# Comparing the Perceptions of Online Learning between Students with Experience and Those New to Online Learning

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*This article focuses on how student perceptions differ between students who are experienced online learners and those taking an online course for the first time. In 2006, students enrolled in online business courses at AACSB accredited schools of business participated in a survey. A total of 300 usable surveys resulted. The respondents consisted of two groups: those who had previously taken an online course and those who had not. Both groups reported that their online courses were of good quality. They also felt that it took more time to complete online course requirements than those of traditional courses. Both groups noted that communication between student and instructor and student-to-student interactions were problematic. Experienced students were less likely to indicate problems relating to support issues from the instructor and the institution. Based on the results of the study, this article offers some recommendations for faculty teaching online courses.*

## Introduction

College students typically have the option to take online courses and often are able to complete entire programs through online learning. Over 3 million students were enrolled in online college-level courses in 2006 (Bisoux, 2007). Online learning opportunities are available within the K-12 environment, but only about 2% of that population has participated in the programs as of 2007 (National American Council for Online Learning, 2007). The college level, therefore, will continue, at least for the near future, as the arena in which most students will be introduced to online learning. It is important for college faculty members involved in creating and delivering online instruction to be aware of student perceptions of online learning. Since those perceptions may differ depending on the amount of experience a student has with online learning, this article focuses on how

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student perceptions differ between students who are experienced online learners and those who are taking an online course for the first time. Dupin-Bryant (2004) found that previous completion of a course online was an indicator of successful completion of a later online course. A review of related literature, however, found no previous studies that directly addressed the correlation of student perceptions with previous experience in online learning.

## Review of Related Literature

As shown in the research literature, several factors influence a student's satisfaction with online learning. The factors include the perceived quality of a course, student and teacher interaction, the time commitment required to complete an online course, and the level of support provided by the teacher and institution. A brief review of the factors follows. It should be noted that online learning is just one type of distance learning. The wider field of distance learning, also known as distance education, includes correspondence courses and courses taught through audio and/or video transmission.

### *Course Quality*

Zhang (2005) surveyed undergraduate students in an introductory database course and discovered that participants in an e-learning group achieved "significantly better performance and higher levels of satisfaction" (p. 158) than those in a traditional classroom. A survey of graduate level accounting students (Spiceland & Hawkins, 2002) found positive student attitudes toward an online course. The students, accustomed to more passive learning in traditional accounting classrooms, enjoyed the active participation required by the online course. Most of these students responded positively when asked if they would take another online course. Wilkes, Simon, and Brooks (2006) discovered that undergraduate business students had a better opinion of online courses than did their college professors.

Gaytan (2005) listed effective assessment techniques for online instruction and stated that online courses had the potential to generate more interaction than traditional classes. One of his recommendations was the inclusion of "immediate, ongoing, and detail-oriented feedback" (p. 27) for students. In a survey of students who had completed an online course, Young (2006) found the following seven elements correlated most strongly with the students' perception of teaching effectiveness: "adapting to student needs, using meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning" (p. 65). It can be argued that communication plays a factor in each of these seven elements. Communication, according to many studies, is one of the most important elements of a successful online course (Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, Glessner, Green, & Lara-Alecio, 2007; Choy, McNickle & Clayton, 2002; Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Gregory, 2003; Roper, 2007; Spiceland & Hawkins, 2002).

### *Student and Teacher Interaction*

Research shows that communicating with the professor and with other students is a common problem for students in the distance-learning environment (Gregory, 2003; Wilkes, Simon, & Brooks, 2006). Cooper (2000) stresses the importance of instructor and student communication in an online course. Incorporating opportunities for students to interact with one another is also important to successful learning. Harris and Kelley (2004-2006) found that a high degree of personal attention and interactive feedback from instructors were significant factors for success. They listed four channels of communication necessary to support an online course: (a) student-to-content, (b) student-to-instructor, (c) student-to-student, and (d) student-to-community. Students may not fully take advantage of or be comfortable

with the means of communication available through online learning environments. Some training on communication technologies and course expectations may be warranted (Schramm, Wagner, & Werner, 2001). To maintain an adequate level of teacher-to-student communication, instructors may need to plan ways to provide multiple levels of communication, including frequent feedback.

### *Time Commitment*

A common complaint among online students is the amount of time needed for success. One suggested area of support, therefore, would be assistance with time management. A study of online learners (Roper, 2007) resulted in seven student-recommended steps for success. At the top of the list was "develop a time-management strategy" (p. 62).

Students who are successful in distance learning are organized and have a high degree of self-discipline (Devi, 2002). Lindberg (2004) surveyed students in introductory computer courses about their opinions of online learning and discovered that "students with some experience in self-directed learning were more likely to want an online course format" (p. 9).

### *Support Provided*

Although communication and time management are essential for an effective online course, adequate support also is important. In fact, some experts argue that learner support is critical for success. Moore (2003), in an editorial for *The American Journal of Distance Education*, stated, "learner support is one of the most critical elements in determining the success of a distance education program" (p. 141). The three types of problems that can occur in an online course that would require support include (a) student-generated problems, (b) malfunctions in the administrative system, and (c) emotional issues (likely related to one of the first two problems). Support services should be "proactive rather than reactive" (p. 143).

In an Australian study (Choy et al., 2002), students listed regular support for online learning as one of the three key areas essential for online learning. Liu, Lin, and Wang (2003) studied student behavior in distance learning and discovered that students favored a question-and-answer forum method to obtain the instructional support they needed. LaPadula (2003) surveyed online students at a technological institute and found that they were satisfied with most of the support services available, but they were interested in receiving more technical assistance along with additional social and counseling services. Students in a health education program listed student support services and student technical assistance as two critical factors for online program success (Chaney et al., 2007).

## Research Questions

The following research questions helped determine if the perceptions of students experienced with online learning differed from those who were new to online learning:

1. Do experienced and first-time online students' perceptions differ regarding the quality of online courses as compared to traditional courses?
2. Do experienced and first-time online students' perceptions of the time commitment associated with online courses differ?
3. Are there differences between experienced and first-time online students' opinions regarding indicators of online learning course satisfaction?
4. Do experienced and first-time online students equally perceive that they have received good support from their instructor and school?
5. Have experienced and first-time online students' encountered the same types of problems with online courses?

## Method

The researchers designed a survey based on a literature review and their experiences with online learning. A ten-member panel of online learning faculty members and administrators validated it. Members of the review panel, selected from the researchers' universities, each had over five years of teaching, design, or administrative experience with online learning. After this initial review, one class of online students at one of the universities pilot tested the survey. This pilot test indicated that the survey items were easily understood and no changes were needed. See Appendix A for the specific survey items used to address the research questions.

In 2006, after receiving Institutional Review Board approval to disseminate the survey, the researchers asked faculty members experienced with online learning at their institutions, medium-sized Midwestern public universities, to assist in gathering data on student perceptions from one of their online courses. Eighteen faculty members volunteered to either distribute the survey online to the students or to inform the students in one of their online classes of the survey availability. This voluntary process yielded a total of 300 usable surveys.

Data analysis involved frequency counts, weighted means, percentage distributions, and cross-tabulations. Frequency counts allowed for the examination of responses to the questions, and Pearson's chi-square tests identified any significant differences between the responses of experienced and first-time online learning students at the .05 and .01 alpha levels.

## Findings

Students taking online courses provided their perceptions of select factors relating to online instruction. The factors included the overall quality of online courses, the time commitment required, personal satisfaction with online courses, adequacy of support provided by the institution and instructor, and problems encountered with online learning.

**Table 1. Student Assessment of Online Course Quality as Compared to a Traditional Course**

| Student Experience Level | Quality Rating | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Online is Better | No Difference | Traditional is Better |
| Experienced Online Students | 31.4% (64) | 55.4% (113) | 13.2% (27) |
| First-time Online Students | 20.3% (20) | 61.0% (36) | 18.6% (11) |

**NOTE:** Not all participants responded to the item.

### *Demographic Information*

The students participating in the study were enrolled in business courses at AACSB accredited schools of business. Distance learning was not new to most of the participants, with about 75% indicating they had completed at least one other online course. None of the respondents indicated that they had taken any other type of distance education course. The majority of the participants (60%) were under the age of 30, and both genders were well represented, with 54% of the respondents being female. Most of the respondents resided in the United States; only 3% of the respondents indicated they lived outside of the United States.

### *Quality Perception*

Experienced and first-time online students showed no statistically significant differences in their assessment of the quality of online courses. The majority of the students felt there was no difference in quality between online and traditional courses, as shown in Table 1. About 30% of the experienced and 20% of the first-time online students indicated that online courses were of better quality than traditional courses. A smaller percentage of both groups, 13% of experienced and 18% of first timers, indicated traditional courses were of better

quality, but this difference was not statistically significant.

### *Time Requirements*

Students were in agreement that it takes longer to complete class-related tasks for online courses than for traditional courses; these tasks included class activities, homework, and communicating with the professor. With regard to completing homework, over half of the students in each group, 59% of experienced students and 56% of students new to online learning, agreed or strongly agreed that more time was needed. A little less than half of the students, 49% of the experienced users and 42% of the students new to online learning, agreed or strongly agreed that it took more time to complete class activities. Communicating with the professor had similar ratings, with 49% of experienced students and 40% of students new to online learning agreeing or strongly agreeing that it took more time to communicate with a professor of an online course than for a course offered in a traditional setting. A complete breakdown of the students' levels of agreement with the need for additional time to complete standard class-related tasks is presented in Table 2. There were no significant differences between the two groups' responses regarding time requirements.

### *Satisfaction Indicators*

Students shared their opinions regarding online learning satisfaction. Indicators included if they enjoyed online learning and felt instructors of online courses showed more enthusiasm than instructors in traditional courses. There were significant differences in the two indicators.

The indicator "enjoyed online courses" showed a significant difference at the .01 alpha level ($t_4$=31.345, p<.01). Over 90% of the experienced online students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed taking online courses. Although a majority, 69% of students new to online learning indicated they enjoyed online courses, 22% indicated neutral feelings toward online learning, and 8% indicated they did not enjoy online learning. In contrast, only about 5% of the experienced online learners were neutral, and only 2% indicated they did not enjoy the online learning experience.

Students responded to a question asking if they thought their online instructors were more enthusiastic than their instructors in traditional classroom settings. The two groups' responses differed significantly ($t_4$=21.815, p<.01). The students new to online learning were less likely to indicate that the online instructors were more enthusiastic. About 35% of the experienced students agreed that online instructors were more enthusiastic, while only about 15% of the students new to online learning indicated online instructors were more enthusiastic. A little less than half, 48.8%, of the experienced online learning students were neutral, but 70% of the students new to online learning were neutral. As shown in Table 3, about 15% of both groups indicated that they did not feel online instructors were more enthusiastic than their instructors in traditional classroom settings.

**Table 2. Comparison of New and Experienced Online Students' Level of Agreement That Online Courses Require More Time for Completing Class-Related Tasks**

| Class-Related Tasks | Percentage Agreeing by Student Experience | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Strongly Agree | | Agree | | Neutral | | Disagree | | Strongly Disagree | |
| | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New |
| **Homework Assignments** | 25.9 | 19.4 | 33.7 | 37.1 | 26.8 | 22.6 | 11.2 | 17.7 | 2.4 | 3.2 |
| **Class Activities** | 17.3 | 11.5 | 31.7 | 31.7 | 30.2 | 31.1 | 19.3 | 19.7 | 1.5 | 6.6 |
| **Communicate with Professor** | 21.7 | 16.4 | 28.1 | 34.4 | 30.5 | 27.9 | 15.8 | 18.0 | 3.9 | 3.8 |

**Table 3. Comparison of New and Experienced Online Students' Level of Agreement Regarding Their Satisfaction with Online Learning Indicators**

| Satisfaction Indicators | Percentage Agreeing by Student Experience | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Strongly Agree | | Agree | | Neutral | | Disagree | | Strongly Disagree | |
| | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New |
| **Enjoy Online Courses*** | 46.1 | 27.9 | 47.1 | 41.2 | 4.9 | 22.1 | 1.9 | 4.4 | 0.0 | 4.4 |
| **More Enthusiastic Instructors*** | 10.2 | 3.0 | 25.4 | 11.9 | 48.8 | 70.1 | 14.6 | 7.5 | 1.0 | 7.5 |

*$p \leq .01$

Students responded to questions asking if they would recommend online courses to friends. Both groups of students indicated they would recommend online courses. The students new to online learning were a bit more hesitant about recommending the courses. Twenty-one percent of the students new to online learning indicated they either would not recommend or were uncertain if they would recommend online courses to friends. Only 11% of the experienced students noted that they would not or were uncertain about recommending online courses to friends. The difference between the two groups was not significant regarding those who were willing to recommend online courses to friends.

## *Support Levels*

Students provided their perceptions regarding the level of support they received from their online instructors, academic institutions, and academic program areas. The differences between the responses of experienced online learning students and new online learning students were significant for each of the three support levels.

When students responded to a statement that they had received good academic assistance from their online professor, the two groups' answers differed significantly at the .01 alpha level ($t_4$=13.538, p<.01). Whereas 83% of the experienced online learning students indicated they had received good academic assistance from their online instructor, only 64% of the students new to online learning agreed. Table 4 shows a complete listing of the responses.

A significant difference at the .01 alpha level was noted relating to technical support when the responses were compared by group, experienced and new online learning students ($t_3$=11.743, p<.01). The new online student group responded less positively about the technical support they received. Almost 46% indicated a neutral opinion of the quality of the support they received, whereas the experienced online learning students strongly agreed; 71.6% felt that they had received good technical support.

When asked about administrative support

**Table 4. Comparison of New and Experienced Online Students' Level of Agreement Regarding the Adequacy of Level of Support Received**

| Support Areas | Percentage Agreeing by Student Experience | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Strongly Agree | | Agree | | Neutral | | Disagree | | Strongly Disagree | |
| | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New |
| **Academic Assistance from Instructor*** | 46.1 | 27.9 | 47.1 | 41.2 | 4.9 | 22.1 | 1.9 | 4.4 | 0.0 | 4.4 |
| **Technical Support from Institution*** | 24.2 | 9.8 | 47.4 | 44.3 | 26.3 | 45.9 | 2.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| **Administrative Support from Program*** | 31.5 | 16.7 | 46.8 | 40.9 | 17.7 | 40.9 | 3.9 | 1.5 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

*$p \leq .01$

from the program or department level, both groups agreed that the level of support was good. The groups' responses differed significantly at the .01 alpha level ($t_3$=16.624, p<.01). Seventy-eight percent of the experienced online students agreed or strongly agreed that the administrative support was good. Only 57% of the students new to online learning agreed, and about 40% were neutral, indicating they neither agreed nor disagreed that the support was good.

## Common Problems

Students shared their experiences of common problems associated with online classes. These problems included (a) communication with the professor and fellow students, (b) team projects, (c) testing, (d) access to resources, and (e) technical competence. All but the issue of access to resources showed significant differences. Table 5 provides complete response information.

At least half of the experienced and new online students, 58% and 50% respectively, did not find communicating with the professor to be a problem. Still, 41% of the experienced and 42% of the new online students indicated that their experience communicating with the professor had been problematic or somewhat problematic. The two groups' responses differed significantly at the .01 alpha level ($t_3$=11.461, p<.01).

The students indicated they had encountered problems when trying to communicate with other students in their online learning classes. Over half of both groups indicated communication with other students was problematic or somewhat problematic, but about 40% of the students in each group indicated that communication with other online students was not a problem. The responses on this issue showed no significant difference.

Students agreed that working on team projects was problematic in an online learning environment. Seventy-six percent of the experienced and 68% of the new online students noted that they found team projects to be problematic or somewhat problematic. The difference in these percentages is significant at the .01 alpha level ($t_3$=13.984, p<.01).

Neither group in this study had experienced a problem with test taking. Seventy-eight percent of the experienced students and 60% of the new students did not consider taking tests to be a problem. These percentages are significantly different at the .01 alpha level ($t_3$=20.169, p<.01).

Students in both groups also agreed that their level of technical competence as it related to their online learning courses was not a problem. However, about 23% of the students in both the experienced and new groups did note that their technical competence was a problem or somewhat of a

**Table 5. Comparison of New and Experienced Online Students' Experiences of Common Problems Associated with Distance Learning**

| Common Problems | Percentage Indicating Problem Level Experience | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Problematic | | Somewhat Problematic | | Not a Problem | | Do Not Know | |
| | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New | Exp | New |
| **Communication with Professor*** | 6.8 | 10.5 | 34.3 | 31.6 | 58.5 | 50.9 | 0.5 | 7.0 |
| **Communication with Students** | 10.7 | 11.9 | 48.1 | 39.0 | 39.8 | 42.4 | 1.5 | 6.8 |
| **Team Projects*** | 27.7 | 23.0 | 48.5 | 45.9 | 23.8 | 24.6 | 0.0 | 6.6 |
| **Testing*** | 3.5 | 8.31 | 13.9 | 11.7 | 78.6 | 60.0 | 4.0 | 20.0 |
| **Technical Competence*** | 2.9 | 5.1 | 20.3 | 18.6 | 75.4 | 64.4 | 1.4 | 11.9 |
| **Access to Resources** | 3.9 | 3.4 | 28.0 | 19.0 | 67.1 | 70.7 | 1.0 | 6.9 |

*p≤.01

problem. A significant difference at the .01 alpha level was found ($t_3$=14.715, p<.01).

Differences between the groups of students were not significant with regard to accessing resources. The majority of students did not indicate that access to resources needed for the online course was a problem. Some indicated otherwise: Thirty-one percent of the experienced students and 22% of the new online students noted that they had problems obtaining resources.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Dupin-Bryant (2004) found that prior distance learning experience was related to online course success, but the students in this study with prior online learning experience showed no difference in their assessment of the quality of their online courses from those without such experience. In fact, at least one fifth of the respondents new to online learning indicated that online courses were of a higher quality than traditional courses. This finding shows that distance education faculty members are providing students with quality learning experiences. Students who had previously completed an online course were more likely to enjoy taking online classes and more likely to perceive their instructors as more enthusiastic than those who were taking an online class for the first time. Both groups were equally likely to recommend online courses to their friends after their experience.

Both groups of students in this study felt that an online course required a larger time commitment than a traditional course. A portion of this time commitment involved, from the students' perception, more time communicating with their professors. Students new to the online learning experience were less likely to be satisfied with the instructor, technological, and administrative support they received than were those with previous experience in online courses. Laszlo and Kupritz (2003) noted that students in online courses require more support than students in traditional courses. The study's findings reinforce the need for additional support, particularly for students new to online learning.

Although students in both groups reported a degree of frustration in accessing resources, the most common problem noted in this study was communication. Related literature often places similar importance on communication for success in an online course. The two groups noted some level of difficulty in communication with the professor, but they most often cited the problem of communication with other students in the course. Students indicated communication relating to team projects as particularly problematic. Distance education faculty need to consider the additional communication barriers associated with team projects. Providing guidelines that include communication expectations and timelines would be useful.

## Summary

Students new to online learning and students experienced with online learning shared their satisfaction with the educational experience and their perceptions relating to issues identified by the literature as potential problems with distance learning courses. With some exceptions, the differences in perceptions between students experienced with distance education and those enrolled in an online course for the first time do not differ. Both groups agreed online courses are of good quality, and it takes more time to complete online course requirements than it does for traditional courses. Both groups also noted that communication between student and instructor and student-to-student interactions were problematic.

Some differences students in the study noted might be due to the amount of experience students have had with online learning courses. For example, students with more experience were less likely to note problems relating to support issues from the instructor and the institution. It may be that because of their experience they have a

greater level of confidence in their ability to meet the course expectations and no longer seek the additional feedback from the instructor that students new to online learning want. Also, experienced students may have already solved any technical issues that the students new to online instruction find frustrating or problematic.

Based on the results of this study and the literature cited, instructors of online courses should be ready to provide additional support to students new to distance learning. Additionally, they should ensure that adequate avenues for communication be utilized in their courses. In planning online courses, faculty should incorporate communication channels in all directions and not just include faculty-to-student communication. Student-to-student communication through avenues such as chat rooms or discussion groups can greatly enhance the quality of a course.

One common concern for students is the time commitment required for online courses. At the beginning of each class, the instructor should make students aware of the time requirement needed for success in the course. He or she can remind students of the fact that they will not incur the commuting and seat time required for a traditional class, and that they can then allocate this "saved" time for meeting online course expectations.

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**Appendix A**

Specific Survey Questions Related to Perceptions of Online Learning:

1. Have you taken distance-education courses in the past? __Yes __No
   If yes, please indicate the type(s) of course(s) that you have taken:
   __Interactive Television __Mail Correspondence __Videotaped
   __Web-Based (Internet) __Other (Please List):_____

2. Please indicate your experience in taking distance-education course(s):
   - ⇒ I enjoy taking distance-education courses.
     __Strongly Agree __Agree __Uncertain __Disagree __Strongly Disagree
   - ⇒ I receive good academic assistance from my distance-education professor(s).
     __Strongly Agree __Agree __Uncertain __Disagree __Strongly Disagree
   - ⇒ How do you obtain assistance from your professor(s) outside of class?
     __Email __Telephone/V-mail __Fax __In-Person Office Hours __Other
   - ⇒ I obtain good technical support from the school's computer/technical service center.
     __Strongly Agree __Agree __Uncertain __Disagree__Strongly Disagree
   - ⇒ I obtain good administrative support from the school/department/program.
     __Strongly Agree __Agree __Uncertain __Disagree __Strongly Disagree
   - ⇒ Distance-education professors are more enthusiastic than those in the traditional classroom.
     __Strongly Agree __Agree __Uncertain __Disagree __Strongly Disagree
   - ⇒ Compared with classroom face-to-face teaching, distance-education courses take more time in:
     a. Class-related activities: __Strongly Agree __Agree __Uncertain __Disagree __Strongly Disagree
     b. Doing homework: __Strongly Agree __Agree __Uncertain __Disagree __Strongly Disagree
     c. Email/phone to professor: __Strongly Agree __Agree __Uncertain __Disagree __Strongly Disagree
   - ⇒ How do you rate the quality of your distance-education courses in comparison with traditional classroom education?
     __Better __No difference __Worse
   - ⇒ Will you recommend distance-education courses to your friends? __Yes __Uncertain __No

13. Which area(s) have you found problematic when taking distance-education courses?

| | **Problematic** | **Somewhat Problematic** | **No Problem** | **Don't Know/No Experience** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student-Teacher Communication | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Student-Student Communication | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Team Projects | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Access to Resources | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Taking Tests | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Student Technology Competence | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Teacher Technology Competence | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Technology Reliability | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Technical Service from School | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Other (Specify: _____) | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |