

# Pros and Cons of Online Learning: Conflicting Perceptions Among Teacher Education Students

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## Abstract

How do educators perceive the value of online (Internet based) learning? This paper reports on a survey of 180 participants in online graduate education courses at Webster University's (MO) School of Education. Stereotypic assumptions of the pros and cons of online learning were frequently nominated. However, the students held transparently *self-contradicting* perceptions about online learning. The same characteristics of online learning are viewed both favorably and unfavorably. The pros and cons reported are more indicative of students' personal attitudes, preferences, priorities, or biases about learning online, rather than an evaluation of the online learning format itself.

## Introduction

Throughout academia the popularity of online (Internet-based) courses and programs is rapidly rising. Online enrollments were expected to exceed 2,000,000 (up from 500,000) across the 85% of two- and four-year colleges and universities offering courses online (American Federation of Teachers, 2001). Yet the value of learning online continues to be controversial among faculty and students in many of these same universities. This paper reports on a study exploring the question, "How do teacher education students perceive the value of online learning?"

## Methodology

The study was conducted in courses in Webster University's (MO) School of Education, which has been offering two Masters degree programs using 100% online courses since 1999. Participants in online courses have included graduate students across North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Students enrolled in an online graduate education course titled "Introduction to Online Learning" completed an anonymous survey in the first week of the course. The survey was given in 12 sections of the course (Spring 2001 through Fall 2002). Enrollment in each section was limited to 20 students. The survey contained three questions:

1. Do you have any previous experience with online courses? (*Choose one.*)
  - a. YES, I completed (or am currently involved in) one or more other courses that were (are) 100% online (via the Internet).
  - b. YES, I have taken one or more courses where some, but not all, of the course materials were online (email, web pages).
  - c. YES, I have seen one or more online courses, but I have not completed one.
  - d. NO, I do not have any prior experience in an online course.
  - e. I don't know or I'm not sure.

2. List 5-8 pros (advantages) for learning through courses delivered online (via Internet).
3. List 5-8 cons (disadvantages) for learning through courses delivered online (via Internet).

## Results

A total of 180 students completed the survey. Table 1 summarizes their responses to Question 1 on prior online course experience.

<b>Table 1: Prior experience in online courses</b>		
<b>Items:</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
1. I completed (or am currently involved in) one or more other courses that were (are) 100% online (via the Internet).	51	28%
2. I have taken one or more courses where some, but not all, of the course materials were online (email, web pages).	18	10%
3. I have seen one or more online courses, but I have not completed one.	13	7%
4. I do not have any prior experience in an online course.	95	53%
5. I don't know or I'm not sure.	3	2%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2 is a compilation of pros (advantages) of online learning that the students nominated. Table 3 is a similar compilation of cons (disadvantages) of online learning. In all there were 747 pro nominations, and 686 con nominations. The nominations were grouped according to similarity in meanings or theme. There were 37 pro themes and 34 con themes identified. In Table 2 and Table 3, the themes receiving 10 or more nominations are listed.

## Discussion

It may not be surprising that the theme “Flexibility of time to work...” (Table 2; Item 1) was the most frequently nominated advantage (pro) to online learning, and “Lack of face-to-face, personal or social contact with instructor or students” was the most frequently nominated disadvantage (con) (Table 3, Item 1). The most frequently nominated pro theme (“Flexibility of time...”) received 61 more nominations (81% more) than the second most frequently nominated theme (“Save time on travel to / from campus; parking hassles”). Similarly the most popular con theme (“Lack of face-to-face...”) outpaced the second con theme (“Technical Problems ... or fear of technical problems”) by 43 nominations (52% more).

The more interesting nominations on this list were the several seemingly *contradictory* nominations. For example:

- Time is a concern in both the pros and the cons list. On one hand, online learning can “Save time on travel to/from campus; parking hassles” (Table 2, Item 2). On the other hand it is “Too time consuming” (Table 3, Item 17).
- Online learning can provide the opportunity to “Learn new technology / up-to-date developments, Internet skills” (Table 2, Item 5) but can also be a detriment since “Technical / computer literacy or keyboarding /typing skills and comfort level are required “ (Table 3, Item 4).

<b>Table 2: Nominations of Pros (Advantages) of Online Learning</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Pros (Advantages) of online learning named</b>	<b>Number of Nominations</b>
1	Flexibility of time to work; work at own pace (any time of day, even on busy schedule)	135
2	Save time on travel to/from campus; parking hassles.	74
3	Convenience; freedom; accessible any time, from anywhere.	68
4	More resources available for the course; easy access to course materials.	59
5	Learn new technology / up-to-date developments, Internet skills.	54
6	Instructor more accessible; quick answers to questions; help available 24 hours	40
7	More comfortable to work at home or place of my choice	32
8	Allows more time to think before answering questions	29
9	Saves money on gasoline, childcare, car, housing.	25
10	More peer / class interaction; more personal or meaningful communication	22
11	Can review material often	22
12	Non-threatening atmosphere; reduces stress; less anxiety or worry (e.g. being late for class).	20
13	Learn to be more focused, self-motivated, independent, or disciplined	18
14	Interacting with students all over the world	14
15	Clearer or more effective communication with my classmates	14
16	No worry about how to dress; PJs to class.	13
17	More interaction, collaboration, or sharing of ideas	13
18	Avoid boring or unpleasant classes or classmates	11
19	Fits my learning style	11
20	More flexible, varied, dynamic instruction: interactive, hands-on; non-textbook	11
21-37	Other themes (17) with fewer than 10 nominations each	63
<b>Total nominations:</b>		<b>747</b>

- The online learning experience is welcomed because one can "Learn to be more focused, self-motivated, independent, or disciplined" (Table 2, Item 13). However it is not a welcomed experience because it "Requires too much self-discipline, self-motivation, time-management and organization " (Table 3, Item 3)
- There were 40 nominations saying the "Instructor is more accessible; quick answers to questions; help available 24 hours" (Table 2, Item 6), but 31 nominations on the other side saying there is a "Lack of immediate help or feedback" (Table 2, Item 6), in the online learning experience.
- "More peer / class interaction; more personal or meaningful communication" (Table 2, Item 10) is viewed as an advantage, but the online learning experience is also characterized in the opposite way: "Communication, directions, or discussions are unclear or more difficult or confusing" (Table 3, Item 5).

The *same* experience or characteristic may be viewed on the one hand as appealing, welcomed, and positive or, on the other hand, as distasteful, unwelcome, and negative. Is this the difference between an "optimistic" versus a "pessimistic" view? Is this difference attributable to those with experience in online courses versus those without? Are these differences a matter of personal values, priorities or preferences? When the participants in this survey were shown the result for their classes, they offered comments such as:

<b>Table 3: Nominations of Cons (Disadvantages) of Online Learning</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Cons (Disadvantages) of online learning named</b>	<b>Number of Nominations</b>
1	Lack of face-to-face, personal or social contact with instructor or students	126
2	Technical Problems (including computer, server, network, power), or fear of technical problems	83
3	Requires too much self-discipline, self-motivation, time-management and organization	79
4	Technical / computer literacy or keyboarding /typing skills and comfort level required.	63
5	Communication, directions, or discussions are unclear or more difficult or confusing	45
6	Lack of immediate help or feedback	31
7	Too many distractions & interruptions; hard to focus on work	29
8	No before or after class meeting with other students / instructors	29
9	Lacks classroom atmosphere; or feeling of University campus life.	20
10	Not suitable for auditory learners	14
11	Feeling incompetent, inferior, stupid, inadequate, overwhelmed or confused.	14
12	Requires access to computer and Internet.	13
13	Limits certain kinds of class instruction (modeling, demonstrations, spontaneous interactions)	13
14	You have to type everything	11
15	Feeling isolated; lack of social support in studying	11
16	Team activities online are awkward	11
17	Too time consuming	11
18	Physical problems: Stiff neck, headache, lack of movement	11
19-34	Other themes (16) with fewer than 10 nominations each	74
<b>Total nominations:</b>		<b>686</b>

“Money was not among my pros or cons. However, while I am saving money (grant pays for part of course, no parking, no gas, etc.), I am garnering new expenses: (1) the reams of paper I am using printing hard copies of everything (over and over in an obsessive compulsive panic); (2) the additional phone line I must have installed; (3) the new computer I must purchase, so I do not have to share and can get a good night's sleep! ... There may be more (such as the trip to Starbucks every morning, because I am too tired to make the drive to school). ... Actually, this is a true learning experience for me, and I am enjoying using the Internet.”

“I think I agree it is just a pessimistic or optimistic way of looking at things. For many of us this is a new thing and we just resist change. Once we have done this a few weeks we will be fine with it. Everything in life has good and bad points, you just have to balance them out.”

In all, the pros and cons of online learning seem to be a matter of individual perception and attitude rather than a matter of the medium or technology. As online learning itself becomes increasingly accepted as a legitimate learning format, the question of its advantages and disadvantages, pros or cons may also become moot.

## Reference

American Federation of Teachers (2001). *A Virtual Revolution: Trends in the Expansion of Distance Education* New York: American Federation of Teachers.