DETERMINING ONLINE GRADUATE STUDENT EXPECTATIONS: THE USE OF MET EXPECTATIONS HYPOTHESIS

By

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of a grounded theory, multi-case, descriptive study. Transcript analysis was conducted of graduate students' responses to questions regarding their expectations of courses in which they were enrolled. Responses were captured within an expectations discussion board forum upon students' entry to the course. The researchers used met expectations hypothesis to help understand and assess graduate students' expectations. Analysis of transcripts revealed that graduate students' expectations were to compare and contrast previous learning to the content of current courses, learn about course topic, achieve degree or course requirement, and gain useful, applicable knowledge. Graduate students wanted to contribute to courses by sharing their personal and/or professional experiences, providing their own, different perspective, contribute to the course environment. Doctoral students wanted to contribute by learning the content. There was not a lot of commonality expressed with regards to expectation changes; the student simply wanted to express that they had made a change.

In addition, the researchers developed a stacked matrix in a multi-case format categorized by masters and doctoral students' expectations of course, contribution to course, expectation changes and themes to provide a comparison of groups to triangulate the data. The results of the study illustrate that students do bring their own expectations to a course which may or may not align with course descriptions and/or objectives outlined in a syllabus.

Keywords: Met Expectations Hypothesis, Online Learning, Graduate Student Expectations, Grounded Theory.

INTRODUCTION

In today's technological environment, enhanced computer skills are a necessity for growth and survival throughout society. The university community has been affected by an increase in the number of students that need to be taught by faculty who have decreasing resources available. Computer technology has led to the rapid growth of knowledge acquisition and expansion and also provided numerous resources that were never available before to both faculty and students. (Banks, 2002, p. 2)

The use of electronic mail, the World Wide Web and computer conferencing have become regular teaching aids in the education arena (Goodyear, Jones, Asensio, Hodgson & Steeples, 2005); however, the addition of computer technology hasnot reduced the amount of time faculty members spend preparing (Banks, 2002;

Deden,1998; Gibson & Herrera, 1999; & Zhang, 1998) to teach their online courses. Faculty cannot take for granted that computer technology alone will enhance student learning. Course materials using computer technology needto be well designed and extensive consideration given to how materials are implemented into the instruction (Berge, 1999; Oliver, Omari, & Herrington, 1998). Despite the preparationdevoted to developing online courses, students' expectations cannot be addressed without input from the students themselves. In an ideal academic setting, students would come to class as empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge that the faculty member would like them to obtain.

According to Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw and Liu (2006), "The importance of understanding the learner's goals, needs, and motivations in taking a course is a basic tenet of instructional design" (p.109). Thus, the

purpose of this research study is to explore online graduate students' expectations upon entering a course and how their expectations change mid-way through the course. The goal of the study is to determine why students enrolled and what they expect to contribute to the online learning environment of the course. Since this data is difficult to obtain prior to the student enrolling in the course, it is captured at entry to the course by the researcher.

Most of the research in the affective domain has examined students' attitudes, satisfaction, and perception of the online environment (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). This affective domain study examines the graduate students' expectations regarding the course(s) itself and may or may not pertain to the environment. The 13 sections of seven courses in this study were all fully online, asynchronous courses and were examined over a limited time span of seven academic terms. The domain for this study was Blackboard discussion boards entitled Expectations Discussion Board within each of the 13 sections of seven courses.

Factors Influencing Online Students' Expectations

It is important to analyze the characteristics of online learners to determine what factors influence their expectations in online courses. Many researchers (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright &Zvacek, 2009; Sullivan, 2001; Dutton, Dutton & Perry, 2002; Angelino, Williams &Natvig, 2007; Wojciechowski & Bierlein-Palmer, 2005; Oblender, 2002; Halsne&Gatta, 2002; Cheung &Kan, 2002) have studied characteristics of online students to evaluate the academic, economic, or personal needs that influence students' decision to enroll in online learning. Technical abilities and learning preferences are also characteristics of the online learners that effect their expectations of online courses (*Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006*).

Paechter, Maier and Macher (2010) specifically assessed "how students' expectations of e-learning courses, i.e., important and desirable characteristics of a course, and their experiences in an e-learning course relate to learning achievements and course satisfaction" (p. 233). Students were asked to describe the aspect of teaching and learning they deemed to be important and describe their experience in one online course. Paechter, et al.(2010) determined that "difficulties in maintaining motivation

contribute negatively to knowledge acquisition" (p. 225). With regard to their expectations, i.e., aspects of a course they consider important, students': achievement goals were the best predictors for success and ranked higher than other course characteristics. With regard to their experiences, students' assessments of the instructor's expertise in eLearning, and her/his counseling and support were the best predictors for learning achievement and course satisfaction. The results of the study suggest to influence students' motivation and goals by adapting instruction accordingly and emphasizing the importance of continuing education and training for the instructors (Paechter et al., 2010, p. 222).

This study seeks to determine a framework for assessing students' expectations of a course using met expectations hypothesis to further expand on works such as Paechter et al. (2010) and provide tools for maintaining students' motivation and training of instructors.

Knowing what is expected of faculty does not directly address the expectations of students. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) found that research has begun to address the subtle questions regarding who is using online systems and why. The majority of students were older than the typical undergraduate student; had significant roles in the community; were highly motivated; and focused on achieving specific learning outcomes. Tallent-Runnels et al. also noted that even with a highly focused and motivated student the quality of the instructional design was crucial in providing a successful learning experience. Developers must design online learning environments to match not only the expectations of the learners but their cognitive styles as well. This cannot be achieved without a method of determining what student expectations and cognitive styles are present. This study will attempt to address the expectations concern. Examining cognitive styles is not a goal of this study although expectancy theory is one of the best known cognitive theories (Steers, Mowday, & Shapiro, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Frameworks and theoretical foundations for online course research are limited and appropriate theoretical foundations need to be developed (Bruinsma, 2004;

Eccles&Wigfield, 2002; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). The use of met expectations hypothesis is one method that we suggest as appropriate for determining student motivation and learning. Met expectations hypothesis was derived from Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory of motivation. Although, these theories were developed for work and motivation and job satisfaction, they are applicable to the academic context because student motivation and satisfaction with courses are essential to continuing and completing their education.

Vroom's Expectancy Model

Vroom (1964) first proposed expectancy theory as an explanation of work behavior. He proposed three related models of job satisfaction, work motivation and job performance to address three phenomena within the interrelationship of work and motivation:(i) The choices made by persons among work roles; (ii) The extent of their satisfaction with their chosen work roles;(iii) The level of their performance or effectiveness in their chosen work roles (Vroom, 1995).Within the context of this research, if the word *course* were to be substituted for work, the models would apply to choices made by students among *course* roles, the extent of their satisfaction with their chosen *course* role, and the level of their performance or effectiveness in their chosen *course* roles.

Vroom's (1964) model can be used to predict the valence of an outcome . Banks (2002) stated, "The extent to which participants' expectations influenced the outcomes of a program could help answer questions of motivation for participating in a new innovation program" (p. 34). In many instances, an online course is new and innovative to the student. Thus, students' expectations can influence their outcome in the course.

Porter-Steers Met Expectations Hypothesis

Porter and Steers'(1973) met expectations hypothesis will serve as the theoretical framework for this study. The extent to which participants' expectations influence the outcomes of a course could help answer questions of motivation for participating in a new innovation course. Steers and Porter (1979) developed "three common denominators that characterize motivation: (i) what energizes human behavior;(ii) what directs or channels

such behavior; and (iii) how this behavior is maintained or sustained" (pp. 1-2). Theories of motivation have models that help to explain characteristics. According to Steers and Porter (1979), "the basic building blocks of a generalized model of motivation are: (i) needs or expectations; (ii) behavior; (iii) goals; and (iv) someform of feedback" (p. 4).Therefore, the concepts of this study can determine aspects of students' motivation by asking them their expectations and providing them feedback. Through the questions of this study, aspects of graduate students' behavior and goals can also be determined.

Porter and Steers (1973) were also concerned with the potential role that "met expectations" may have on withdrawal behavior of an individual. Their concept of met expectations is described as the discrepancy between what a person encounters on the job in the way of positive and negative experiences and what he expected to encounter (Porter & Steers, 1973). Using met expectations hypothesis, Porter and Steers predicted that when an individual's expectations – whatever they are – are not substantially met, the individual's propensity to withdraw would increase.

Irving and Meyer (1995) used difference scores reflecting the discrepancy between post-entry experiences and pre-entry expectations to test met expectations hypothesis and found problems related to the difference scores. The difference scores produced artificial relations with outcome variables because the use of direct measures generally requires respondents to indicate the extent to which they perceive that their pre-entry expectations concerning their jobs have been confirmed(Irving & Meyer, 1995).This weakness of direct measures of met expectations was attributed to the fact that individuals were required to recall their prior expectations after having been on the job for some time and their recollections of pre-entry expectations were filtered by more recent experiences and behaviors (Irving & Meyer, 1995). In contrast, this study sought expectations of students upon their entry into an online course to reduce the dependence on students' personal recall.

Met Expectations and Job Satisfaction

Met expectations hypothesis postulates that when

individuals' expectations are congruent with a realistic experiences, the individual is more likely to be satisfied and willing to make necessary adjustments (Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique, & Burgi, 2001; Hom, Griffeth, Palich, & Bracker, 1999; Wanous, Poland, Premack, & Davis, 1992; Irving & Meyer, 1994, 1995). Met expectation research has been applied in human resource management due to its contribution to the facilitation of employment recruitment and retention strategies. Its presence in human resource management was highlighted by the general consensus that there is a relationship between meeting individuals' pre-entry expectations and employee job satisfaction and commitment. Wanous et al. (1992) concluded that there was a strong correlation between met expectations and organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Although Wanous et al.'s findings were corroborated by Caligiuri et al. (2001) and Hom et al. (1999), Irving and Meyer (1994) found that host organizations should focus more on creating positive post-entry experiences rather than meeting pre-entry employee expectations. Researchers must also be careful not to suggest that met expectations has implications on perceived job performances since Wanous et al (1992) indicated that there was a weak relationship between met expectations and job performance.

Met expectations concepts may be applicable in examining the relationship between a student's entry expectations of a course and their commitment and satisfaction with the course. The concepts may also align with Wanous et al. and show a weak relationship to course performance. Once the students' expectations are determined through the work of this study, further examinations of these constructs may be warranted.

Prior research (Banks, 2002) has indicated that although goals and expectations are communicated to participants before the beginning of a training workshop, the participants still came in with their own perceptions or expectations. Without knowing the needs and expectations of participants when developing and/or teaching a course, it would be difficult to assess the extent to which they were met. According to Bassi, Cheney and Lewis (1998), the methods and processes used by training departments must match the needs of each individual learner as well as the organization's goals and objectives. Although teaching a course is not the same as providing training, a needs (or expectations) analysis and assessment of the individual participant's needs may positively affect the development and teaching processes for online faculty members and instructional designers.

Literature Review

The literature review summarizes research on characteristics of online learners, student use of technology, online learning, and online teaching. Online databases including ProQuest, ERIC, Psyc ARTICLES and tools such as Google Scholar and Internet Journals were searched using the key words motivation, online learning, expectancy theory, online teaching, and student expectations. The search of these descriptors included a time period of articles from the 1960s through present day. Our search produced numerous articles related to our topics. We closely examined over 100 of these articles and have referenced over 50 of those articles.

Learner Demographics and Characteristics

Aslanian and Clinefelter (2012) reported that a majority of online students are Caucasian females averaging 33 years of age, and work full time. They also concluded that there are more women enrolled in online courses than men (almost twice as many), 65% of which are seeking undergraduate degrees; 40% of online students are 29 years of age or younger; and 60% of online students work full time, mostly in education or health care related fields. Halsne and Gatta (2002) found that most women engaged in online course work have children, and are usually attempting to complete their studying at night or early in the morning while their children are sleeping.

Ryan (2001) indicated that many students are attracted to the convenience and flexibility of online learning. Other researchers noted that the most prevalent commonality shared among online learners is the need for flexibility in the approach to attain academic achievement (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Dutton et al., 2002; & Sullivan, 2001). Sullivan (2001) also offered that although academic and employment opportunity are top motivators that drive male and female students to enroll in online coursework,

women indicated that family and child care responsibilities were the primary reason for choosing online coursework over face-to-face settings. Dutton et al (2002) confirmed this finding by revealing that the two greatest responsibilities that students have outside of their class were work and childcare. Their study showed that a higher percentage (84%) of online students worked during the semester compared to only 55% of students in face-to-face courses. Online learners value the independence and control that online learning offers, as it allows them to study anytime and anywhere to meet other obligations and commitments (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012).

Student Use of Technology

Simonson et al. (2009) reported that online learners, with some level of exception for younger learners engaged in P-12 setting, were self-starters and had experience with using technology for solving problems and finding solutions. Students of all ages are constantly exposed and expected to be familiar with using technology for learning, networking, and communicating with peers and educators. Shelly, Cashman, Gunter and Gunter (2008) referenced that students who plan to be successful in the work environment in the 21st century, must possess creativity, innovative skills, critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaborative skills. These researchers go on to say that today's online learners are hyper-communicators, multitaskers, play oriented, and prefer that learning be self-directed and relevant. With constant exposure to and usage of technology, it is likely assumed that students who engage in online learning are capable of utilizing resources to attain success in online courses. However, in some cases, students often seek technical help, flexible and understanding instructors, advance course information, and sample assignments to assure success in the online environment (Mupinga, Nora & Yaw, 2006).

Influencing Factors on Students' Expectations

Several studies have concluded that students' expectations are dependent on factors including culture, gender, age, university type, and mode of study (Shank, Walker & Hayes, 1996; Twale, Shannon & Moore, 1997; Levin, 1993; Stevenson & Sander, 1998). Paechter et al.

(2010) revealed that students who place a high value on academic achievement and expect to succeed tend to be self-regulated learners who invest more efforts in learning, apply elaborate information processing strategies and simply devote more time to learning; all of which are desired behaviors for success in online learning. This finding purports that academic motivation and achievement is linked to the expectation to succeed in online courses.

Educational preparedness is another factor that influences students' expectations. Several researchers (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews & Nordstrom, 2009; Sander, Stevenson, King & Coates, 2000) sought to investigate the relationship between students' expectations, their first year experiences, and teacher perceptions, it was concluded that some students' expectations were unrealistic, and the students were not prepared to meet the expectations of the class in terms of workload, accessing teachers and adhering to feedback on assignments. Knowing students' expectations will provide instructional designers and faculty members an opportunity to help prepare students for the realistic aspects of the course.

Method

Mitchell (1974) suggested that expectancy theory surveys be developed using "the subject's own outcomes" in order to provide more reliability and validity to the study. Vroom's (1964) theory is based on a within subjects approach, so the subject should be asked to list his/her own outcomes, especially in settings where the researcher has no control over the outcomes (Mitchell, 1974). Limitations of this approach are that the list of outcomes could be very extensive and will need to be reduced by the researcher, and participants may not list negative outcomes which may be important to the study. In this study the researchers had some control by providing the same questions to all students. The list of expectations is extensive and will be thoroughly examined using NVivo 10 software. In an attempt to avoid researcher bias, the researchers did not interact with students during their discussions of their expectations. The extent to which students provided negative information was not the intent of this study, but all responses were examined regardless of tone.

Mitchell (1974) reviewed 23 studies that used expectancy theory and found "few problems with expectancy measures" (p. 1064). The most prevalent concerns that he found with measurement methodologies as they relate to this study are as follows:

- Investigators listing outcomes instead of each subject using his own outcomes is probably not the most accurate representation of what the theory would suggest. The impact of this problem is unknown;

- Distinctions between positive and negative outcomes and intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes should probably be included and analyzed separately; and

- Long lists of outcomes, as opposed to short lists, are probably detrimental. (Mitchell, 1974, p.1065)

The above concerns have been considered and the study findings will be analyzed with these concerns in mind. Furthermore, Irving and Meyer (1994) discussed some methodological difficulties in previous studies on met expectations and suggested that there are serious problems with the use of difference scores, direct measures, and measures that collapse across constructs. As a result this study took measures at entry and between six and eight weeks of the course. Irving and Meyer (1994) also suggested that future research hone in on the issues of using direct measures of confirmed expectations.

If researchers use direct measures of confirmed expectations, it should be clear what is being measured and to what extent did using direct measures help attain reliable conclusions. In response to surface methodology, Irving and Meyer (1994) suggested that further research be conducted to investigate the extent to which post-entry work experiences contribute to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. The extent to which the expectations are being met was not the focus of this study; however, some students did note whether or not and provided specific information regarding the extent to which their expectations were met. This study focused on assessing the at course entry expectations of online graduate students. Post entry experience was also assessed with limited responses.

The open-ended questions in the study provided the students with an opportunity to make general comments.

This resulted in a variety of suggestions, comments, complaints, and compliments related to course expectations. Themes that emerged included: compare and contrast previous learning to the content of current courses, share their personal and/or professional experiences, learn about course topic, achieve degree or course requirement, provide their own perspective, contribute to the course environment, and gain useful, applicable knowledge.

Measures of Authenticity

Several measures of authenticity were used in this study to ensure the data collection, and analysis provided reliability and validity of results (Merriam, 1998 & Patton, 2008). All data collection was administered the same way using the same questions in each of 13 sections of seven different online courses in a designated expectations discussion board within each course.

Data Collection

The data was collected over normal class procedures in which the researcher asked the following two questions at the beginning of the course in an expectations discussion board:

- What are your expectations of this course? (i.e. Why did you enroll in this course and what do you expect to learn?)

- What do you expect to contribute during this course?

    And the following two questions about mid-way through the course to re-assess their course expectations within the same expectations discussion board forum:

- Has your expectations changed since you wrote your initial expectations?

- If so, how and in what way(s)?

Because the questions were posted in the same forum, the students had the opportunity to review their previous postings. They also had the opportunity to read and respond to other students' postings. The researcher did not communicate with students regarding whether or not they should respond to other students' postings but some of the responses revealed that some of them did (see discussion section for more information). There were no grades

awarded for answering the questions and no penalization for not answering the questions. The first contact was August 2010 and the last contact for purposes of this study was December 2012.

Researcher Bias

Research biases were controlled by the researcher not responding to any of the expectations postings of students unless during member checking there was an obvious disconnect regarding the course content and the student's expectation that was perceived to have an immediate impact upon the student's presence within the course. This is discussed further in member checking. To limit this from occurring, the researcher provided a discussion board forum for students to introduce themselves to others within the course. If, through information provided in the introduction forum, it was determined that the student had enrolled in the wrong course –masters student in a doctoral course or masters student ineligible to take the level of course at this point in their matriculation process, the researcher informed the student that he was in the wrong course. The student may or may not have yet responded to the questions in the expectations forum. Otherwise, the researcher offered no input to students within this forum.

The researcher did provide feedback to students who reassessed their expectations at the six to eight week time period of the course. This was done only to acknowledge the student's posting and progress or lack thereof. Students were not informed that the researcher would provide feedback if they reassessed their expectations.

Member Checking

Member checking was done if the student posted information that was beyond the scope of the course or showed obvious confusion during the course. One example was of a student posting the desire to learn how to write a dissertation in a quantitative research design and analysis course. Member checking was also done during the transcript analysis phase since the data was not examined for themes during the course and respondents provided a variety or information within responses to each question. Portions of responses that were general in nature were discarded. See section on transcript analysis.

Triangulation of Data

Triangulation is broadly defined by Denzin (1978) as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (p. 291). Triangulation is used to provide researchers more confidence in the results of a study (Jick, 1979). Triangulation's effectiveness is based on the "premise that the weaknesses in each single method will be compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another… that multiple and independent measures do not share the same weaknesses or potential forbias" (Rohner, 1977, p. 134).

This study's researchers utilized sampling techniques and developed quantifiable schemes for coding complex data sets. Triangulation was achieved in this study because the data was gathered separately from different groups of students. Specifically, 13 different groups of students in seven different masters or doctoral courses were examined. The different groups of students produced comparable outcomes over a two year span of time. The different courses also produced comparable results using comparable approaches of data gathering. The within-methods comparisons were consistent and there was also consistency in between-methods comparisons (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2008). One comparison was done by comparing the group masters students' responses to the group of doctoral students' responses. Another comparison was completed by comparing the groups of students within different sections of the same course. The same questions were asked within each section of the different courses and there were patterns across courses (Patton, 2008). The participants reported similar thoughts and used similar wording in their written responses producing consistency across sources (Patton, 2008).

Transcript Analysis

The primary sources of data are the graduate students' responses in the form of transcripts from the expectations discussion boards in 13 sections of seven courses. To make sense of the data, we unitized and categorized the postings from the online expectations discussion boards to determine study participants and the coding scheme (See Tables 1 and 2).

Study Participants

There were 103 possible participants based upon enrollment numbers for the 13 sections of seven different courses (See Table 1). Of those 103, possible participants, there was a total of 85 responses or 82.52 percent response rate to the expectations of course question, 77 responses ork 74.75 percent response rate to the expected contribution to course question and 12 responses or 14.11 percent response rate to the expectation changes question. The expected changes percentage is based upon the 85 participants who provided a response to the initial expectations question.

The participants were further sorted by masters and doctoral levels. There were 48 possible masters and 55 possible doctoral respondents. The masters students' response rate to the expectations of the course was 95.83 percent and the doctoral students' response rate was 70.91 percent. The masters students' response rate on the expected contribution to the course was 89.58% and the doctoral students' response rate was 61.82 percent. The masters students' response rate when asked to reassess expectations was zero percent and the doctoral students' response rate was 30.77 percent. The term and course numbers are coded to protect the anonymity of participants.

Study Postings

The unitizing process involved a coding operation that separated the participants' online postings from other postings, such as the faculty member's feedback and

Term	Course	Enrolled	Expectations of Course	Expected Contribution to Course	Expectation Changes
A1	1	12	10	10	0
A1	2	14	14	14	0
A2	3	2	2	1	0
B1	4	13	13	13	2
B1	5	11	10	10	2
B2	4	5	0	0	0
B2	5	6	0	0	0
B3	3	6	6	6	0
B3	4	7	6	3	0
C1	6	6	6	5	2
C1	6	9	9	8	6
C2	7	5	2	2	0
C2	3	7	7	5	0
Total		103	85 (82.52%)	77 (74.75%)	12 (14.11%)
Masters		48	46 (95.83%)	43 (89.58%)	0 (0.00%)
Doctoral		55	39 (70.91)	34 (61.82%)	12 (30.77%)

Table 1. Study Participants

feedback from peers. We analyzed and assessed each posting based on whether they were doctoral or masters student courses and into the following categories: Expectation of course, expected contribution to course, and expectation changes. Once the data was placed into the three categories for both the masters and doctoral students in Excel spreadsheets, it was discovered that no masters students had responded to the expectation changes questions; so, three spreadsheets for doctoral students and two spreadsheets for masters students were identified as separate sources of data and imported into Nvivo 10 software. The data was then coded into five Nodes and were used to begin coding of the responses into what are referred to as child Nodes or thematic categories. There was 397 total messages coded and up

Emerging Themes	Expectations to Course (Masters)	Expectations to Course (Doctoral)	Contributions to Course (Masters)	Contributions to Course (Doctoral)	Expectation to Course (Doctoral)
1	Course/Degree requirement	Course/Degree requirement	Course Environment (Feelings)	Course Environment	Complaint
2	Current Usefulness of Content	Current Usefulness of Content	Share Experiences (personal and professional)	Share Experience (personal and professional)	Reason for change
3	Future Use of Content	Future Use of Content (being able to use learning)	Learn	Learn	To comment
4	Learn about course topic	Learn about course topic	Perspectives (personal and academic)	Perspectives	Met or did not meet expectations
5	Learn from other students	Learn from other students	Future Use (use learning to help others)	Complaint	Reason for no change
6	Help Succeed	Help Succeed		Degree Requirement	
7	Uncertainty/Complaint	Complaint			
8	Compare or contrast with current experience or knowledge	Compare or contrast with current experience or knowledge			

Table 2. Emerging Themes

to eight initial themes emerged with in the five different categories of responses. The initial coding scheme is outlined in Table 2. The number of responses to each category needed to be further assessed to determine consistency and accuracy of the emerging themes (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997); thus, grounded theory was conducted.

Emerging Themes

Grounded Theory

We used groundedtheory data analysis methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) to investigate the revealed patterns of interaction between and among the participant responses. Grounded theory provided constant comparison and analytic meaning to learn more about the phenomenon in this study where the focus was to investigate expectations of graduate students in the online environment. Using grounded theory, we reassessed and then recategorized the postings. When it was determined that new categories for the online postings were exhausted, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to develop rules that defined which postings were included or excluded from each category and a new coding sheet was developed.

Many revisions, modifications, and amendments were made until all the postings were placed into appropriate categories and further analysis did not provide new information or insights. During the constant comparison process, themes were confirmed or discarded based on the transcript analysis (See Stacked Matrix). Some themes were combined and others discarded. For expectations of course current and future use was combined for the master's students because they were similar based on expressed used in transcripts. Help Succeed and learn from other students were removed because not enough respondents confirmed theses as themes. The cutoff percentage was 15%. The themes complaint and learn from other students were eliminated for doctoral students because of not enough confirmatory responses. For contributions to course, learn and future use were not confirmed for master's students and to comment and complaint were not confirmed for doctoral students.

Findings

Our findings are expressed in Figure 1, the stacked matrix of the categories and themes as expressed by participants. Some participants provided multiple responses related to a particular theme. The percentages are based on unique participants regardless of whether or not they provided multiple responses. There are five themes of expectations of course expressed by master's students. The themes are: learn about course topic, course/degree requirement, current or future usefulness of content, compare or contrast course with current experience or knowledge and uncertainty/complaint.

There are also five themes of expectations of course expressed by doctoral students. The themes are: learn about course topic, future use of content/help succeed, course/degree requirement, compare or contrast with current experience or knowledge, and current usefulness of content.

There are three themes for contributions to course expressed by master's students. The themes are:share experiences, perspectives, and course environment. There are also three themes for contributions to course expressed by doctoral students. The themes are: share experiences, perspectives, learn, and course environment. The doctoral students' expressed themes of reason for change and met or did not meet expectations for the category expectation changes.

Categories with Number of Participants and Themes	Number of Participant Usable responses	Number of Participants who provided usable responses	Percentage of possible Participants
Expectations of Course (Masters) (46)			
Learn about course topic	29	28	60.87%
Course/Degree requirement	27	26	56.52%
Current or Future Usefulness of Content	21	19	41.30%
Compare or contrast with current experience or knowledge	9	9	19.57%
Uncertainty/Complaint	9	8	17.39%
Expectations of Course (Doctoral) (39)			
Learn about course topic	40	37	94.87%
Future Use of Content (being able to use learning)/Help Succeed	27	25	64.10%
Course/Degree requirement	22	22	56.41%
Compare or contrast with current experience or knowledge	22	22	56.41%
Current Usefulness of Content	12	12	30.77%
Contributions to Course (Masters) (43)			
Share Experiences (personal and professional)	27	20	46.51%
Perspectives (personal and academic)	19	15	34.88%
Course Environment (Feelings)	13	12	27.91%
Contributions to Course (Doctoral) (34)			
Share Experience (personal and professional)	34	31	91.18%
Course Environment	23	18	52.94%
Learn	16	15	44.12%
Perspectives	7	7	20.59%
Expectation Changes (Doctoral) (12)			
Reason for change/no change	12	11	91.66%
Met or did not meet expectations	2	2	16.67%

Figure 1. Stacked mabrix

Discussion

The broad question of this study is whether or not graduate students in online courses bring expectations with them to the course and the findings of this study confirm that they do. Do their expectations and to what extent do their expectations align with what the faculty members intend to teach is the subject of inquiry? This study did not ask students if they read the syllabus prior to posting their expectations; however, some students did indicate that they had read the syllabus prior to responding to the questions. The students who had read the syllabus still had expectations of the course.

One group of researchers found that neither experiences nor expectations significantly explained why employees quit their jobs (Hom et al., 1999). They revised the theory to posit that realistic job previews (RJPs) affect emotional discomfort (via expectations), without specifying the nature of this pathway. Their revised theory postulated that problem-focused coping fosters job satisfaction. In addition, they posited that RJPs directly boost beginning employee's belief about a firm's honesty and concern rather than indirectly via expectations. Finally, their theory stated that post hire experiences improved job satisfaction which could be independent of a RJP (Hom et al., 1999). In relation to this study, knowing the expectations of students can help faculty members develop realistic course previews for student. Knowing that students expect to compare and contrast course content to previous courses will allow faculty members to inform students of the uniqueness of their course. The course may or may not relate to previous courses that a student has completed. The student should also be able to assess this from the syllabus. The uncertainty expressed by master's students could be alleviated with a realistic course preview especially when the course is new to the program.

Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2006) indicated that students whose experiences exceeded their expectations understood how the materials in the course related, got to know other students better, and felt a greater sense of camaraderie than expected. The students in this study were not asked whether or not their expectations had been met; yet, two of them did state that their expectations had been met or exceeded. Students must understand what is expected of them upon entering a course to make realistic expectations and plans to perform at expected levels in order to achieve (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006). This was revealed by the uncertainty expressed and complaints expressed by some students. When they were unsure, they expressed that they did not know what to expect.

Some students noted that they read other students' postings prior to posting their own, so they may or may not have been influenced by their peers' expectations. The extent to which this occurred is un examinable. The between course comparison showed consistency of responses to provide validity to some of the within course questions.

Many students expressed that they wanted to be able to use the information immediately on their current job. Online learning in academic environments is being treated like training by the working adults enrolled in the courses. Students want immediate use for the educational content. Traditionally, education is meant for future use while training is supposed to be for immediate use (Banks, 2002). It was also interesting to find that master's students in particular were not entering the courses to learn new content as much as they wanted to share their own personal experiences and/or professional experiences.

The extent to which the graduate students wanted to self-describe their personal characteristics was also an interesting finding (i.e. good problem solver, very knowledgeable). They expressed the desire to use these characteristics to help others within the course environment and providing good advice based upon their "unique" or "different" perspective.

According to Schaubroeck, Shaw, Duffy, and Mitra (2008), there is considerable evidence that people react very negatively to under-met expectations when it relates to underpayment inequity, unequal social treatment, and work experiences. One way that organizations address this concern is to provide a RJP before the new employee starts. The met expectations theory posits that a RJP is positively correlated with perceived honesty, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, while correlating negatively with emotion-focused coping and withdrawal

cognitions. (Hom et al., 1999). Within the academic environment, the course syllabus would be synonymous with RJP; however, if the student does not read the syllabus it is difficult to resolve anxiety and confusion. Determining their expectations through this study provides another tool to help reduce concerns of graduate students.

In addition, Moser (2005) cautioned that unmet expectations increase with tenure on a job, so it can be argued that if too much time passes, whatever that time period is, there may be more dissatisfaction in the job than in an early entry stage. If job dissatisfaction increase with tenure as Moser suggested, then the perception of unmet expectations will increase over time convoluting the individual's perception of their pre-entry expectations. Since graduate students expressed a desire to meet course and/or degree requirements and these accomplishments occur over a time period, it is essential that their expectations are determined and hopefully met early in the process so that they will be satisfied with each course and ultimately their degree. Knowing the graduate students' expectations and being able to address them, if possible, may resolve many issues they face upon entering an online course or degree program.

Conclusion

Understanding the expectations of graduate students in online courses adds to the knowledge base of online learning. The students want to contribute to the courses within which they enroll. They want to interact with other students regardless of the content or design of the course. They want to share their knowledge and their personal and/or professional experiences. They feel that they have unique perspectives to contribute regardless of the course content. They also want to influence the course environment. Although all the courses were online, the students, especially the master's students, wanted to share their personal feelings andemotions in the environment. Motivational related terms were used throughout the students' responses. Many of the responses began with hope, believe, or goal but not from a position of confidence; yet, the students wanted to share with other students (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). The desire for interaction with others was strong, but they did not want to learn from other students.

Course topics may have contributed to responses related to learning from other students. Graduates students may also perceive that other graduate students are incapable of teaching them.

Faculty members and course designers have another framework to assess students' expectations of courses. The use of met-expectations hypothesis is applicable to the academic environment and can be used to gain an understanding of ways of enhancing the learning experiences of both faculty and students.

Future Implications

Wanous et al. (1992) suggested that a discussion of the circumstance of a person's expectations not being met because they are over-fulfilled is needed. The extent to which over-fulfilled expectations influence job satisfaction should be further researched. The extent of over-fulfilled expectations or negative reactions to both unmet and exceed expectations Irving and Montes (2009) was not addressed in this study, but can be assessed in future studies as the items in the stacked matrix can be used to survey a larger population.

This study did not assess whether or not the students read the course descriptions or the syllabus prior to responding to the questions in the expectations discussion board. Future studies can assess whether or not students read the syllabus and if the reading of the syllabus influenced their expectations of a courses.

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