

AC 2009-1310: DOCUMENTED DIFFERENCES IN STUDENT PREFERENCES REGARDING ASSIGNMENT DUE DATES IN DISTANCE-EDUCATION (DE) COURSES

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Turning-In Assignments: Student Preferences for Online Assignments and Due Dates

Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory program evaluation study was to examine the due dates of online assignments in relationship to student needs and to provide faculty and instructors with foundational data for decision-making purposes including a basis for adjusting assignment due dates to better accommodate online students' schedules. This process should allow online education to better meet the needs of distance education students and impact student satisfaction and learning positively in distance education.

Participants consisted of 337 undergraduate and graduate students who were currently enrolled in at least one online course in the College of Technology and Computer Science at East Carolina University. Students were contacted through the online course they were currently taking and were requested to respond to 10 questions online. Participants noted that assignment due dates and times which worked best with their schedules were Sunday and Monday at midnight or 8:00am. Participants preferred interactive or hands-on activities as assignments and that these students recommended that these assignments be scheduled weekly or bi-weekly. Overall, students responding to this survey indicated that consistency in scheduling assignments was viewed as extremely helpful. Overall, students taking online courses seem to prefer assignments that are interactive, as long as all members interact and that the assignments are due directly following a full weekend.

Introduction

Though there is a substantial body of literature on the perceptions of online students centering on satisfaction of or dissatisfaction with delivery of instruction in online courses, the topic of due dates for online assignments appears to have been overlooked in the literature and research. (Buckley, 2003; Chickering, & Ehrmann, 1996; Kearns, Shoaf, & Summey, 2004; Smith, 2006) Others have studied issues associated with online courses including the problems with collecting online assignments (Goldman, Cohen, & Sheahan, 2008; Jaffe, 1997), giving particular types of assignments (Arbaugh, & Rau, 2007; Nichols, Shaffer, & Shockey, 2003; Lewis, & Abdul-Hamid, 2006), and the composition of online student populations. (Buckley, 2003; Mentzer, Cryan, & Teclehaimanot, 2007) In future endeavors this body of knowledge could impact student course satisfaction or dissatisfaction on student evaluation of teaching surveys.

The purpose of this study is to examine due dates of online assignments in relationship to student needs. This study will benefit both instructors of online courses and students within these courses. The data gathered will provide faculty and instructors with foundational data for decision-making purposes when assigning due dates. The data gathered should also help students better fill both their job and family responsibilities and personal obligations by eliminating or reducing scheduling conflicts due to online class assignments and life scheduling conflicts. Many students who enroll in online courses do so because of job and family responsibilities. If we can better accommodate these students by adjusting due dates to meet their scheduling demands

without a decrease of content quality, we should see improvement in student satisfaction and student success in online courses. The benefits of this study are that the data will be available to faculty members who teach online and may provide a basis for adjustment of assignment due dates to better accommodation of online students' schedules, encouraging faculty members to better meet the needs of distance education students.

Methodology

This mixed-methods study addressed student needs when scheduling the due dates of assignments within the distance education arena. Approximately 337 students were enrolled in distance education courses during spring 2007 within the College of Technology and Computer Science. These students were asked to respond to an online survey requesting information regarding preferences for specific assignment due dates in courses (excluding exams and quizzes). Students were utilizing a common distance education delivery platform (BlackboardTM) during April/early May 2007. Data were collected through the online survey software product SurveyMonkeyTM. Data were provided to researchers in spreadsheet format with no identifying information. Data were then uploaded from an ExcelTM spreadsheet into SPSSTM for analysis, utilizing measures of frequency, central tendency, and variability. Frequency data were then presented in the form of tables, graphs, and charts. Finally, collected qualitative data were coded, analyzed manually and utilized in support of quantitative data.

Research Questions

The following two research questions will be addressed during the presentation;

1. *What assignment due dates better meet the scheduling needs of adult students?*
2. *What type of assignments do students believe help them learn more in distance education classes?*

Population Demographics

Survey Questions 1 through 5 requested demographic information from each participant. (see Survey Instrument in Appendix B) Individual tables (A-1 through A-5) for questions 1 through 5 have been included in an appendix at the end of this paper for clarification purposes. Overall, 72% of those students who participated in the online survey were age 30 years or above (approximately 18% were between 34 and 37 years of age; approximately 15% were between the ages of 46 and 49 years of age). (see Table A-1) Seventy-nine percent of these students were taking either one or two courses, while 19% were taking three or more courses. (see Table A-2) Eighty-six participants (73.5%) were male and 29 (24.8%) were female. (see Table A-3) Sixty-two students (or 53%) were working toward a bachelors degree, while fifty-three students (45.3%) were working on their masters degree. (see Table A-4) Seventy students (or approximately 60% of the participants) had previously taken five or more online courses, while less than 10% noted that the current course was their first experience with online education. (see Table A-5) Of the 337 students surveyed, 116 participated in the online survey. This yielded a return rate of approximately 32%.

Survey Results

Survey Question 6 – “The following types of assignments help me learn more in online classes.”

In response to survey question 6, students were requested to select as many options as applied to their situation from the following list of types of assignments; *Individual Topic Papers, Team Topic Papers, Hands-on Activities, Interactive Individual Projects, Team Projects, Reading Assignments, and Other*. Participants’ top-ranked choice was Hands-on Activities, which was selected 77 times or 65.8% of the time. Interactive Individual Projects fell second with 69 times or a 59% selection rate. Reading Assignments were selected 56 times (47.9%). Individual Topic Papers were selected 54 times (46.2%), while Team Projects were selected 21 times (17.9%). *Other* was selected 12 times as an assignment type choice, and Team Topic Paper was noted four times. (see Table 6) Those noting the *Other* category often focused on interactive activities which included interactive laboratories, discussions, and chats. (see Table 11) Participants tended to steer away from team work due to negative opinions regarding poor online interactions between some team members and non-participation of other team members. One participant commented on team assignments with this statement. “Online team projects are largely ineffective for me unless ALL members of the team are willing to put forth solid effort. Just one in the group not carrying their share drags the whole group down.”

Table 6
Preferred Assignments which help students learn (n = 116 w/ multi-selection)

Assignments	Frequency
Hands-On Activity	77
Interactive Individual Project	69
Reading Assignment	56
Individual Topic Paper	54
Team Project	21
Other Assignment	12
Team Topic Paper	4

Survey Question 7 – “To fit my schedule, assignments should be due on the following day each week.”

For this question, participants were asked to select the assignment due days they prefer. Selection options were *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Various Days of the Week*. Because participants were allowed to select more than one due day which might fit their schedule, the total sum of the responses may exceed 100%. Monday was selected 40 times or 34% of the time by participants, while an assignment due date of Sunday was selected 36 times or approximately 31% of the time. Tuesday and Various Days were selected 15 and 16 times respectively. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday all were selected approximately only 8 times or 6%. (see Table 7)

Table 7
Preferred Assignments days (n = 116 w/ multi-selection)

Days of the Week	Frequency
Monday	40
Tuesday	15
Wednesday	8
Thursday	7
Friday	8
Saturday	7
Sunday	36
Various Days of the Week	16

Table 8
Importance of Assignment Day Consistency (n = 116)

Consistency of Assignment Days	Percentage in Agreement
Yes, assignments should be on the same day each week/month/ etc.	75.2%
No, assignments do not need to be on the same day each week/month/ etc.	22.2%

Survey Question 8 – “It is important that assignments come due on the same day of the week throughout the course.”

This survey question requested that students responded by marking *Yes* or *No* to the importance of all online assignments being consistently due on the same day of the week. Of the 116 participants, 88 or approximately 75% noted that having the same assignment due day each week was important in online classes, while 26 participants (approximately 22%) marked *No* to the importance of assignment daily consistency.

Table 9
Preferred Assignments Times selected (n = 116)

Hours of the day	Percentage
8:00am	1.7%
12:00 noon	0%
4:00pm	.9%
8:00pm	6.8%
12:00 midnight	76.9%
4:00am	2.6%
Anytime, my schedule is flexible.	6.0%
Other	4.3%

Survey Question 9 – “To fit my schedule, assignments should be due on or before the following time on due dates.”

Students were requested to select a preferred time for turning in assignments from a list of 4-hour interval times; 8:00am, 12:00 noon, 4:00pm, 8:00pm, and 12:00 midnight. Ninety of the 116 participants (76.9%) selected 12:00 midnight as the preferred time for turning in an assignment,

while eight (or approximately 7%) selected 8:00pm as their preferred assignment turn-in time. Other times offered on the survey list were selected by less than 3% of the participants, while seven (6%) noted that anytime was their preference for turning in assignments. (see Table 9) Five student participants selected Other and wrote in comments concerning convenient assignment turn-in times. Overall, the participants requested instructors “just make it the same time all the time. One participant noted that assignments should be “assign[ed] on Thursday or Friday with assignment due on Tuesday or Wednesday, allowing at least the weekend to do the work,” while another respondent stated that “Mondays at 8am are best for me.”

Table 10
Preferred Assignments Intervals (n = 116 w/ multi-selection)

Intervals	Frequency
Daily	2
Weekly	80
Monthly	6
Throughout as Necessary	42
Other	10

Survey Question 10 – “To help me learn, assignments should be due”

For this survey question, participants were asked to select one response from the following to describe assignment intervals that would encourage learning; *Daily*, *Weekly*, *Monthly*, *Throughout as Necessary*, and *Other*. Eighty of the participants (or 68.4%) selected *Weekly* as their preference for assignment due date intervals, while *Throughout as Necessary* was selected by 42 of the respondents(35.9%). Two respondents noted that daily assignments were preferable and six respondents noted that monthly assignments would suit their needs. Ten respondents noted that *Other* intervals were preferred. Those selecting *Other* often commented that “It is best to be consistent” and that “every two weeks for lengthier assignments” would be helpful. Three of the 10 participants simply stated one of the following, “every two weeks,” “biweekly,” and “week to 10 days” for assignment intervals. One participant “prefer[red] a syllabus at start of the semester listing all assignments and due dates.”

Findings

Overall, students taking online courses seem to prefer assignments that are interactive, as long as all members interact and assignments that are due directly following a full weekend.

Research Question 1 – “What assignment due dates better meet the scheduling needs of adult students?”

As noted by responses in this study, Sunday or Monday at midnight, or Monday at 8:00am appear to be the highest-ranked preferences for assignment due dates. This may be due to the fact that online students have multiple responsibilities including duties within their family and work environments and they tend to use their weekends to work on course assignments. The hour 8:00pm came up often but not inconnection with a particular day of the week. Researchers assume that 8:00pm might correspond with Sunday or Monday as a due date preference, also.

One participant stated directly that: “Assignments should be assigned to give DE students the weekend to complete them.”

Research Question 2 – What type of assignments do students believe help them learn more in distance education classes?

Participants indicated that interactive or hands-on activities were preferred over any type of team assignment or team project. In addition to the order of the preferred assignments, participants identified the following types of assignments as ones they thought might enhance the learning process. These additional assignment types were extracted using a qualitative analysis approach from participant’s written (open-form) comments. (see Table 11)

Table 11
Specific Additional DE Assignments Listed by Students

DE Assignments
Student Discussion Online
Recorded Lectures
Interactive Labs
Interactive Discussion Boards
Tutorial CD or Video
Class Chat Session with Instructor
Individual Graded Homework

Conclusion

Findings in this study clearly indicate that online students are better able to allocate time toward completing course assignments during the weekend. They prefer to have their assignments posted at the same time each week and to have these assignments due at midnight or at 8:00am on Sunday or Monday, again at the same time each week. Students also indicated a preference for assignments that include interactive elements. In general, distance education students are older than their corresponding face-to-face counterparts and often times have other major responsibilities in line with education. This factor may account for the need for assignment due date which fall during non-work hours. The need for interactive elements within assignments may correspond to the methods of adult learning.

After conducting this research, it was determined that additional questions remain unanswered and would require a follow-on survey. Candidate questions for the future survey include: 1) What are the student’s preferences for DE coursework using synchronous versus asynchronous delivery methodologies, 2) Clarification is needed to better define the levels and types of interactions desired by DE students, and 3) Opinions of DE students regarding course effectiveness compared to similar Face-to-Face courses are also needed.

A future follow-up survey is planned to help answer questions regarding preferences in DE delivery protocols and methodologies. Detailed survey results and the complete set of survey questions can be obtained by contacting the authors of this paper.

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Appendix A

Table A-1
Student age (n = 116)

Age Range in Years	Frequency
18-21 years old	1.7%
22-25 years old	6.8%
26-29 years old	6.8%
30-33 years old	13.7%
34-37 years old	17.9%
38-41 years old	13.7%
42-45 years old	11.1%
46-49 years old	15.4%
50-53 years old	9.4%
54-57 years old	2.6%
58-61 years old	0%
Over 61 years old	0%

Table A-2
Number of semester courses currently taking (n = 116)

Semester Courses	Frequency
1 Course	26.5%
2 Courses	52.1%
3 Courses	15.4%
4 Courses	1.7%
More Than 4 Courses	1.7%

Table A-3
Student gender (n = 116)

Gender	Frequency
Male	73.5%
Female	24.8%

Table A-4
Degree in progress (n = 116)

Degree	Percent
Bachelors	53.0%
Masters	45.3%

Table A-5
Past number of DE courses taken (n = 116)

Past DE Courses	Frequency
This is my first online course.	9.4%
I have taken one other online course.	2.6%
I have taken two other online courses.	12.8%
I have taken three other online courses.	6.8%
I have taken four other online courses.	7.7%
I have taken five or more other online courses.	59.8%

Appendix B

Survey

Online Assignment Due Dates: Best Times for Turning in Assignments

Thank you for your participation in this important study. The estimated completion time is **8 minutes**.

Your participation in completing this survey for a research project entitled *Turning In Assignments: Student Preferences for Online Due Dates* will allow faculty members to better meet the needs of adult learners by assigning due date which better accommodate students' timeframe. Findings will provide a baseline in order to support student success in the online learning environment. Individual responses will be held in strictest confidence. We sincerely appreciate your time and effort in support of this important research initiative.

Please mark your answer by checking or filling in the blank where appropriate.

1. Number of online courses taken this semester: *(select one)*

- 1 Course 2 Courses 3 Courses 4 Courses More than 4 courses

2. Age: *(select one)*

- 18 – 21 years old 22 – 25 years old 26 – 29 years old
 30 – 33 years old 34 – 37 years old 38 – 41 years old
 42 – 45 years old 46 – 49 years old 50 – 53 years old
 54 – 57 years old 58 – 61 years old Over 61 years old

3. Gender: Male Female

4. I am currently working on a

- Bachelors Degree Masters Degree Doctorate Degree

5. How many online courses have you taken **NOT counting** those courses taken this semester?

- This is my first online course.
 I have taken **one** other online courses.
 I have taken **two** other online courses.
 I have taken **three** other online courses.
 I have taken **four** other online courses.
 I have taken **five or more** other online courses.

6. The following types of assignments help me learn more in online classes.

- Individual Topic Papers Team Topic Papers Hands-on Activities
 Interactive Individual Projects Team Projects Reading Assignments
 Other *(Please specify)* _____

7. To fit my schedule, assignments should be due on the following day each week.

- Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday
 Friday Saturday Sunday Various Days
of the Week

8. It is important that assignments come due on the same day of the week throughout the course.

Yes No

9. To fit my schedule, assignments should be due on or before the following time on due dates.

8:00 AM 12:00 Noon 4:00 PM 8:00 PM
 12:00 Midnight 4:00 AM Other:

10. To help me learn, assignments should be due

Daily Weekly Monthly Other:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire honestly and candidly.