Student and faculty perceptions of online clothing and textile courses

Genna Reeves-DeArmond, Independent Scholar, USA
Jennifer Mower, Central Michigan University, USA
Keith Nishida, Woodbury University, USA

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Introduction. An exploratory evaluation of ITAA proceedings from the past five years indicates that there have been limited studies regarding practices and assignments in online clothing and textile (CT) courses. It is important to continue assessment of online education in the CT discipline because the most recent "Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States" report indicates that 31.1% of college students are enrolled in an online course with a 10% or more increase in enrollment each year since 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The purpose of this research was to obtain perceptions and evaluations regarding CT online courses. In so doing, the current status of online education in this discipline can be assessed and potentially improved.

Method. Participants were recruited via (1) the International Textile and Apparel Association listserv, (2) CT-focused social media sites (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn) hosted by professional organizations, and (3) three junior and senior-level courses at one Northwest university. An online survey that consisted of quantitative and qualitative questions was conducted with two sample groups: CT students and faculty. Quantitative data were analyzed via descriptive statistics. A coding guide was developed for all qualitative questions after an initial review of themes; constant comparison was used to analyze this data. One hundred and sixty-three students and 99 faculty members completed the survey. The mean age of the student sample was 23.8 years (range of 18- 47 years old). The majority of students were of a junior/senior academic standing (60.3%). The mean age of the faculty sample was 57 years (range of 30-67 years old) and currently in an assistant or associate professor position (58.3%). The majority of students and faculty were female.

Participation in Online CT Courses. Over half of the student participants (58.0%) had taken an online CT course. The most common online courses that students reported having taken included history topics (e.g., historic dress) (43.2%), computer-aided design (31.8%), cultural aspects of dress, and textiles (11.3% each). Over half of faculty participants (55.0%) reported that their institution currently offers online CT courses. Forty-eight percent of faculty reported having taught an online course. The most common online courses that faculty participants taught included business topics (42.8%), a certain level/type of course (e.g., hybrid course and survey course), cultural CT (19.0% each), textiles, and pedagogy topics (e.g., how to develop an online course and best teaching practices (14.3% each).

Positive Aspects of Online CT Courses. Perceptions of the positive aspects of online courses were sought via an open-ended question. The most common positive aspects of online courses cited by students were convenience (80.0%), offering solutions to a variety of situations (e.g., scheduling conflicts), flexibility (16.9% each), accommodation of learning styles (12.3%), and aiding learning and comprehension (4.6%). Subtopics included working at own pace, working from home, offering a solution to being distracted by other students in class, flexibility in completing coursework, self-paced learning, and watching lectures as many times as needed.

The most common positive aspects of teaching online courses cited by faculty were convenience (39.1%), flexibility (30.4%), and interaction (21.7%). Subtopics included student control over course pace, access to additional materials, flexibility with schedule, and rich online discussion.

  Negative Aspects of Online CT Courses. Perceptions of the negative aspects of online courses were sought via an open-ended question. The most common negative aspects of online courses cited by students were lack of or difficulty with instructor/other student interaction (50.0%), difficulty maintaining motivation and engagement (30.3%), less convenient than in-class courses, and different course organization and assignments that are disliked (19.6% each). Subtopics included less/no face-to-face interaction, easy to forget assignments, more expensive, not having meaningful classroom experience, and more "busy work." The most common negative aspects of teaching online courses cited by faculty were lack of or difficulty with interaction (51.1%), difficulties associated with gauging student comprehension (28.6%), and course limitations in an online setting (19.0%). Subtopics included difficult to form personal relationships with students, hard to gauge student level of comprehension, limited course availability, and limited assignment options.

  Discussion and Recommendations. Both students and faculty mentioned convenience and flexibility as two of the top reasons why they like online courses. Beyond these two responses, there was variation among the student and faculty responses regarding positive aspects of online courses. This finding suggests that students and faculty members have a different experience within online courses and notice and/or value different components. It is important to further understand these varying perspectives to ensure quality learning experiences because faculty must understand that today's students learn differently than they did in the past (e.g., via a variety of online learning platforms). Faculty reported difficulty to gauge comprehension and learning and students reported having unclear components and explanations in a course as negative aspects of an online learning environment. These findings suggest that there needs to be a pedagogical dialogue among faculty regarding how to present online learning material with clarity and precision. Students specifically reported not liking discussion boards in online classes. This finding gives faculty the opportunity to rethink this type of assignment and consider creating innovative assignments that are differentiated from the assignments that students have come to associate with online courses. The work of Ellis (2012) illustrates an example of a classroom activity (i.e., audience response systems) that could be transformed to suit an online learning environment. The authors recommend ongoing discussions within ITAA about online teaching and learning; such discussions could take place via an interactive discussion session at annual conferences (as suggested by Ha-Brookshire and LaBat [2015]) or an online course-specific teaching collection hosted on the ITAA website.

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