Teaching and Learning Public Speaking Online: A Case Study

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Abstract—The increased availability of online coursework in higher education has prompted a number of research studies regarding the academic rigor and marketability of those courses. However, the existing literature pays little attention to the opportunities and challenges of the online delivery of skills based courses (courses that require the mastery of a practical component in addition to the theory). This paper is a case study in the teaching of a public speaking course in a fully online setting. The format of the online setting of the course is analyzed and the challenges faced from an instructional and student perspective are described. The paper also discusses the effectiveness of teaching this specific course in an online setting based on student feedback. The paper concludes with a discussion of the educational implications and opportunities stemming from the development of teaching and learning public speaking skills in an online setting.

Index Terms—communication education, online learning, public speaking online.

Introduction

The proliferation of online programs and courses in higher education is considered by many scholars a pervasive societal phenomenon [1]. This remarkable growth can be easily attributed to the technological and societal changes as well as the increased consumer demand for alternate delivery modes of educational offerings [1]. Indeed, according to the Sloan Consortium, in 2005, more than 3 million students in the US were enrolled in at least one online course. This number represents an increase of 800,000 students compared to the year before. More than 96% of the nation’s higher education institutions offer some form of online learning opportunities [2] and more than 80% of the Doctoral/Research institutions today have coursework or entire programs offered online according to the Sloan Consortium.

The increased availability of online coursework and programs in higher education has had a significant impact in the corporate sector. According to Reference [3], in today’s technology driven world an increased number of adult learners need training or professional development to further their careers. This need had a significant impact in the culture of the workplace as there is now an increased demand for employees to remain constantly up-to-date in their field as a result of being part of a knowledge-driven society [4]. In order to meet the demand for both professional development and current knowledge in the field, Universities developed alternate modes of delivery for existing programs, including the online format.

The availability of online course and program offerings constitute the prime example of accessible educational opportunities for current employees. Indeed, according to Reference [5] distance and online education have been more successful in the corporate world rather than in academia. The authors further argue that corporations have successfully promoted online education over the years for the purposes of training and/or continuing education, and that certain types of online degrees have gained acceptance within the corporate world. In light of these developments, it is not surprising that the online education offerings in the US have witnessed a remarkable growth rate during the last five years.

I. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE EDUCATION IN COMMUNICATION COURSES

The proliferation of online offerings raises the question of whether the educational quality and learning outcomes of online instruction is similar compared to the face-to-face instruction [6],[7],[8],[9],[10]. The Sloan Consortium indicates that 45% of the chief academic officers surveyed believe that online and face-to-face education methods have similar learning outcomes. Reference [11] cites a 2005 survey of human resources representatives according to which more than 62% of employers have a favorable opinion of online instruction; the survey respondents also view e-learning as an equal or superior mode of instruction compared to courses taught face-to-face. However, Reference [5] who also conducted a survey of potential employers found that graduates with online degrees are less likely to be hired than applicants who have received their degree through coursework delivered in either a hybrid or face-to-face format.

One important discipline for evaluating the effectiveness of online education in the workplace is communication. According to a survey of hiring officers by Reference [12], more than 90% of the respondents consider communication to be an essential skill for success in the workplace. However, according to the same survey, interviewers found that only 60% of the applicants demonstrated effective communication skills during the interview, and identified the inadequacy of
oral skills as the most prevalent communication inadequacy observed [12].

A. Online Degree in Communication: The Drexel University Case

Drexel University has been offering online degree program options since 1996 through its subsidiary unit called Drexel Online. Currently, Drexel offers Bachelor (10 programs) and Master degrees (more than 20) as well as a significant number of certificate programs online. In 2006, Drexel Online was the winner of the 21st Century Best Practice Award for Distance Learning, one of the most prestigious awards given to e-learning organizations by the United States Distance Learning Association. The expansion of online education at Drexel University is one of the key objectives of the 2007-2012 strategic plan. Specifically, the plan indicates that the goal of the University is to provide 10% of the total credit hours through online delivery. In 2006, Drexel University launched a Bachelor’s Degree in Communication which is offered completely online. The program brochure, published from Drexel Online indicates that students will receive great benefits from the program in terms of quality, flexibility, development of specific career skills and affordability. Furthermore, according to the promotional materials of Drexel Online all programs that are offered online have the same exact rigorous curriculum, well renowned faculty and well respected degree as the on-campus programs.

Given the above, it is reasonable to assume that faculty and students at Drexel can expect that the learning outcomes will be the same when taking communication courses in an online setting and in a face-to-face setting. This paper examines student perceptions on a number of variables including effectiveness of delivery, knowledge acquisition, workload and rationale for enrolling in the online section of COM 230: Techniques of Speaking, a course focusing on the development and delivery of speeches and oral communication. In light of the student responses, the study also looks at the instructional challenges associated with teaching such a course in an online setting.

B. A Different Public Speaking Course Online

The research literature does include a few case studies of the traditional public speaking course offered in an online setting. Reference [13], conducted a study comparing online and face-to-face sections of a public speaking course in a community college in terms of student rationale for enrollment as well as student perceptions of communication apprehension and public speaking ability before and after the course. The authors did not observe a significant difference between the two sections. Nicosia (2005), discusses the successful incorporation of certain assignments of a traditional public speaking course in an online format (such as the initial self-introduction speech). The author further discusses the challenges associated with teaching communication and public speaking courses in an online environment including, the emphasis on the personal interaction and the skills-based acquisition nature of the curriculum which is harder to master in an online setting (Nicosia, 2005).

The versions of the public speaking course discussed above are more closely associated with a hybrid delivery format where part of the course content is delivered online, but some face-to-face interaction is also required especially for the delivery of the speeches. In 2005, Drexel University developed an online version of the traditional public speaking course. All of the course content was delivered online using the Blackboard interface. The textbooks were the same with some, but not all of the face-to-face sections of the said course. Students in the online section were required to view PowerPoint lectures with audio and participate in discussion boards weekly. The evaluation for the online section also included three quizzes consisting of multiple choice/true false quizzes during pre-announced regular intervals within the quarter (weeks 3, 6 & 9 of the 10-week quarter system). Students were also required to write, deliver and submit either streaming video online or via VHS/DVD an informative and a persuasive speech (typically the face-to-face section includes a speech of self-introduction in addition to the informative and the persuasive speech). No face-to-face meetings were required and the live conversation/discussion options now available through the Blackboard interface were not used for the sections under examination.

The instructor, who also developed the course, has taught the face-to-face sections in the past, though he did not teach the online and face-to-face section during the same quarter. More than 95% of the students enrolled in the online sections of the said course are majoring in part-time programs and are considered working adults. The specific course is required for almost every part-time program. Less than 5% of the students enrolled in the sections examined were located abroad. It is important to note that the said course is offered in a variety of formats in order to accommodate different schedules and preferences. Specifically, students can take COM 230:

--during the day (traditional, full-time students)
--during the evening (meets once a week for 10 weeks/3 hours per session, commuter/working adults/part-time students)
--during Saturday (meets once a week for 6 weeks/4 hours per session, accelerated version/working adults/part-time students)
--online (no face-to-face meetings, weekly assignments/participation required and speeches/quizzes due at regular intervals throughout the quarter/online students)

Based on the above, and assuming that students are able to commute in order to attend the campus section, it can be inferred that students do in fact have at least some choice regarding the section selection for the said course.
Methodology

In order to assess students’ perceptions on the effectiveness of the online section of public speaking, a cross-sectional survey was administered in the latest three versions of the online course (Winter 2007, Summer 2007, Winter 2008). In total the paper examines four sections of the said courses (one from Winter and Summer 2007 and two from Winter 2008). The survey instrument included Likert scale, nominal scale and true/false questions as well as an open-ended qualitative question regarding the feelings of the students towards the online section of the said course (in terms of learning experience, knowledge acquisition, workload and overall recommendation towards the online delivery of the said section). The survey also attempts to assess the rationale behind the students’ decision to enroll in an online section for the specific course; there is also a control question in order to find out whether the respondents are familiar with the different delivery modes of the specific course.

The survey was available during the last week of the course and had to be completed online. Student participation was voluntary, but students received between 2.5% (Winter 2007, Summer 2007) and 5% (Winter 2008) bonus in their final grade for participating. The responses to the survey were completely anonymous. It is important to note that the survey instrument asks students to make a prediction regarding the face-to-face sections of the said course. While the instructor did provide some information regarding the face-to-face sections of the said course (e.g. number of speeches required), and even though a few students have taken other face-to-face courses in the University in the past, it is easily understood that the online students did not attend both the face-to-face and online section of the course under examination. Therefore, student responses are based on their expectations of what a face-to-face section is rather than an actual experience.

During the course of the four sections under examination the instructor recorded his personal observations regarding the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching the specific section online. Those observations are illustrated in the discussion section in conjunction with the results of the student survey.

Results

Both the quantitative and qualitative responses from the survey clearly indicate that the vast majority of the respondents had a positive and valuable learning experience in the online sections of Public Speaking. In total, 55 out of 71 students in the four online sections of Public Speaking participated in the survey, a response rate of 77.5%. The results and response rates are consistent across all four sections examined. The high response rate and the consistency of the results across the sections indicate that the responses accurately reflect the students’ perspective in the specific sections.

A. Quantitative Findings

The quantitative results highlight a few crucial findings for the online delivery of the specific course. First, about 63% of the respondents indicated that they are familiar with the different modes of delivery for the specific course (evening, accelerated on Saturday etc) (Figure 1). When asked to indicate the primary reason for opting for the online delivery of the specific course, respondents are almost equally split between convenience (45%) and the lack of a real choice (44%) (Figure 2).

![Figure 1. What was the primary reason that you chose to take COM 230 online?](image1)

![Figure 2. How familiar are you with the different delivery modes at Drexel University (e.g. Saturday, evening, day etc)?](image2)

Furthermore, about 80% of the respondents indicated that initially they were at least to some degree concerned with taking a public speaking course in an online setting. However, at the conclusion of the course more than 80% of the students felt that the delivery and knowledge acquisition skills from the online version of the course were equally effective as they would be in a classroom format (Figure 3). Additionally, 80% of the students felt that they learned the same amount in the online version of the course as they would have in a face-to-face format (Figure 4). Finally, 80% of the students...
indicated that they believe that their public speaking skills through the online version of the course developed the same amount or more than they would have through a face-to-face version (Figure 5).

Students were also asked regarding their perceptions of the academic rigor and workload of the online version of the course. Almost half of the respondents (47%) indicated that the online version was more rigorous compared to a likely face-to-face version (Figure 6). More than 90% of the students felt that the workload for the online version was the same or even more compared to a face-to-face version (Figure 7). An overwhelming majority of the students (91%), reported that the video-recording requirement for the speech submission helped them improve and practice the skills covered in the course (Figure 8).
One of the most impressive findings of the survey is the indication that 60% of the respondents would take the course online once again if they were given a second chance (Figure 9). In addition, more than 90% of the respondents would recommend the online version of the course to a colleague or a friend, which is a clearly a positive statement regarding student attitudes towards the specific delivery mode (Figure 10).

**B. Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative responses in the open-ended question of the survey, provide additional insight into the rationale for the quantitative responses given above, but also highlight the challenges associated with taking and teaching the specific section in an online format. Students were asked to provide statements regarding the aspects of the course illustrated in the multiple choice questions and specifically if they felt they learned more, less or the same compared to a possible face-to-face version.

A few themes are evident through the qualitative commentary. First, many students felt that the online version of the course was equally or more effective compared to a face-to-face version, despite some initial concerns. According to one student:

“Although I was skeptical about how effective an on-line speaking course would be, I was pleasantly surprised. In my experience, most public speaking courses focus on the presentation itself. This course did that, but also taught skills in speech writing, listening skills, ethical obligations, and presenting information logically. This was of great value to me. In addition, the professor was the only one who had to spend the time viewing all of the speeches, so we got ten solid weeks of education. In a typical classroom setting, students usually sit through all of the presentations which consumes a lot of time. Overall, this was an excellent experience. I take with me new skills and tools that will definitely be put to use in my professional and personal life”.

A few students enjoyed the convenience of the online format, the skills learned, as well as the rigor of the course:

“I really enjoyed this class I think it was great way for me to take this course without having to the college and I believe I gained many important skills that I will use later in my teaching career. I was not good at giving speeches and after this class I feel like I have a step towards learning how to give speeches well. I enjoyed the class and I would definitely recommend it to friends”.

“I feel like I really learned a lot in this class. I actually felt like i had to prepare more in an online setting than a class speech. For instance, you cant watch other peoples speeches before you go, as you can in a class. I used to watch people and use what they did to help my speech sometimes in order to not make certain mistakes
etc. I felt that from reading the book and listening online, as well as watching the speeches on video for class I was very well prepared. There were certain challenges of course being an online class, such as recording the tape etc. but it was really a fun course and I loved the online discussion, thanks so much for a great quarter...”.

In addition to the advantages of taking a public speaking course online, students also indicated several challenges associated with the specific delivery format. The main student criticism focused on the recording requirement for the speeches as well as the lack of a live audience during the speech delivery. Below are four comments highlighting the difficulties associated with the technical requirements and the absence of a live audience associated with the online version of the course:

“I had more problems getting my speech recorded and burned onto a usable format then anything else, and I don’t think the added stress should be added to the course load. I think in a face-to-face, we could have started with smaller speeches and done them more frequently to help build confidence. I’m a pretty good speaker (I do training and presentations quite often at work), but getting in front of a camera was a nightmare. It was even worse that a camera gives you the ability to start over, as it made both of the ten minute speeches into two hour ordeals. I liked the class, and the course work was informative, but I’m not sure I like the online format for this type of class”.

“I believe that part of the speech giving anxiety is performing in front of an audience. Online does not provide that level of experience that a real classroom would.”

“The technical requirements are very stringent and frustrating and I feel it unnecessarily compounds the stress of presenting the speech itself. The required visual aid would be much easier to institute in a face-to-face setting but becomes a huge hindrance in the online setting.”

“The content of the course was effective with respect to the readings and discussion. However presenting in front of a camera is challenging at best because its unresponsive. The camera also makes me more nervous because it seems to amplify any strange presentation problems (not looking at the camera, ticks, pauses, etc). Just having to know that I will have to sit and watch it to make sure it looks solid before sending makes me feel awkward... Also I think this is a class that I could have benefited from the normal classroom banter regarding course material and problems with speaking in public in general. This could have been a disaster if the professor wasn’t as involved or organized”.

Discussion

A few key findings emerge from the survey results. First, the majority of the students felt that they received a comparable educational experience in terms of academic rigor and skills from the online version of the course as they would have with a face-to-face section. While results indicate that the online version of the course does pose some challenges in regards to the submission of the speeches, an overwhelming majority of the students believe that the requirement to videotape and submit the speeches for evaluation does help master the oral communication skills covered in the course. The fact that students have the ability to review their speech prior to submission and get a sense on how they look on camera can be classified as one of the benefits of the online delivery of the specific course. While some face-to-face sections involve the recording of the speeches delivered in the classroom, this only allows the evaluation of the speech after it has been delivered and graded.

Overall, despite the challenges associated with taking the online version of the course three key findings from the survey highlight that a fully online version of a public speaking course can work. First, an overwhelming majority of the students believe that they learned the same or more than they would have in the face-to-face version. Second, a large percentage of the students would re-take the online version of the course if they had a second chance. Third, an overwhelming majority of the students would recommend the online version to a friend/colleague.

The technical requirements associated with the delivery of the speeches do present a challenge from both a student and instructional perspective. In the current version of the course, students must be able to record the speech assignments, and be able to successfully convert the video to a DVD/VHS or upload it to a streaming server online. All of those options require specific hardware and software that students need to be able to use. There is always the risk of a decline of the video and audio quality, thus preventing the instructor from fully appreciating and adequately evaluating the speech; this has been a common problem in the sections examined, affecting at least 15% of the submissions. In addition, while prospective students are explicitly cautioned not to register for the online version unless they can meet one of the submission options, recently (Winter 2008) there has been an increase on the number of submissions that do not conform to the submission requirements (about 20% of the submissions received). The submissions that do not conform to the established requirements present another instructional challenge; assuming that the instructor wants to give the students the benefit of the doubt an effort has to be made to either view the submissions that do not meet the format requirements or to work with the
specific students for a re-submission that conforms to the course requirements.

Another challenge with the online version of the course is the lack of a live audience for the delivery of the speeches. While students are encouraged to record their speeches in front of a live audience that they setup themselves (for bonus points in the speech), very few students (less than 5% of submissions) make use of this option. This can be attributed to the difficulties associated with getting a live audience (time requirement, room location etc) and the additional challenge of capturing the audience’s reactions in the recording.

Two solutions are currently under consideration to address the issues above. First, an upgrade at the blackboard interface will allow for direct online submissions of the speeches from the student’s computer or camera. This upgrade is likely to resolve a few of the difficulties associated with the technical requirements of the speech submission. Second, the next version of the online section will be using two relatively new communication features of the blackboard interface; voice boards (allowing for audio discussion posts) and live classroom where students will be able to log in at the same time with both audio and video and interact with the fellow classmates and the instructor. Those features will allow for increased interaction among the group members. Potentially, the live classroom feature can be used as a forum for delivering the speeches and as such can provide the live audience setting which is the standard in a speech course. However, the live classroom option will mean additional work for the instructor as it is likely that sessions will have to be held more than once to accommodate the different schedules of the online learners.

Finally, the time devoted to the teaching of the online public speaking section should be considered. The total time spent on the actual instruction and preparation of the online section (2 hours average per week) was less than the face-to-face version (5 hours on average per week). However, grading and dealing with student questions and concerns was considerably more time consuming in the online version (5 hours on average per week) than in the face-to-face version (2 hours on average per week). It should also be noted that developing and updating the online section of the course requires on average 10 hours per week, though this is only applicable on the quarters that the course is updated or developed.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

This paper includes results of a comprehensive survey of students enrolled in a public speaking course delivered entirely online. The survey results clearly indicate that a fully online version of a public speaking course can be comparable to a face-to-face version in terms of skills, knowledge acquisition, workload and academic rigor. In addition, the results indicate that the students surveyed were satisfied from the online version of the course and would re-take it if they were given a chance. However, it is clear that the online version of the public speaking course is best suited to the students who are familiar with video recordings and the online environment. The convenience associated with the opportunity of taking the specific course online seems to be the main driving force behind the choice of taking the specific course in an online environment. The above indicate that the online version of the public speaking course can appeal to working adults who would like to improve their oral communication skills without having to worry about attending a class at a specific time slot. The technical challenges and the lack of audience interaction, two issues that the survey respondents indicated as drawbacks of the online version, can be addressed to a great degree by using the new technologies of the blackboard interface.

This article analyzes the responses and their implications from the students who enrolled in the online sections of the Public Speaking course at Drexel University during the past year. Due to the selection of the specific sample, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results beyond the specific population. Further research is needed in order to identify the perceptions of online students towards face-to-face instruction in addition to the online instruction. In addition, more research should be conducted towards identifying the interactions in the online environment in more detail in order to get a better sense of the perceptions of students enrolled in communication courses. As more data become available researchers if a discipline like communication, which requires interactivity and mastery of information exchange can be effectively taught in an online environment. With additional research results employers will be able to direct adult learners towards the delivery mode that is best suited to the individual learner's needs—a requirement in order to produce effective communicators in the workplace.

REFERENCES


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