A Comparison of Learning in An Ethics Course and Modality of Delivery: Online and Face-to-Face

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Abstract- A study was made to analyze, compare, and contrast two sections of a course in Organizational Ethics and Decision Making offered during the spring term, 2007 at Northern Kentucky University. The primary difference between the two sections was the modality of delivery; one section was face to face while the other was online. Other points of comparison were course content, learner types, assessment, and sectional response to assessment, grade distribution and course evaluation. Although the focus ease and emphasis of some aspects of how matters are learned may differ the attainment of learning objectives is equally satisfied when delivered in differing modalities, face-to-face or online.

Keywords- comparison, delivery, face-to-face, online,

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the comparison and contrasting between the two sections of a course in Organizational Ethics and Decision Making offered during the spring term, 2007 at Northern Kentucky University. The primary difference between the two sections was the modality of delivery; one section was face to face while the other was online. Other points of comparison were course content, learner types, assessment, and sectional response to assessment, grade distribution and course evaluation.

II. ISSUE

Much debate and disagreement has been prevalent in the academy over the last decade as to the efficacy of learning in online courses. The needs of scattered learners with multiple responsibilities on their time and resources that coincided with advances in technology and its availability have made online learning much more attractive to today’s learners. Is learning degraded as compared to traditional face-to-face delivery? In the spring of 2007, the same course was offered in both modalities and presented an opportunity for analysis and comparison. Where learning outcomes satisfied by both modalities, and, if so, what were some of the strengths and challenges?

III. CONCLUSION

Although the focus ease and emphasis of some aspects of how matters are learned may differ the attainment of learning objectives is equally satisfied when delivered in differing modalities, face-to-face or online.

The assessment gap [8] associated with the recent use of online delivery modalities as to the quality of the courses seems to have been overcome. This comparison of online and face-to-face modalities of delivery, at a minimum, shows that the course quality is similar. That is not to say that either or both sections could not have been improved. The learning objectives were clearly met, but the quality of the examples and experiences can always be improved. Nevertheless, both delivery modalities resulted in a high quality of course content and excellent satisfaction and attainment of learning outcomes.

With the major exception of the in class oral presentation, this course, in both
modalities, met the Student Learning Objectives (Appendix A) for the course in Ethics, Organizations and Decision Making. The content assignment assessments demonstrated mastery with respect to the knowledge of ethical, critical analysis and decision-making in both interpersonal, organizational and team contexts. Ethical practices and cultural and organizational climate were also addressed, particularly from a stakeholder perspective. One of the assessments used had to do with identifying, describing, and analyzing the learner’s own personal value structure. The course also had a specific assessment of dealing with decision-making in individual and organizational dimensions. Finally, utilizing a team approach, a major societal issue was addressed with respect to the delivery of healthcare.

With respect to Program Learning Objectives (Appendix B), mastery of awareness in the development of a personal value system, as well as the review of decision-making in an experiential setting demonstrated such awareness in a personal nature. Social responsibility dealt with the topic assigned with respect to health care delivery systems and the ethic of social engagement and citizenship. This particular project, although momentous for a class project, gave sharp focus to evaluating consequences of action as well as intercultural awareness and the establishment of a lifelong learning commitment.[6]

Additional Program Level Learning Objectives were satisfied. Research in information literacy skills, critical thinking inquiry and analysis, and development of teamwork problem-solving and collaborative decision-making skills were integrated throughout the course and its content. Each of these activities was assessed in the class assignments as described previously. [5]

With respect to grade distribution, the grades in the online section were higher than the face-to-face group with respect to the course grade. In the online group, there were a total of 13 “A”s. In the face-to-face group, there were a total of seven “A”s. The grade distribution was comparable throughout. The mean grade in the online group was 926 of 1000. The mean grade in the face-to-face class was 882 of 1000. These totals were the result of all assignments and their assessments. To search for any other conclusions resulting from this would be meaningless since no data exists with respect to the typical performance of any of the students throughout their college career. Comparisons of adult learners and nontraditional students who comprise the majority of the online community are in sharp contrast to the more traditional students who comprise the majority of the face-to-face students. The main conclusion that could be drawn is that the vast majority of the students’ performance was excellent no matter which modality was used.

The effort and challenges of organizing the online section led to greater experiential teamwork and project coordination availabilities. A formal schedule, express assignments, and periodic evaluation of progress were necessary in order to coordinate the entire class in the online setting.

Both sections also provided development and practice with those particular topics. A limitation of the online modality did not provide for oral presentation skills. However, recent enhancements to the Blackboard learning platform will allow, through the use of WIMBA, the presentation of an oral project. The online course will also require greater supervision with respect to selection of team members and team dynamics. The online modality allowed for group work involving distributing components of a project amongst group members. While enhancing and deeper understanding and analysis by using a group approach, there was a trade off by losing significant team dynamics experience. However, absent the oral presentation and without the considerable number of teams, there was no experience and feedback for team dynamics and interaction amongst the team members in arriving at team perspectives with respect to the presentation.
This was the result of the self-selection in the online modality of one large class team.

In addition to the deeper treatment of the topic by the online class, the presentation and written product was much more extensive than that of any of the individual groups in the face-to-face class. There also appeared to be a greater use of references and resources, primarily through the internet, by the online class than that of the face-to-face groups. The online group appeared to take more time and place greater emphasis on research and fact gathering and then the sharing and discussion of results than that of the face-to-face groups. On the other hand, the face-to-face groups spent more time developing the various topic enhancements that were presented during the class room activities including the critical thinking skills, discussion of bias and heuristics, and that of neuroscience with respect to neural networks, plasticity and connectedness. Those topics were offered to the online group during the course of their study, but were not received with the perceived emphasis on the professor’s predilection for those topics and that could account for the more extensive treatment done by the face-to-face groups in an effort to respond in a way in which they believed the instructor was interested. Those topics did not allow for the great in-depth discussion and elaboration in the online presentation. Rather, online thoughts and offerings were made in a conclusory manner, presumably after doing some individual research and synthesis.

IV. PROCEDURES

Each of the sections utilized an identical syllabus and class schedule, submitted written assignments and projects, and texts. The assessment tools of learner’s work were identical. The sections each had approximately 20 students (N=20), comprised of both adult learners and traditional students. The online course was predominately adult learners; the face to face course was predominately traditional students. The course awarded three (3) hours of undergraduate credit.

The course content dealt broadly with personal ethics, organizational ethics and culture, personal decision making, and group or organizational decision-making. The texts were fairly conceptual and abstract and were supplemented by case studies. The course material in the discussion threads and the in class presentations dealt with more concrete and experiential applications of the abstract information presented in the texts and supplemental reading material. Both classes were also provided with additional outside articles, diagrams, and taxonomies dealing with appropriate topics.

The typical organizational ethics course was refocused and directed towards decision science and the way that individuals and organizations make decisions. Both sections were conceived with the expectation that most individuals can ascertain right from wrong. In most instances, organizations make determinations between what is right and what is right, depending on the various stakeholders’ perspectives. Nevertheless, how ethical organizations behave is more a matter of decision-making than the value systems that self-organize within a given organization. The conflict between organizational values and individual value systems of some of the people who make up those organizations may conflict and that was another major component of the content of the course.

The organization for both sections of the courses was built around an active learning experience. Writing activities, brainstorming, group work, and case studies were an integral part of both classes and both were utilized to the same degree with apparent success.

The approach for both sections, face-to-face and online, was grounded in an active learning approach. Opportunity presented and, in some instances, required self-teaching and learner-teaching with respect to case studies as well as discussion topics. The concepts and topics used as the case studies were replicated in both modalities. The online course used Blackboard
discussion threads. The learners were encouraged to utilize the internet access which was available to them while using Blackboard as a way to discover and share references and resources on the various discussion topics. The face-to-face group was provided with the same handouts to initiate such active learning processes. Collaboration, teamwork, and self-reflective aspects were introduced into this course.[4]

The course presentation online dealt with discussion threads that paralleled the topics associated with the reading material but supplemented with additional material for thought and discussion. The modality platform was Blackboard 6.2.

The face-to-face course paralleled the same sequence of topics. The course met one time per week for approximately 3 hours. Classroom time dealt primarily with matters other than and in addition to those covered in the reading material in an effort to enhance and elaborate the concepts associated with the reading in the designated texts.

Assessment in the course was primarily based on three written assignments which were performed on an individual basis. Each of the delivery modalities resulted in similar submissions wherein individual class members dealt with the assignment in comparable ways both with respect to breadth of content and depth of treatment. Both sections were also given a group project dealing with the description of and solutions to the healthcare delivery system in this country. The assignment was announced at exactly the same time and identical references were given to all involved. Both sections were allowed to self-select as to team members. The team was assigned to present a written report as well as make a presentation.

The course assessments were divided into three major content areas. Ethics was discussed with respect to typical ethical theories and one of the assessments was a written paper attempting to understand, analyze, and apply a utilitarian or communitarian theory to the rebuilding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The balancing of various groups and perspectives was addressed and the learners had to integrate the obvious concept associated with the common good in order to determine who was a member of the commonality and what was good and not so good about various approaches. Both sections succeeded in the active learning involved in this assignment. Both solutions were grounded in research and analysis of the actual case study of this natural calamity and the response to it.

The second major assessment in the course dealt with organizational dynamics especially as related to decision-making. In discussing biases and heuristics in the face-to-face modality, more discussion was generated. However, the more reasoned and deliberative approach demanded in an online modality seemed to give further and deeper insights into decision-making processes of individuals and the organizations from which they were comprised. The written assessment bringing all this together was a paper dealing with efforts to compare and contrast how individuals make decisions.

The third deep learning assessment project involved the composition of team collaborative learning towards reaching some proposed solution to the delivery of health care in the United States. It is obvious that many people, groups, experts, and think tanks have grappled with this topic for decades. However, the active learning component allowed the learners to experience the consensus building necessary to limit the subtopics in bringing the project to a conclusion as well as reach consensus on these solutions offered for those subtopics.

The two sections took contrasting approaches to this problem solving case study. The face-to-face group, encouraged by the use of class time to coordinate team efforts, developed into multiple teams. The face-to-face section ended up dividing into five teams of approximately 4 people each. Though the products of the various teams were similar, as one would expect there was different emphasis and focus on outcomes.
and solutions. There appeared to be a continuum of offered solutions from none to one which was fairly rich in depth. In sharp contrast to that, the online group decided to maintain as one team with work distribution and collaboration within the subtopics of this very large project topic. Each team seemed to provide a different emphasis with respect to the sub components within this very large project. The presentation of this project was another contrast. The face-to-face group provided oral presentations of their various subtopics. This allowed for further development of oral skills. However, because of the necessity of providing a solution in this arena, some of their written solutions were not as well conceived and thorough as the written report generated by the online class. The online class also provided a full PowerPoint presentation. The online class did not provide any oral presentation. Through the use of technology now available and becoming more and manageable, including Second Life, individuals in an online modality could now develop their oral skills through presentation of the mediated and simulated environment. Nevertheless, this major assessment project allowed for the development of group work and decision-making in both and experiential and content laden environment.

The final assessment was a presentation of an individual journal that described real experiences in ethical order and organizational dilemmas. The experiences could be drawn from the work on the project, as well as individual real life experience. This active learning process allowed for the introspective and self-reflective component necessary to develop personal and organizational virtues and values in an ethical context.

The online team elected to present their project as one team. They utilized an online random selector to assign various topics associated to the subgroups within their one team. There was extensive communication via the Internet in the Blackboard platform that could be monitored by the instructor. The presentation, both in written form and in PowerPoint by the online class was in greater depth than any of the groups in the face-to-face section and appeared to offer a greater discussion among the group members as their individual solutions. The instructor was not privy to interchange and interaction within the various groups in the face-to-face section. He was hindered in determining what degree of interaction, give and take, and active listening and learning occurred within the face-to-face groups. In contrast, it was clear to him that there was a significant and substantial interaction in the online group.

The assessments rubrics in both sections were identical. Assessments of the four written submissions as well as the PowerPoint were made. There was the additional assessment in the face-to-face class of the oral presentation. Class participation was done in both instances through class discussion in the face-to-face context and discussion thread interaction in the online section. The class discussion in the face-to-face section allowed for perhaps a more heated, but perhaps spontaneous and underdeveloped discussion of the topics. The online modality allowed for a deliberative and intentional analysis and composition of the contribution of the individuals. Moreover, in the online modality, all class participants had to make a contribution. In the face-to-face instance, some individuals could make little if any contribution on a given topic. The quality of the assessment regarding the demonstration of acceptable satisfaction of learning outcomes was almost identical. It might even be suggested that reading one of the assignments submitted by either of the modalities would not identify which modality in which the learner had participated.

V. LIMITATIONS

The evaluation of the course as a whole done by the learners was also an area where comparison cannot be made. During this term, the face-to-face section was evaluated during a designated time at the conclusion of
class. Contrasting that is the online evaluation process which is available for a longer period of time and is much more voluntary and on individual basis. In the face-to-face situation, there was the natural momentum associated with already being in class when the evaluation process began which led to a much higher return rate for evaluations. All of the evaluations of the course were positive. However, the return rate for the online evaluation responses was so small as to make any conclusions meaningless. There was no statistical significance that could be associated with the evaluation responses.

The oral presentation and communication skills were more obvious in the face-to-face environment. Additional development has been accomplished in the virtual reality known as a second life. This allows for a mediated and simulated environment to be established where oral communication skills can be explored and developed. While it is true that presentations are given by an avatar, the learner is able to experience the credibility and gravity that can be established based on the demeanor, dress, and physical attributes of a speaker when it comes to making an oral presentation. While it is obvious that this is a simulation, it nevertheless allows for some a virtual reality experience with respect to distance learners in an online environment.

The availability of Second Life as a platform to further enhance active learning and simulate interactions between individuals within groups and groups themselves by allowing for a visual component of the experience in both sections remains a vehicle that can be used to enhance both courses.[7] The virtual world allows for collaboration and connection that, while involving technology and absent real face-to-face interaction, nevertheless simulates the interaction and connection and resultant development of community that is sometimes deficient in the online course delivery modalities. Second Life allows for and is specifically enhanced to get the most out of group work in its formation and communication. Roles and abilities are highlighted in the context of a simulated environment. Communication and exchange are also given greater emphasis and might to be available in a traditional online delivery modality.

**APPENDIX A**

The Learning Outcomes of this course are:

- Ethical critical analysis and decision making (interpersonal, organizational, and team)
- Ethical practices (secular, spiritual, personal and professional)
- Cultural and organizational climate and ethical considerations
- Stakeholder perspectives, tension and resolution in decision making
- Motivation
- Personal value structures
- Power, politics, and ethics in organizations
- Diversity of individuals and cultures in global settings
- Perceptions and ethics
- Laws, regulations, codes, and norms relating to ethics and methods of compliance

**APPENDIX B**

Program Level Learning Objectives:

I. Knowledge Gained through Leadership Studies (objective) by:
   - Addressing important questions, both contemporary and enduring. (demonstrator)
II. Acquisition of Intellectual and Practical Skills by:
- Developing a capacity for critical thinking, inquiry, and analysis;
- Increasing precision and clarity in reading, writing, and oral communication;
- Practicing research and information literacy skills, and using the information effectively and ethically;
- Developing teamwork, problem-solving, and collaborative decision-making skills; and
- Applying knowledge, skills, and abilities to increasingly complex problems.

III. Increased Awareness of Personal and Social Responsibility by:
- Fostering an ethic of social engagement and citizenship;
- Evaluating the consequences of actions;
- Developing intercultural awareness and understanding; and
- Creating an appreciation for lifelong learning.

REFERENCES


