

**What Do Students Think about Online Course Structure?**

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### **Introduction**

As web-based learning becomes an important platform for education in the 21st century, it is critical for educational institutions to conduct further research and generate knowledge that enhances the social aspect of distance education. Online education enables learners to overcome the geographical barriers and allows for a variety of learning styles and teaching strategies (Barriocanal, Sicilia, & Alonso, 2013). The success of online learning depends on the ability of educational programs to personalize the teaching and learning processes to increase the effectiveness and the efficiency of the online learning (Saba, 1999; Burgess, 2006).

In order to develop and deliver online courses, instructors, and instructional designers, usually, use models and approaches that are being used in traditional face-to-face education. Although these models and approaches make great contributions to teaching and learning via distance education, further investigations need to be done. Traditional education approaches must be re-examined and revised to build solid online learning environments utilizing the advancement educational technologies. This study fits into the fourth research priority "Meaningful, Engaging Learning in All Environments" in the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda 2016-2020.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was Transactional Distance Theory, which is developed by Michael Moore. According to Moore (1993), the concept of "transactional distance" includes the gap that may exist in the educational process between the instructor and the learner. Thus, distance is determined by the amount of structure that exists in the course design and the amount of dialogue which occurs between the learner and the instructor. Nevertheless, greater transactional distance occurs when an educational program has more structure and less student-instructor dialogue.

### **Methodology**

This is a quantitative descriptive study that aimed to investigate if there are differences between students' perceptions regarding different online courses structure. The structure of four online graduate courses was measured using The Structure Component Evaluation Tool (SCET) by Sandoe (2005). In addition, course evaluations were used to assess learners' perceptions regarding the structure of the online courses. The collected data was coded and analyzed using (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were used to analyze the data and report the findings. Also, one-way ANOVA technique was applied to determine the differences between the means of students' perceptions regarding structure components in the four online courses.

## Results/Findings

The findings revealed the structure of the online courses ranged between a “moderate” and “high-structured” course. Although students’ perceptions regarding the structure of the online courses ranged between “moderate” and “Excellent”, there is a significant difference in means of students’ perceptions. Most of the significant mean differences were between “Course D” and “Course B”, in favor of “Course D”. That indicates, having clear objectives, well-organized course plan, and clear grading system made “Course D” to be the most appreciated course from students’ perspective. On the other hand, having only moderate scores in the same structure components made “Course B” only an average course, in terms of structure, from students’ perspective.

## Conclusions

Students appreciate well-structured and flexible online courses. Therefore, the findings support the Transactional Distance Theory in which students appreciate courses that have a flexible structure and provide a great amount of dialogue between the instructor and the students. This agrees with Murphrey, et al. (2012) that social presence and frequent feedback help students to perform better in online learning environments. However, course schedule, consistency, and student-instructor interaction are the most features of the courses in the study. The students’ perceptions regarding the structure of the online courses ranged between “Average” and “Excellent”. The most appreciated structure components were course objectives, course plan, and grading system.

Therefore, when instructional designers work on developing online courses they must pay careful attention to course objectives, course plan, and grading systems. Online courses consistency is important and all four courses in this study received high scores. This indicates using a unified learning management system such as BlackBoard not only enhances the consistency in each online course, but also improves the consistency between online courses within the program.

## Implications/Recommendations

- Agricultural education departments should offer flexible online courses that help students to apply learned knowledge in their contexts.
- Good communication and interaction play an important role in online learning environments. Therefore, each online course should have a well-detailed communication plan with a great amount of interaction.
- Online courses must be clear about the objectives, schedule, assignments, and expectations.
- Refer to course evaluations when desired to improve online courses.

The findings of this study contribute to the profession by being a piece of the literature of distance and web-based education. The findings can assist educators and instructional designers, within the profession of agricultural education, to develop meaningful and engaging online learning environments.

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