

A Qualitative Comparison Study of Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) Student's Attitudes Towards Online Education and On-Campus Education

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative comparison study was carried out to capture the attitudes of RIT students towards online education and traditional face-to-face education. The comparative study was conducted on 15 students enrolled at RIT of various backgrounds and have either taken online courses or not. Data was collected through the use of structured interviews via face-to-face, phone, and instant messaging. Collected data was analyzed using framework analysis.

The chief findings of the data analysis were that the attitudes of RIT students towards online and traditional education varied and neither one dominated the other. Both mediums provide the same desired outcome for RIT students, earning a degree. How the degree is obtained, considering the results ultimately depends on the student.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has grown significantly in the past several years. More and more schools are offering traditional face-to-face courses for online learning. RIT is no different and ensures that it provides a multitude of educational programs too many corners of the world. "RIT offers about 300 unique distance learning courses for both undergraduate and graduate studies and still maintains a solid presence in traditional classroom education." [1]

There are various points considered in previous studies to understand the experience of students towards online education like; student-teacher interaction, independent learning skills, well-designed learning content, and tangible support [2]. In this paper, we interviewed RIT students to understand their point of view towards online and on-campus education.

Fifteen structured interviews were conducted with a list of specific questions that were designed to elicit the necessary responses (data) to understand the RIT student's views and experience with online and traditional education. A lot of research has been already done in this field. "Online learning environments are less instructor-centered in nature than face-to-face courses, which allow students to pursue a more independent level of learning;" [3].

Through this research, we propose to elucidate on "how does this affect the students at RIT?" They are the core and lifeblood of online and traditional education. What are RIT students' attitudes towards online education and traditional face-to-face education?

METHODS

This research study conducted structured interviews with participants to understand their preferences between online and on-campus classes. A total of 15 participants were interviewed for this study. The project team discovered that recruiting participants was a difficult task.

The project team identified 20 questions categorized into four areas: Introduction, Online Courses at RIT, Online Courses Outside of RIT, and Conclusion. The requirements for conducting the interviews were in person or over phone or chat. None of the interviews were conducted over email. The screening requirements for the participants were 1) should be a student at RIT, 2) have taken at least one RIT online course. The project team had to think creatively pertaining to recruiting participants as the team is not geographically co-located. As a result, the Rochester team went to the library and asked individuals who were sitting alone if he/she would like to participate in the interview. Some declined. Others graciously obliged. We asked if he/

she have taken an RIT online course. If yes, then the interview continued. For the interviews conducted in Germany, former colleagues or classmates were contacted and they participated in the interview over the phone or chat. The participants ranged in age between 18 to 30 years, and majors included Animation, Biomedical Engineering, Computer Science, Environmental Sustainability Health and Safety Management, Game Design and Development, Interior Design, HCI, and Liberal Arts.

RESULTS

After interviewing all 15 participants, the project team consolidated the questions and answers into a single spreadsheet for analysis. The participant's names and other personal information were not collected. So no answer(s) can be used to identify the student. Each student was identified as Student #1, Student #2 and so on. When populating the spreadsheet, the project team realized that not all participants provided answers for each question. This gap causes stating percentages of the participants for each question will not have the same denominator of 15. Therefore, providing tables to show the percentages of participants could be misleading. Nevertheless, the project team conducted a combination of open coding and axial coding to organize the data into the code and interconnect them. The devised codes were 1) Choice between online class vs on-campus class, 2) Experience taking an online class, and 3) Experience with the Professor. The themes identified will be broken down by code.

Choice between online vs on-campus class: Majority of the RIT students have taken an RIT online class within the past year. About half of respondents had an option to take an in-class version of the same class, but some chose an online class because of the on-campus version conflicted with their schedule. Some respondents felt they were required to take the online course or did not mind taking an online class. As well, some of them indicated that schedule and convenience were the primary benefits of an online class. Others respondents preferred on-campus class.

Experience of taking an online class: About half had a positive experience taking online classes. However, some feel taking an online class depends on the student, and type of class. Some thought the classroom setting is more effective. When asked if he/she would suggest taking an RIT online class to another student, the majority said Yes but the reasons varied.

Experience with the Professor: All respondents were happy as their professors provided a plethora of information and resources. Still they searched online first if had some doubt. Some indicated their professors were very helpful in responding to emails and questions. However, others experienced that their professors were not very helpful and did not respond in a timely manner.

DISCUSSIONS

From the results, we observed that there are various aspects that students consider while choosing an online class. The major factors that affected the decision of the students to take an online or on-campus class were choices given by the university, the experience of taking an online class, experience with the professor.

We further asked the students to compare their on-campus class experience with online class experience and whether they think one is better than the other. All the replies from the participants can be divided into three categories, "On-Campus is better", "Depends on the Course" and "Depends on the Student". In general, "Effective cognitive study of thinking and learning are classified into four sections: learner-centered, community-centered, knowledge-centered, and assessment-centered learning." [2, 4, 5].

The participants who stated that on-campus is better have taken online courses related to their majors and wanted more interaction with the professor and classmates. We can surmise this from one of the participant's statement, "Yes, a classroom setting provides an experience that you can't get through an online course. You cannot replace the face-to-face value with the instructor and classmates." Another point to be noted here is that the students who stated that they would prefer on-campus classes are either disappointed by the response time of the professor or they think that they would learn better that way. These students prefer community-centered learning.

The students who gave "Depends on the course" response believe that some particular courses related to their majors should definitely be taught in-class so that they are more serious about it. This can be inferred from the statement "The professor might be more lenient regarding what is expected in an online course." Also if the student is interested in a particular course, it doesn't matter to them whether it is online or on-campus. So, the interest factor is as significant as the type of course. This group belongs to the community-centered learning category.

Some respondents stated that the experience depends on the person taking the course. Now, this is an essential aspect while considering the perspective of students towards online and on-campus courses. From the interviews, we saw contradictory statements like “I never really liked being in a classroom in grade school” and “In class because you get to interact with the professor, and you get classmate’s feedbacks”.

CONCLUSIONS

From our research, we draw a conclusion that the student's attitude towards online courses varies significantly based on various factors such as choices given by the university, experience with the professor and overall pros and cons of taking online and on-campus classes. Online classes can be useful to one person and futile for the other. It depends on whether the person is interested in spending the time to check out other resources online, asking questions to the professor and other classmates when in doubt, the response time and how helpful the response is to solve the issue.

This was from the point of view of full-time students who can attend the lectures on campus. The students who are taking part-time classes here think that on-campus courses need dedicated time and online courses provide them with more flexibility. Ultimately it comes down to the student's learning preferences and circumstances.

Future work

In this research, we gathered data from the interviews of a small set of 15 students. We need more data to generalize the results and for that, we plan to conduct a survey. This would allow us to reach out to more people. Also, we cannot depend on the qualitative data analysis method to get solid outcomes. Conducting surveys would allow us to get more strong results so that we have a basis to compare.

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