to accommodate education, was clearly stated.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

Most students in this sample have complaints about the dynamics and learning environment of the traditional classroom, going beyond the already noted time and place constraints of the traditional physical classroom. The *speed* of the face-classroom, and lack of time for thinking or reflection, is noted by many.

The traditional classroom moves too quickly. Online, when you get confused, you simply turn away from the computer and turn to the book or another resource and figure it out, and then continue with the learning when you are ready. (Student 27, M, 60)

I never felt like I was a proper student in the face-classroom because I never had a moment for a quiet thought or reflection about the course content. Isn't thinking and learning what education is supposed to be all about? (Student 62, M, 30)

The pragmatic need to keep up and take notes quickly, and perhaps incompletely or without understanding, is also noted.

In traditional classes you're so busy taking notes that it is detrimental to full participation in the discussion, or even following the discussion. (Student 86, F, 44).

The most common complaint regarding the face-classroom is that a few verbal students typically dominate classroom discussions, with most of the students in the class sitting passively, and therefore not contributing their own perspectives and experiences to the discussion. This reluctance of students to engage in the face-to-face classroom may be caused by shyness, simple inability to get airtime, or even lack of interest in the discussion because of lack of energy as noted earlier. Over half the students in the sample resent the need to spend energy and time trying to have their contribution noticed.

You have to fight for talk-time in a face-to-face class. It is like talk radio where the loudest and most outrageous are always heard, but the quieter and more reflective people are rarely heard. (Student 158, F, 41)

For me, by the time I'm ready to talk or make a comment, the class has already moved on to some other topic. (Student 33, M, 44)

In the traditional classroom most students feel there is little or no opportunity for student-to-student discussion or even student-to-professor discussion. Interaction in face-to-face classrooms is described by most as being one way from instructor to the class, with occasional interaction between a few students and the instructor (Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006; So & Brush 2008).

My classroom experiences consisted mostly of teachers lecturing and students listening. Questions and discussion were between the teacher and one or two students with little or no classroom interaction between the rest of the students at all. (Student 43, M, 52)

The discussion-based asynchronous online classroom flattens the traditional top-down classroom hierarchy, at least in part. Students

TABLE 1
Comparing the Online and Face-to-Face Classroom

• Classroom is “open” 24/7 at convenience of each individual student and professor. • The classroom discussion is automatically archived, thus a permanent record is available to all in the cohort. • Classroom has low opportunity costs, aside from Internet access and a computer. • Classroom is usually student centered. • Classroom is mostly student and cohort talk, although the professor is present as well, so students have influence on content of classroom materials. • Classroom is experiential and student-discussion based, so students discover course content through discussion. • Student experience and the sharing of this experience in the cohort discussion are used as the core of further learning. • Students in the classrooms are active and collaborative.	• Classroom is only “open” when scheduled at a fixed time and place, although professor is often available outside of class. • Classroom is typically verbal only, without a record of discussion except through memory or class notes. • Classroom has high opportunity costs such as a commute or babysitter. • Classroom is usually professor centered. • Classroom is typically professor talk, with occasional inputs from students—professor controls content of classroom and materials. • Course content is “downloaded” from the professor to the student, and is typically lecture based. Other materials can be shared, but the course usually is professor centered instead of student centered. • Student experience is largely ignored with the core of learning being textbook or professor based, in most classes. • Students in the classroom are mostly passive and noncollaborative, in most classes.
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Source: Adapted from Berry (2006).

have considerably more control over their own contribution, participation, and learning, partly because students drive the online discussion. The professor still controls the initial discussion questions, but he/she is not the dominant voice in the discussion as in most face-to-face classrooms, and student interaction is the online norm (Berry, 2006). Domination by the verbal few is simply not possible in the online classroom. For the discussion-based online classrooms in this sample, students were expected to offer an initial response to each discussion question, and then were expected to respond another three or more times to the responses from other students over a 1-week period. Competition for voice time in the asynchronous online classroom is not an issue, whereas communication blocking by students or the professor is commonplace in the face-classroom (Berry, 2011). The need for immediate response to any given question or topic is also removed completely, thus quiet time for reflective thought or analysis is possible and encouraged.

Pedagogical objectives such as analyzing and synthesizing are well served by the amount of interaction in the online classroom (Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000; Weiss, 2000). The challenge facing professors is on how to encourage student discussion beyond the sharing of descriptive information and experience to more analytical and critical thinking levels (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Richardson & Swan, 2003).

USING ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

The 24/7 online asynchronous discussion generates literally hundreds of student postings per course, and this amount of discussion or experiential sharing is not possible in a synchronous face-to-face class, regardless of interest or intent by student or professor. Unlimited peer discussion is possible in the online classroom because all students in the

cohort can talk at the same time, unlike turn-taking, as in synchronous conversation. Further, the online discussion is spread over a week (168 hours) and not compressed into a 3-hour face-class. This ability of students to self-regulate scheduling and learning often leads to greater satisfaction and learning outcomes (Eom, 2010).

Some online students feel frustration with some of the differences between asynchronous computer-mediated-learning (CML) and synchronous face-to-face learning. The benefits of CML may be recognized and appreciated, but online is still the newer and less comfortable experience for most. Over 80% of the students in this sample took their first degree or most of their first degree in the traditional classroom. Importantly, online is not perceived as being easier than traditional face-to-face learning by these students. Most students note that online courses demand more student time per course, even though this class- and work-time scheduling is more controlled by the students in terms of when they do their work. Four specific characteristics of online communication are consistently mentioned by most students: some feel isolated and alone; the roles of student and professor change dramatically; relationships between peers or peer and professor are sometimes more difficult to establish; and not having face-to-face conversations seems odd.

Some students feel isolated in the online classroom, and this seems partly correlated with the slower pace and lack of immediate response in CML, but also with the reality of working alone at the computer. Others express concern regarding the changed pace for learning or interaction.

Things are certainly slower in the online class, so waiting a few hours or even a few days can feel like a lifetime. (Student 15, M, 31)

An advantage of the CML classrooms is that students work/study/learn when personally convenient for them, yet this benefit leads some students to feel a lack of community or support because this independence results in

lags for response time. The transportability of computing means that online learning activities can now be done at alternative times and locations, usually when alone (McCloskey, 2016).

Given my time zone, I am usually online when everyone else is probably asleep, so I don't get to *converse* with anyone, and they read my postings eight hours after I post them. (Student 172, F, 45)

Although many share the experience of detachment or isolation as noted above, others appreciate the near-exclusive focus on task, and the more professional tone in the online classroom.

Online is less personal but way more professional. Less chat. Less trivia. Less wasted time. More work gets done in less time. This works for me. I'm not a kid, and I'm not in school to find a new best friend anyway. (Student 41, M, 38)

Students recognize changed roles for both students and professors, and this sample expressed a mixed reaction to these changed roles. Some students feel uncomfortable with the added responsibility of organizing their own work and learning, yet others highly value this added autonomy and independence. Lack of participation in the discussion equates with lack of presence, which is documented in the electronic archive.

There is no-one standing over you telling you to get busy. Lack of commitment, motivation, dedication, goal setting, and even basic time management skills can present huge problems for unprepared students. (Student 210, F, 43)

The learner must become self-directed and self-motivated in interaction. You aren't on your own exactly, but sometimes it feels like you are. (Student 156, M, 36)

Student prior experience with CML and online learning seems to solve most of these participation and time-management issues.

The benefits of personal flexibility and autonomy are the balancing tradeoffs once the changed communication dynamics are understood.

The online environment is easy once you become familiar with the routine and your own personal responsibilities. It takes time to learn how to organize and regulate your own time. No one babysits you here. (Student 145, M, 41)

The outcomes of online learning in terms of connection or personal relationships evolving from the class is still viewed as weak by some. Many perceive that establishing personal relationships is more difficult in the virtual world. Many students find it strange and uncomfortable to communicate solely via text messaging.

E-mails and text certainly convey basic information, but lack the nuance, context, and supplementary content that you can get in a face-to-face conversation or meeting. (Student 72, F, 53)

Some suggest that they know their professor less well.

Online courses present more challenges and difficulties than traditional courses when it comes to instructors getting to know students, and students getting to know instructors. (Student 18, F, 34)

Others disagree, suggesting that the longer and more reflective responses common in CML balance and make up for the lack of face-to-face interaction.

Actually, I feel I *know* all my classmates better online, because everyone talks and makes comments almost every day for weeks on end, compared to the regular once a week classroom where the same two or three do all the talking. (Student 53, F, 49)

I know everyone in my online class, at least a little bit. I know where they work, and what they do, and their attitude about all sorts of

topics. In the regular classroom I might get to know one or two or three, but certainly not everyone. (Student 187, M, 34)

Almost all students admit to missing face-to-face conversation while in the online classroom, yet most also acknowledge that synchronous communication is not necessary in terms of learning the course material. The lack of face-to-face communication creates trust issues for some, especially with team-based assignments as some have concerns about the willingness of other team members to do the work (Peters & Karren, 2009). The constant interaction found in the online classroom may aid in developing trust (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005), but many students work together based on reluctant pragmatic need and not *trust* (Thomas, 2007). CML lacks the personal social control often found on synchronous work teams, and this causes unease for some (Cascio, 2000). Yet, the conclusion of many students is that higher levels of relationship are possible over time in the online class because of the depth of shared personal information and experience in the discussion-based asynchronous format.

The changed role of both professor and student is mentioned by more than 70% of the students in this sample, and most see this as a beneficial shift. Many students welcome this shift as it puts them more in charge of their own learning and thus more responsible for their own educational success. This change of role is initially confusing to some, and is further confounded by false expectations that the online classroom will be more or less the same as the traditional classroom (Berry, 2006).

I miss people face-to-face. Maybe I really don't need them (face interactions) to learn, but I still miss the interaction. (Student 168, F, 28)

You get the work done online, and then some, but sometimes you'd really like the option of heading off to get a coffee with a classmate. (Student 175, M, 61)

Both students and professors need to develop new skills, abilities, and methods for success in the online classroom (Picciano, 2001). Communication patterns change in CMC, as do expectations of performance and other behaviors including team roles and responsibilities (Hinds & Weisband, 2003).

STUDENT FRUSTRATIONS WITH CML

The most obvious difference between traditional and virtual education is that the mode of communication has changed, and this impacts all aspects of student perception. Students or professors who expect or try to make asynchronous communication work like synchronous communication often find themselves frustrated and unhappy.

The flow of conversation/communication is much slower in CML, the result of people who are not all in the same place (or electronic space) at the same time. Some individuals in the virtual classroom may be online every 3 hours, with a post or two, while others are only visible every second day with a dozen posts each time.

The discussion may be spread out over several days, instead of starting and stopping in fifteen minutes in the same class session. It took my brain some time to get used to this. (Student 167, M, 44)

The flow of conversation can be lost because of slow response. Sometimes slower isn't a good thing, or to be fair, isn't what I want all of the time. (Student 46, F, 46)

The pause commonly found in CML is thus seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage.

I enjoy the relatively autonomous personal scheduling in asynchronous classes, and appreciate that I can think before I respond, but I miss the immediacy and flow of face-to-face class time. I guess I want the best of both. (Student 147, M, 39)

The strengths and weaknesses of CML take some time and effort to become familiar with, and there is often a lag before appreciating the advantages, and understanding how to protect against the disadvantages, both in responding in the discussion but also in questioning others in the cohort. Most students agree that clarity of message is essential.

Online demands an exactness of thought and the ability to put ideas into meaningful and accurate words. This is a valuable skill for all of us to learn and have, and sadly even after 3 years (in this program) I'm still learning. (Student 54, F, 38)

Asynchronous learning allows us the opportunity to research, prepare, and even polish our answers. (Student 148, M, 57)

Most communication models acknowledge the reality of *noise*, situations or behaviors or communication characteristics that interfere with a clear transmission of a message. CML has different types of noise, but still has *noise*. Misunderstanding may be related to the student not being familiar with the CML environment, either in their own writing or careful reading of other posts, and the time lag in CML contributes to lack of clarity and focus.

In online, the text message is 100% of the message, and it isn't tempered by body language or tone. Sarcasm or humor is often misunderstood. (Student 122, M, 36)

Students learn from each other as well as from the professor and courseware in the CML classroom, simply because all students are expected to share their thoughts and experiences with all others on a myriad of discussion topics. Everyone is expected to contribute. Over 90% of communication is from student to student in the online cohort, instead of being mostly from the professor to the class. Cohort-based discussion results in more opinion, comments, and shared experience, but perhaps also less academic focus as well.

The advantage of learning from other students outweighs the cons. All that experience to learn from. I mean we're all professionals here, and it all seems so relevant. Sometimes the textbook material doesn't seem all that relevant. (Student 153, M, 34)

Some online students note that the student is more in charge of the classroom, at least in terms of the discussion, and as a consequence some students note that the professor's role is also changed.

Sometimes the facilitator is more valuable when he/she isn't participative. The discussion questions are still set by the professor, fine, but then let the students work it out for themselves. Doing it yourself is a better learning experience. (Student 190, M, 29)

Most students are concerned with the amount of writing required in the online discussion-based classroom.

The most difficult aspect is the amount of writing required. In the traditional classroom, class discussions are verbal and generally not graded. With online, you are rewarded for participation in the discussions, and participation means writing. (Student 163, F, 46)

I speak much faster than I can keyboard, and I frame my words in person using body language and other nonverbal communications. In the online environment, all the nonverbal body language and tone must be incorporated into text. (Student 125, F, 36)

The sheer volume of comment posted by the student cohort is noted by almost all, again demanding new skills of time management and persistence from the student.

Students build their personal understanding of the course material through active discussion and learning from all in the cohort, including the professor, and this is a more difficult synthesis compared to the more simple transfer of ideas and information only from the professor to the student (Meyer, 2003). Students are accountable for their participation, a task easily evaluated as all CML contributions are

archived (May & Gueldenzoph 2006). Parallel and overlapping asynchronous communication instead of sequential communication is appreciated by most students, once they become familiar with the process. A different communication skill set is required from both professor and student in the CML classroom compared to the traditional classroom, and these skills can take some time to develop (Johnson, Chandidprapa, Yoon, Berrett, & LaFleur, 2003; Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002). All those involved should not assume that all CML students or professors share the same attitude or skillset in using asynchronous CML.

STUDENT PERCEPTION OF TIME MANAGEMENT AND SELF-DISCIPLINE ISSUES

A major challenge when entering the CML online classroom is the autonomy of time use available to students for online work, and students control how much time they choose to spend in the classroom.

The amount of work and time I had to put into the program was a shock to me. Two things ... I had to spend time but I also wanted to spend time. (Student 42, F, 57)

The most challenging aspect of online learning for me is needing to take a step back. You have to figure out how much is enough, and how much is too much. (Student 16, M, 38)

Online can be all-consuming because the classroom is not limited to set times and set places and with a specific amount of work expected by the professor in that limited time. The personal challenge of competent time management cannot be ignored.

The challenge has mostly been learning that just because I have twenty minutes, and happen to be near an Internet connection, doesn't mean that I have to go to class. You can burn yourself out. There is always more you can do. (Student 187, F, 33)

The distractions of working at home or office, and other distractions not found in the traditional classroom, cannot be ignored either.

The home study sessions can attract attention from loved ones, as supports or distractions. Uncomfortable study situations can result in unsatisfactory results for both home and school. (Student 142, F, 34)

Because most students are online every day, the pace of online and the accumulation of unread postings seem relentless. If a student misses class for a few days the time cost of catching up can seem insurmountable. As an example, in an online class of 15 students if every student makes just one comment for each of three ongoing discussions on a given day, that results in 45 comments just for that one day, and a 4-day absence results in about 180 postings to read and absorb. As most students take multiple classes, this build-up of material expands even further.

The strenuous pace and complexity have been my greatest challenges. You aren't just listening to the professor, but you have everyone in the class to listen to and respond to. (Student 115, M, 62)

You have to work every day, which is sort-of ironic given that class-time flexibility was partly what I was looking for. (Student 116, M, 28)

Almost all students comment on the need for self-discipline, and the amount of time and effort required for success in the online classroom. This flexibility of when to participate is associated with perceived increased student learning outcomes and satisfaction (Arbaugh & Duray, 2002), but also leads to trouble for those without competent work and study skills.

STUDENT PERSONAL CONCERNS AND ISSUES

Online students share many of the same concerns as face-to-face classroom students, but

with added worries and uncertainty about the virtual environment, virtual communication, and technology. Working on virtual teams is a concern for many online students, and while some students simply don't like working on teams, virtual or face-to-face, these issues are then further exacerbated and complicated by the use of CML. These issues seem especially troublesome for novice or near-novice online students.

Fear of nonacceptance by classmates or teammates is a real fear for me, which is silly, really, but still a concern. I doubt that I'm the only one who worries about my personal team skills being up to par. (Student 123, F, 33)

Frustration with online teams is enhanced if other members on the team are slow responders or last-minute workers. This is perhaps less of a problem in face-classes as non-performing team members can be seen and chastised. With virtual communication though, team members are not even sure that a communication query was seen or read, adding further confusion and stress to the team.

In a prior class there was a team member who disappeared for days at a time. He wasn't being responsible to the team, and that is unacceptable. (Student 77, M, 47)

You don't have control over who you work with. In a previous class I was the only one on the East Coast, and the rest of the team was in California, so the team did most of the work after I was already in bed. (Student 29, F, 43)

Responsibility to the learning team is an added constraint and expectation beyond just personally doing well in the class, or managing one's own timetable and schedule. Given increased student autonomy in terms of scheduling work, this can become complex.

Team assignment demands have proven fixed and inflexible. Teamwork can be time bound, and that is sort of counter to the whole

point of the virtual classroom. (Student, 178, M, 39)

Students identify aids that can alleviate some of these concerns. Team charters created by the team to lay out the specifics of participation and process per project, and especially who is responsible for what and by when, are seen as beneficial.

You need good learning team agreements, with accountability and consequences like getting kicked off the team. Specific and harsh team expectations are better than vague and polite expectations. (Student 12, M, 34)

Another commonly expressed concern is more personal, focusing on a general fear of lack of self-discipline, or of not having sufficient personal time to do the level of quality work desired.

My sense is that I should always be doing more, and more, and more. This worries me. I'm never happy with my level of contribution. (Student 2, F, 44)

Fear of not having enough time to do all the work properly is my main fear. You have to learn that perfect is never going to happen. (Student 3, M, 35)

The constant fear of keeping up to the cohort and the pace of the course scares me—and I worry about being left behind. (Student 5, M 37)

Some view the need for self-discipline as a responsibility that simply was not necessary in the face-to-face classroom. Some view this as an unfair expectation, while others see this as a personal growth opportunity.

Another element was my exposure to learning on my own. I'm not complaining ... I was in charge of my own learning, and I liked that. Online learning requires self-discipline for the student to reap the most from it. (Student 198, F, 34)

Others simply struggle to find any time for school, regardless of communication method.

Life is just nuts ... technology issues, international travel issues, aggressive work schedule issues, and now school too? (Student 140, M, 42)

I know that school is number one for some in the cohort, but for me it is about number five. I do what I can with the time I have, but I wish life would slow down sometimes. (Student 201, M, 54)

Technology breakdown or even just using the technology in a competent manner is a concern for some. Details of where and even how to post, receive announcements or work plans, and the classroom norms and expectations are all new to those recently exposed to online learning.

The reason online was hard to begin with can be attributed to my fear of the unknown. More than a year into the program, most of that fear is gone. (Student 203, F, 34)

Coping with firewalls, connectivity issues, posting substantive messages ... the days of sitting quietly at the back of the classroom are dead and gone. (Student 36, M, 44)

One surprise evolving from this research was the overwhelming concern with teamwork in the CML classroom. Most workplace teams use computer mediated communication to some extent, if only to send agendas or files across the office, thus most students might be expected to have some experience with virtual teams and online communication. Teams are interdependent and share a common purpose (Duarte & Synder, 2001), so the broader issue may simply be that the nontraditional students in this sample resent this need for interdependence, and the need to trust others while missing the visual controls available to face-to-face teams (Costa & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2007; Weibel, 2007).

SOLVING IDENTIFIED ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

This article has documented and commented on student frustration with both traditional face-to-face classrooms and online classrooms. Many students feel uncomfortable with the change in the communication dynamics from face-to-face classrooms to the online classroom, and the pace of online work, leading to ongoing concerns with online learning. The challenge for educators and institutions is using this awareness to improve online teaching and online systems to mitigate these frustrations.

The first step perhaps is to be aware of the institutional support needed by students. The school cannot assume that the transition to online will be seamless, or even easy, for many if not most students.

Tutorials on “how to” do online classes are essential. They can’t just push us off the pier and tell us to swim. We’re going to need help and support, and more than just a listing of available help-desk numbers. (Student 1, M, 46)

Students identify guidance and institutional advisors as critical to their success in the online environment. All expect a routine structure and system that works for them the first and every time.

Structure and strict expectations equal less hassle. (Student 51, M, 31)

I had a detail-oriented admissions counselor who provided excellent instruction and advice. The technical support line has been excellent too, as it needs to be. (Student 92, F, 42)

Online students need to assume responsibility for their own success, even prior to the start of class.

Surfing the University data base, and taking some of the various tutorials, and becoming familiar with the tools that are part of the

online environment allowed me to develop a comfort for the asynchronous environment, even before the class started. (Student 94, F, 45)

Students need to socialize themselves to the technology and the online environment just as you’d socialize yourself to the campus in a traditional setting. (Student 217, M, 32)

The need for professors and facilitators who understand the stressors on the student is mentioned by almost all students.

You need technical support for online to work. I’ve taken courses that were perfect, and others that were nightmares. Often a professor’s hint here and there makes all the difference and saves hours of grief and aggravation. (Student 96, F, 37)

Many students mentioned time and economic support from their employers, adding yet another stakeholder to the mix. Some employers appreciate that the virtual collaboration skills learned in the online class may well have applicability on the work site.

My company pays for and supports my online education. Flexibility, accessibility and convenience also made the online choice an easy decision for me. (Student 109, M, 44)

Electronic communication and virtual collaboration is a necessary requirement for corporate existence. Smart firms push online learning to the forefront. (Student 7, F, 29)

Although employer and institutional support is important, the most significant support comes from family and friends. Some students work on their online studies from work, but most students work from home, and this can be challenging.

I doubt that my transition would be successful without family support. My children are still little. Even though they always ask about when I will finish, all three of them support me, and my wife, and their support is critical for me. (Student 204, M, 40)

Any virtual communication experience seems valuable, and most students acknowledge that prior experience with online education, or virtual work in their workplace, helps immensely.

I think what made the transition easy for me is that I was not a novice about using computer communication software prior to my starting online education. (Student 132, F, 48)

Almost without exception students acknowledge the need to develop excellent self-management and time management skills if they expect success in the online environment. Most students suggest that the electronic CML environment itself demands this added sense of responsibility.

Online requires self-discipline and self-control. You can't fake paying attention and learning in the online classroom. You're independent and interdependent at the same time. (Student 11, M, 36)

Online demands that the student becomes more self-sufficient and self-reliant, and, big picture, isn't that what we all want from our education? (Student 56, F, 42)

The concern for many students is their lack of conviction that they can make this transition from dependency to being more fully independent, given other life responsibilities.

With the flexibility of the online setting it is easy to become too relaxed because you do the work when you choose. You need to be prepared for planned school-time to be messed up by unexpected work or family demands. (Student 170, M, 30)

Many students in the online environment self-identify as more mature than traditional students. Most also claim that online education suits them, as seems logical given that unsuccessful or unsuited students would likely self-select out of online classes after the first course

or two, and wouldn't choose to be in the online classroom for their graduate degree.

The university is now the producer of learning opportunities, instead of being the supplier of knowledge. I'm in charge of my own learning. I love this. (Student 110, F, 40)

The online environment allows people who otherwise can't go to school at all to actually go to school. There is thankfulness for the option, and I think this carries over into doing good work and making the extra effort for myself and my cohort. (Student 88, M, 42)

Most students in this sample claim that online personally suits them better. For some, this may be a choice based on job or family constraints, for some a preference based on age, but for many, online is a choice because of personality or other personal characteristics.

There is a distinct maturity and discipline factor involved when differentiating between 19 year olds and 45 year olds. Having relevant and appropriate experiences to share with other students and faculty is simply different for the 45 year old. (Student 152, M, 45)

I am an introvert and the asynchronous environment allows ample time for me to reflect and process information and ideas. In a regular classroom by the time I'm ready to share my thoughts we're already on a different topic. (Student 106, F, 40)

CONCLUSION

This article has presented findings collected from 229 students over 16 graduate business school classes. The students in this research have identified the need for institutional support, technology security and tech support, employer support, professor support, peer cohort support, and support from family and friends. The stakeholders involved to create success in the online classroom far outnumber just the student and professor. However, adaptations and changes can be made by institutions,

TABLE 2
Modest Advice to Institutions, Instructors, and Students

To Institutions: • Must provide a seamless CMC discussion system • Must provide a caring and well-qualified help desk to assist both students and instructors • Must understand that online is simply not the same as traditional classrooms except presented in an electronic or computerized forum • Must understand that both students and instructors need training in the use of CMC • Must understand that great face-classroom instructors are not necessarily great online instructors • Should expect complaints from both instructors and students that online is too much work and too complicated, and takes too much time to “do it right” • Must provide both technical security and technical support beyond the help desk • Must provide knowledgeable course program assistance and program advisors
To Instructors: • Must understand that the classroom is interactive and student-centered, and that students have much more control and independence over the direction and tone of the classroom • Must step-back and allow more student control of their own learning, and student learning from the cohort and not almost exclusively from the Instructor • Must learn and understand effective CMC communication skills • Must set clear expectations for tone and student participation • Be prepared to spend much more time as compared to teaching a traditional face-class • All students participate (not just the verbal few as in the traditional classroom) • Expect to be challenged with research and data-driven questions as students now have the ability to do research and collect data prior to response in any given discussion • Must recognize that school and schoolwork is not necessarily the top priority of all students, even more so than in the traditional classroom
To Students: • Must be open to learning as much from the cohort as from the classroom materials and the Instructor, and thus must be willing to share experiences as well to aid the learning of others • More in charge of their own learning, and are responsible for the amount of work and effort they put into the course • Must be self-disciplined and self-motivated, and mature, about their educational opportunity • Must learn effective CMC discussion skills • Must be prepared to be “in class” daily, and perhaps even spending too much time in the classroom ... much more work and time required than a traditional once-a-week class • Must be prepared to defend and justify what they post as these perceptions and claims will be challenged by both the cohort and the Instructor, with research data not just opinion • Understand that there is no excuse not to participate as there is no communication blocking • The power and control dynamic is somewhat flattened in the online classroom, with added responsibility and authority resting with the student and the student cohort • Expect to spend time prior to the start of class navigating the various support sites and becoming familiar with the university system • Do not assume that online will be easier or seamless, or someone else’s responsibility to “fix” issues or problems

and professors, and the students themselves to make the experience more positive and successful. Both operational and quasi-philosophical lessons from the learners are offered.

Institutions

Institutions need to recognize that CML is not the same as face-to-face classroom learn-

ing; thus, both students and professors need training in the effective use of CML. If a discussion-based class, a seamless CML system is an absolute must, thus allowing both professor and student to concentrate on learning and course content without technical glitches. Prior to being placed in the CML classroom, students need knowledgeable course program assistance and program advisors. The institu-

tion must also provide a caring and qualified help desk to assist both students and professors with CML, technical, or other online issues. The institution must understand that online is simply not the same as traditional classrooms except presented using computer-mediated communication. Great face-to-face classroom instructors are not necessarily great online instructors, or vice versa. Because the communication dynamic is changed, different skills and abilities are needed for both effective CML teaching and learning.

Professors and Instructors

Operational lessons include the obvious awareness that instructors must learn and understand effective CML communication skills, and that effective CML communication is not the same as effective face-to-face communication. An encouraging tone and supportive attitude is still expected, but much more difficult to achieve in the CML environment. In a practical sense, CML is seen as a 24/7 environment by most students, and this alone is a challenge for many novice online professors more used to the once-per-week-and-done face-classroom. Expectation for conversational (text) tone and participation is set by the professor, and the absent professor may lead to absent students in the CML classroom. Professors need to be prepared to spend much more time online as compared to teaching a traditional face-classroom course. The professor should expect to be challenged with research and data-driven questions from students who now have the ability to do research and collect data prior to response in any given discussion. Data-driven instead of opinion-driven discussion is the norm in the CML classroom.

Classroom management skills are also different in the CML classroom. Professors must understand that the discussion-based online classroom is interactive and student-centered, and that students have much more control and independence over the direction and tone of the classroom. Thus, the professor steps back and does not hinder more student control of

their own learning, and student learning from the cohort. Finally, the instructor must recognize that school and schoolwork is not necessarily the top priority of all students, even more so than in the traditional classroom. This lower priority is often not choice, but simply a reality, although in a practical sense somewhat offset by the 24/7 availability of the classroom and course materials.

Students

Students should expect to spend time prior to the start of class navigating the various support sites, and becoming familiar with the University online system. On a traditional campus one might expect to walk around to find out where the bookstore is, and the information technology walk-in support center—the online environment is essentially the same, but needs to be found and “known” to the student through online search. The fundamental need for success in the online discussion class is that the student learns effective CML discussion skills, and must be prepared to be present in class 5 to 7 days per week. Online is simply more time intensive than a traditional once-per-week class. The student must also understand that discussion and participation is the core of the class, and communication blocking online means there is no excuse for not participating.

Students must be self-disciplined, self-motivated, and mature about their educational opportunity. Students are more in charge of their own learning, and thus responsible for the amount of work and effort they put into the course. The traditional face-classroom is upended, and students must be willing share experiences to aid the learning of others. The control dynamic is flattened in the online classroom, with added responsibility resting with the student and the student cohort. Finally, as with the professor in the online classroom, students should expect to be challenged with research and data-driven questions. Experience with online education seems to alleviate the fear of online learning for

many, but training in CML and experience in working on virtual teams seems essential as well. Much of the fear regarding online learning is personal and not content- or academically related, focusing on the need for time management and self-discipline in terms of meeting deadlines and getting the work done.

Online professors and institutions and students can all alleviate some of the concerns currently surrounding online learning. Yet, online is not for everyone, professor or student. Students who are successful are generally technologically savvy, appreciate the pace and benefits of the online conversation, have excellent time management and self-discipline skills, and have a desire for learning that overcomes the frustrations sometimes present in the online environment.

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APPENDIX A: BASIC DEMOGRAPHICS OF THIS SAMPLE

Gender	Male	132
	Female	97
	Total	229
Age	Under age 30	54
	Under age between 30–40	126
	Over age 40	11
	Average age in sample 38	38
	Total	229
Prior online learning experience	Under 5 online courses total	128
	Under 15 online courses total	45
	Under 30 online courses total	32
	Over 30 online courses	24
	Total	229
Learning choices available or not	Online by choice with other options available	128
	Online only option available	101
	Total	229
Marital status	Married	188
	41 Single	41
	Total	229
Children in household	Zero	106
	One	72
	Two	44
	Three or more	7
	Total	229

APPENDIX B: OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS ASKED OF THE STUDENTS

1. Please comment on the issue of financial and personal cost in gaining an education generally in the online or in the traditional face-to-face classroom/program.
2. Please comment on the various benefits and/or frustrations you personally found/find in the face-to-face (traditional) classroom, and relate these to your perceptions of difference from the online classroom.
3. Please comment on the various benefits and/or frustrations you personally found/find in the online classroom, and relate these to your perceptions of difference from the face-to-face classroom.
4. Please comment on the responsibility or role differences for both professor and student comparing the online classroom and the face-to-face classroom.
5. Please comment on any other general issues experienced in the online classroom, aside from specific course expectations.
6. How could some of these issues from questions one through five above be resolved?
7. Please offer any final thoughts regarding these questions as impacted by either

online or the face-to-face classroom. What could the institution, the professor, or you personally do to improve these situations?

Initial coding from these seven questions resulted in 21 categories. Fourteen categories were populated by less than a dozen comments each, and were then merged into the remaining seven broader categories.

- Category 1. Student perception of personal cost
- Category 2. Student issues with the traditional classroom
- Category 3. Differences between traditional and online classrooms
- Category 4. General frustrations with computer-mediated online learning
- Category 5. Time management and self-discipline
- Category 6. Student personal concerns and other general concerns online education
- Category 7. Student solutions to issues/problems