
**Undergraduate Students' Experiences in Different Course Formats:
An Exploratory Study Examining Traditional and Nontraditional
Student Perceptions**

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College students often have certain preferences and opinions about how courses are offered (e.g., face-to-face, online, hybrid). With an increased number of nontraditional students attending college, higher education programs should be prepared to provide flexible and high-quality experiences for this unique population of students. In order to learn more about students' experiences and views about different course formats, a qualitative student survey was designed and implemented at an Ohio regional college campus. Sixty-four undergraduate students participated in this pilot study. Analysis of the data revealed that the participants' experiences differed based on the course format (face-to-face, online, hybrid), and that they had different views on what could improve their learning in each type of course format. Student surveys also revealed that regardless of the course format, a majority of the participants preferred face-to-face courses, and online was their least preferred course format. Implications for recruitment and retention at colleges and universities based on students' preferred course formats and rationales for these preferences are discussed.

Today, students have a wide variety of options when taking college courses (face-to-face, hybrid, and online). Face-to-face (F2F) courses are often described as instruction in traditional classrooms, which may include such teaching strategies as lecture, discussion, and individualization of content delivery (Good & Brophy, 1997). The hybrid course format combines F2F classroom instruction with additional electronic assignments, activities, etc. which reduces the amount of classroom time. Murphy, Rodriguez-Manzanares, and Barbour (2011), define asynchronous online teaching as students working with online curricular materials on their own time, under the guidance of an instructor. Internet-based instruction,

especially in higher education, has grown tremendously and has emerged as an increasingly popular alternative to other types of classroom instruction (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). With the number of adult learners or nontraditional students also increasing, colleges are being forced to rethink how courses are delivered in order to provide flexible options based on students' preferences (Newbold, Mehta, Forbus, 2010; Scott & Lewis, 2012).

Much research has reported on students' preferences for different course formats (e.g., Artino, 2010, Paechter & Maier, 2010). However, there is a dearth of research on the rationales given by students on why they prefer one course format over other course formats, a knowledge gap that our study addresses. Several researchers (e.g., Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007; Paechter & Maier, 2010) have argued that despite the abundance of research on students' experiences in F2F and online courses, very little is known about students' experiences in hybrid courses, another gap in knowledge addressed by our study. Based on our research questions below, we designed a qualitative student survey to help us gain a deeper understanding of this important topic. In addition, we explored traditional student perceptions versus nontraditional student perceptions to determine how the method of instruction impacts students' learning experiences. Our study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students' learning experiences vary based on the method of instruction in a course?
2. What are the experiences and perceptions for non-traditional students compared to traditional students?

Review of Literature

Nontraditional students are often described as being at least twenty-four years old, having a family to support, or being employed full time (Evelyn, 2002). Adult learners over the age of twenty-four have become the fastest growing group of college students in North America (Kasworm, 2003). Some of the more common issues faced by nontraditional students are childcare, financial, and transportation issues (Lutes, 2004). When comparing traditional and nontraditional students, depression and anxiety were similar in the two groups, but nontraditional students often performed at a higher academic level despite family and employment commitments (Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002). Despite having extra challenges, adult learners often exhibit a drive to succeed even though they

have more unique circumstances compared to their traditional counterparts (Newbold, Mehta, Forbus, 2009). Nontraditional students typically, possess extensive life and work experiences which may serve as a critical factor in the learning process (Knowles, 1984). Furthermore, Knowles (1974) described four principles that characterize nontraditional students: (a) self-direction and responsibility for their own actions, (b) extensive experience that is the foundation of their self-identity, (c) they are ready to learn and actively engage in their learning, and (d) they are motivated to achieve their goals.

Several studies over the past two decades have compared students' academic performance in online and F2F courses (e.g., Allen et. al., 2004; Helms, 2014; Johnson, Aragon, Shaik, & Palm-Rivas, 2000; Neuhauser, 2010). A comprehensive review of research literature by Allen et al. (2004) revealed that students taking online classes slightly outperform their counterparts who take F2F classes on exams and course grades. Contrasting results were reported by Helms (2014), who found that F2F students performed better than their online counterparts in a Psychology course. Neuhauser (2002) found no differences in students' academic performance in two sections of a management course where one section was taught as an online course and the other section was taught as a F2F course. Johnson et al. (2000) reported similar results.

Another body of research has reported on students' satisfaction and preferences for courses taught in different formats (e.g., Artino, 2010; Neuhauser, 2010; Paechter & Maier, 2010). In Neuhauser's (2010) study, learning style positively impacted course performance especially for those students who were able to assimilate information well in an online learning environment. Paechter and Maier (2010) found that "when conceptual knowledge in the subject matter or skills in the application of one's knowledge are to be acquired, students prefer face-to-face learning" (p. 292). Artino (2010) argued that students who preferred taking an online class (as opposed to a F2F class) in the future reported being satisfied with their learning experiences.

Methods

The methodology used for this pilot research study included conducting student surveys, in a variety of courses with different teaching formats (online, hybrid, F2F), which were approved by the researchers' Institutional Review Board (IRB). The courses chosen were from several

departments and disciplines on a regional campus in southwest, Ohio. Of the 243 students who were invited multiple times to participate in the study, 64 students completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 26%. The survey questions were qualitative in nature, and students were asked to classify themselves as either traditional or nontraditional students (based on the definition provided in the Appendix section). In addition to the definition of a non-traditional student, the Appendix section contains a list of all the questions (demographic, experiential, and preferential) that were included in the survey.

Participants

Participants of the study were 64 undergraduate students who were chosen in such way that they were representative of the population of traditional and nontraditional students in three different course formats, namely F2F, hybrid, and online classes. Each participant received a \$15 monetary compensation for his or her time spent completing an online Qualtrics survey. Since none of the students was taking a class taught by the researchers at the time of the study, the researchers believe that the monetary compensation did not sway students’ participation. At the time of the study, 29 of the participants were enrolled in at least one F2F course, 22 of the participants were enrolled in at least one online course, and 13 of the participants were enrolled in at least one hybrid course. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants’ responses to most of the demographic questions listed in the Appendix section. The counts do not add up to the number of surveys received because a few surveys were only partially completed.

Table 5. Summary of Demographic Data

Age		Employed?		Children?	
Age Range (years)	Count	Yes (count)	No (count)	Yes (count)	No (count)
17 or younger	0	42	17	14	42
18-23	13				
24-30	27				
31-40	6				
41 or older	6				

Seventeen students had completed one semester of college, 13 students had completed two semesters, five had completed three semesters, and 21 students had completed at least four semesters at the time of the study. Forty-two participants indicated that they were employed outside the home. Of those employed, 17 students reported they had full time jobs and 25 students reported they had part time jobs. The 14 participants who reported having children had children ranging from ages one to three years old. The participants represented a wide range of majors including engineering, education, nursing, and economics. Thirty-one participants (12 in a F2F course, 11 in an online course, and eight in a hybrid course) self-identified as nontraditional students and 25 participants (12 in a F2F course, nine in an online course, and four in a hybrid course) self-identified as traditional students. In addition, eight participants opted not to self-identify as traditional or nontraditional.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for the study took place in the spring semester of 2017. Seventy-eight surveys were sent to a sample of students who were enrolled in at least one F2F course, 96 surveys were sent to a sample of students who were enrolled in at least one online course, and 69 surveys were sent to a sample of students who were enrolled in at least one hybrid course. Each survey consisted of three types of questions, which were demographic, experiential, and preferential in nature. A list of all the questions that were included in each survey appears in the Appendix section.

When analyzing the data, we looked for patterns (common themes) in students' responses to the experiential and preferential questions listed in the Appendix section. The qualitative responses were organized by grouping each participant's responses into narrative units. Next, the narrative units were reduced to simple descriptive phrases or common codes. The codes were further analyzed to search for tentative themes by looking for commonalities or similarities between the participants. This process continued until the investigators were confident that the themes best represented the data. The following section provides results of this analysis.

Results

There are two main results from the data analysis. First, the data revealed that the participants' experiences differed by course format, and that the participants held different views on what could improve their learning in each course format. Specifically, when asked if they would take a F2F course again, 21 of the students (nine traditional and 12 nontraditional) who were enrolled in a F2F course answered yes and two students (traditional) answered no. There were five common experiences shared by 23 students (21 who answered yes and two who answered no) about F2F courses. These experiences were: (a) the content is explained/presented in detail, (b) the content is easy to understand, (c) it is easy to ask questions as you go, (d) it is easy to get immediate responses to questions asked, and (e) it is easy to get immediate clarification on questions about the content. Exemplary comments made by the participants that supported each of the aforementioned experiences included claims such as "...the professor will give you all information about this course as well as he can," "...more understanding, able to ask question as you go," "...I can better understand problems and can ask a question and get a response fast," "the immediacy of getting clarification is invaluable." There were four common responses given by 23 students as suggestions that could improve their learning in F2F courses. These responses were: (a) more examples, (b) interactive learning, (c) use of different teaching methods, and (d) efficient use of time. Exemplary comments made by the participants that support each of the aforementioned responses included remarks such as "...less PowerPoints and more examples," "interactive learning," "more hands on classes," "...a wider range of teaching methods," "improved differentiated teaching skills and computer skills," "I feel lectures should be recorded and leave face-to-face meetings open to questions related to the lecture, examples, and homework questions. It would be a more efficient use of time for the teacher and the students."

When asked if they would take an online course again, 17 of the students (nine traditional and eight nontraditional) who were enrolled in an online course answered yes and three students (nontraditional) answered no. There were five common experiences shared by 20 students (17 who answered yes and three who answered no) about online courses. These experiences were that online courses were: (a) a nightmare, (b) difficult, (c) easy, (d) pleasant/enjoyable, and (e) have clear expectations for students. Exemplary comments made by the participants that supported each of the

aforementioned experiences included claims such as “one of my online courses has been a nightmare,” “completely unorganized, difficult to follow and too much work...,” “...easy to follow...,” “...easy to use Google for answers so you are not learning you are copying,” “pleasant, but fast paced,” “I enjoy them,” “the expectations for the course are set up clearly...” There are three common responses given by 20 students as suggestions that could improve their learning in online courses. These responses were: (a) nothing, (b) removal/improve management of group activities, and (c) improved/increased communication among students. Exemplary comments made by the participants that supported each of the aforementioned responses included remarks such as “I am satisfied with the course I have, so I don't know what else could improve,” “I wouldn't change anything,” “making sure no group projects occur since it is very difficult in an online setting”, “group projects are somewhat difficult to manage in online courses,” “...facilitate communication between other group members in a way that the instructor can also view,” “more communication with other students in the course.”

When asked if they would take a hybrid course again, 10 of the students (four traditional and six nontraditional) who were enrolled in an online course answered yes and two students (nontraditional) answered no. There were two common experiences shared by 12 students (10 who answered yes and two who answered no) about hybrid courses. These experiences were: (a) positive experience and (b) flexible environment. Exemplary comments made by the participants that supported each of the aforementioned experiences included claims such as “my overall experience with this course is very positive”, “overall good”, “highly satisfied”, “I enjoy the flexibility and the choice to go to class once a week...”, “with my hybrid class I chose to attend each class because I get so much more out of it than doing everything online.” A common response given by 12 students as a suggestion that could improve their learning in hybrid courses was that nothing needed to be changed. Exemplary comments made by the participants that support this response included remarks such as, “I greatly excelled in hybrid classes and enjoyed the format,” “nothing,” “and I like them how they are.”

Second, analysis of the data revealed that regardless of the type of course they were enrolled in at the time of the study, most of the participants stated that F2F was their most preferred course format. The results of the analysis also revealed that online was the least preferred

course format. Table 2 provides a summary of the participants’ responses to the preferential questions shown in the Appendix section. The first column of the table lists the type of class (F2F, online, hybrid) the students were enrolled in at the beginning of the survey. The number and NT symbol in parenthesis in each entry of the table represents the portion of nontraditional students in that count. For example, the entry 14 (9 NT) in the table means that 14 students, nine of which were nontraditional students, reported that F2F was their most preferred course format.

Table 6. A Summary of Participants' Most and Least Preferred Course Formats

		Most Preferred		Least Preferred	
	Course Format	Count	Course Format	Count	
F2F	Traditional	14 (9 NT)	Traditional	4 (2 NT)	
	Online	1	Online	15 (8 NT)	
	Hybrid	9 (3 NT)	Hybrid	5 (2 NT)	
Online	Traditional	11 (5 NT)	Traditional	6 (6 NT)	
	Online	6 (4 NT)	Online	6 (3 NT)	
	Hybrid	3 (2 NT)	Hybrid	8 (2 NT)	
Hybrid	Traditional	5 (4 NT)	Traditional	4 (4 NT)	
	Online	2 (1 NT)	Online	3 (1 NT)	
	Hybrid	4 (3 NT)	Hybrid	4 (3 NT)	

Thirty participants (sum of oval entries in Table 2), most of which were nontraditional students, stated that their most preferred course format was F2F. There were four common reasons given by these participants on what makes F2F their most preferred course format. These reasons were: (a) learn better, (b) better communication between student and professor, (b) better access to professor or help, and (d) better student-to-student interaction and student-to-professor interaction. Exemplary comments made by the participants that supported each of the aforementioned reasons included remarks such as “I learn better if I can speak to someone face to face,” “...I can get clarification, quicker and just being face to face, the communication level seems greater,” “Better access

to professor for questions/help when confused,” “I enjoy going to class and having discussions with other students and the professor,” “I like being able to interact with the professor and ask questions I may have that arise at that moment during the class.”

Twenty-four participants (sum of rectangular entries in Table 2), half of which were nontraditional students, stated that their least preferred course format was online. There were two common reasons given by these participants on what makes online their least preferred course format. These reasons were: (a) hard to understand course content without professor’s physical presence and (b) hard to ask questions/get help from professor. Exemplary comments made by the participants that supported each of the aforementioned reasons include remarks such as “I am able to understand what a teacher is trying to teach when they are showing me and explaining it to me directly,” “if there is a question I have its easier to have a teacher show me in person rather than an email and a faster response in a face to face class,” “I feel It’s harder to explain difficult questions online,” “Lack of access to professor for help.”

Discussion and Conclusions

In response to Paechter and Maier’s (2010) call for research on students’ experiences in hybrid courses, this study examined the experiences of traditional and nontraditional students in three different course formats, namely hybrid, online, and F2F, at a regional college campus. To reiterate, of the 64 study participants, 31 self-identified as nontraditional students, 25 as traditional students, and eight opted not to self-identify as traditional or nontraditional students. Few studies have reported on students’ experiences in hybrid, F2F, and online courses (cf., Bliuc et al., 2007; Paechter & Maier, 2010). The researchers were not aware of any research that has reported on students’ perspectives on how to improve students’ learning outcomes in each of the three aforementioned course formats, a gap in knowledge that our study addressed.

A qualitative analysis of the data revealed that a majority of the students (traditional and nontraditional) who were enrolled in F2F courses had positive experiences in these courses. Students’ comments’ on their overall experiences in F2F courses indicated that they particularly liked the presentation of content in such courses in addition to the opportunity to get immediate responses to questions from the instructor. Students identified encouragement of student interaction with the content (e.g., group

activities) and the use of different teaching methods in F2F courses as key factors that could improve student learning in such courses.

Many of the traditional and nontraditional students indicated that their online courses were easy, pleasant/enjoyable, and that they had clear expectations for students. The students identified removal of group activities/better management of such activities and improved means to foster student-to-student interactions as key factors that could improve their learning in online courses. Nontraditional students expressed great satisfaction with hybrid courses. These students described their experiences in such courses as “very positive”. Of particular note, nontraditional students liked the “flexibility” of hybrid classes, which they described as having a combination of face-to-face meetings in addition to online instructions. A common theme that emerged on students’ response to the question of what could be done to improve their learning in hybrid courses was that nothing needed to be addressed.

A majority of the study participants indicated that F2F was their most preferred course format. Students stated that better student-to-student interaction and more access to help from the professor was what made F2F their most preferred course format. Paechter and Maier (2010) reported that “when conceptual knowledge in the subject matter or skills in the application of one’s knowledge are to be acquired, students prefer face-to-face learning” (p. 292). Participants stated that online was their least preferred course format, which is similar to other studies (e.g., Artino, 2010; Neuhaser, 2010). As an implication for recruitment and retention in universities that serve large numbers of nontraditional students, these results suggest that increasing the number of courses offered in a hybrid format could help in retention and recruitment efforts of nontraditional students. The results further suggest that to increase recruitment and retention, institutions of higher learning should continue to offer a variety of F2F courses.

Given the tremendous growth of internet-based instruction (Crawford-Ferre & West, 2012) and the growing numbers of nontraditional students across universities (Newbold et al., 2010; Scott & Lewis, 2012), there is an opportunity to take advantage of the advancement of new instructional technologies to develop high quality online courses that could be of interest to both traditional and nontraditional students. We argue that online courses may better support nontraditional students’ learning needs

because of the flexibility of working from home or after work. Therefore, further research can be done to further address this relevant topic.

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