AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ONLINE VERSUS TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL DELIVERY METHODS USING SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY

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Abstract

Research regarding online courses shows significant benefits to the institution, professors, and students. Yet many professors, students and the general public question the value of this delivery method. While the potential for both professors and students to not do their job well exists in both in-class and online settings, there are several theoretical/conceptual reasons to suggest that this potential is amplified in the online setting. Primarily, the lack of a Hawthorne effect removes much of the social impetus to excel at teaching and learning. In class settings require that the professor be present before a group of students when teaching – thus there exists a social contract due to this interaction. When the instructor is ill-prepared or performs poorly, (s)he suffers embarrassment, which tends to be communicated quickly through informal channels to other students and the professor's peers. Likewise, the social contract in a face-to-face setting encourages students to be at least minimally prepared and behave in a socially acceptable manner.   The same may or may not be true in an online setting. Using Social Contract Theory, along with the psychological theories of Egoism and Altruism, this paper examines the fundamental differences between in-class and internet delivery methods. Overall, the exploratory results were varied showing that a combination of all three theories is necessary to explain some of the differences that occur between formats. In general, the results supported that the lack of direct interaction and communication between professors and students as well as between students amongst themselves, has both positive and negative effects in internet education delivery. There appears to be less pressure to be prepared for class or to assist other students in the classroom; however, there also appears to be more willingness to contribute and take risks that might be socially unacceptable in the classroom setting. Also, students seem to rate professors as less prepared and less accessible. Online classes tend to be rated as less challenging with lower levels of learning by students. It is acknowledged that this may due to other factors than the professors, such as student self-selection.