

Improving Course Completion Rates through the Use of a Distance Learning Assistant

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to provide a supplemental support system to students taking online courses. Courses selected were those with historically low completion rates and were supplemented with a distance learning assistant (DLA) to provide encouragement and guidance. Overall retention and student satisfaction were evaluated. Although not significant, a strong numerical improvement was observed in both courses selected (Course 1, 100% completion vs. 62% previous and Course 2, 67% completion vs. 52% previous). Student responses towards the DLA were positive and it was determined, the DLA positively influenced (92%) their commitment to the course. Additionally, students felt the DLA positively (82%) contributed to their final grade. The DLA used in this study provided structural support (timelines, dates, guidelines, encourage) and not academic content. Use of a DLA demonstrated that non-content support may be a viable way to improve course completion.

Key words: distance learning, assistant, completion, rates

1. Introduction

Distance education is an innovative, alternative approach to traditional face-to-face classroom. Today, distance learning is a common part of the fabric of universities and in some cases, the university only exist virtual. The number of higher education students who participate in at least one online course each year continues to grow. In Fall 2010, online enrollments accounted for 31.3% in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2013). As distance learning grows, so does the desire for improved quality of education. In a recent study, the United States Department of Education (2009) state that students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction.

Distance education has greatly expanded opportunities for learners through enhanced flexibility of courses, especially in oversubscribed sections or where courses are offered at similar times thus creating an inherent challenge to scheduling. Despite some of the advantages of distance learning, careful attention must be given to some known challenges in online courses, such as access, guidance, format and level of comfort (Driver, 2002). Although the evidence supports that students enrolled in computer-based instruction perform equally as well when compared to their lecture-based counterparts, there is a well-documented high dropout rates in courses delivered

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via computer-based instruction (Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2002; Kozeracki, 1999; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Therefore, in order to address the high dropout rates within distance education, the objective of this study is to utilize a distance learning assistant (DLA) in improving course completion rates and satisfaction in courses known to have historically low completion rates.

2. Materials and Methods

In Indiana, there is a cooperative organization, Indiana College Network (ICN) which facilitates sharing of online courses between partner institutions. The ICN arrangement allows students to take courses and earn credit at their primary institution through this arrangement. ICN partners offer a wide range of course formats such as eight week, traditional semester long and yearlong self-paced courses. Students that participate in ICN courses are registered by both the home and partnering institution with the partner providing the educational experience.

The distance learning center (DLC) within Purdue Extended Campus (PEC) serves as a testing facility for Purdue West Lafayette (PWL) students, especially for those students taking courses through the ICN. Purdue students taking courses through the ICN are for degree purposes where the equivalent is offered at Purdue. PWL students attend classes in two primary semesters (fall and spring) with limited offerings during the summer. Students who have not completed the yearlong ICN course by the end of the first semester, receive an Incomplete (I) on the transcript. If a student fails to complete the course by the 12th week of the second subsequent semester, not including summer, the resulting grade is a F. After this deadline then the Incomplete “I” turns into an Incomplete Failure “IF”. The IF remains on the student’s transcript.

In the ICN partnership, two courses with historically high attrition rates were selected for strategic intervention. For the purposes of this study, the two courses will be named as Course 1 and Course 2. The cohort of students selected for this study started their yearlong courses in Fall 2010 semester. In late August, through the middle of November 2011, a staff member of the DLC intervened in these student’s progress through the course. In this intervention the staff member was referred to as the distance learning assistant (DLA). Both courses selected for this study were structured to contain eight assignments, a midterm and a final. In order to track and encourage students through the course, the DLA received regular progress reports from ICN partner, including all assignments and grades and made those clearly known to students.

The DLA intervention involved a series of weekly emails and would increase to the DLA phoning the student. The emails began with an introduction describing the purpose of the DLA. The DLA would email students a personalized schedule of the assignments to articulate timelines, scheduling of exams, on-campus help, and overall encouragement. The emails also included assignment deadlines in order to complete the courses. During the duration of this intervention, students received weekly encouragement and useful information regarding on-campus resources for assistance. The DLA provided no course content assistance. If a student asked an academic question, the DLA directed them towards the resources, i.e., course instructor and/or on-campus resources. The DLA monitored student progress through the course and if they were not progressing as intended, the DLA contacted them either by email or phone. The DLA served as a connection back to the ICN partner and guided students through a self-paced course.

In this study, both completion rates and student satisfaction of the DLA were examined. To estimate satisfaction by the student, a formal survey was created and administered using Qualtrics. The survey contained eleven questions from a 622 question databank maintained by the university (Table 1). All questions within the

survey were optional and identity of student remained anonymous. Questions one through four were categorized as general questions about the course. Questions five through eleven were categorized to evaluate the DLA specifically. These questions were designed to estimate the level of assistance provided by the DLA such as helpfulness, guidance, explanations and communication. Because both classes received the same level of support from the DLA a single survey was sent to both classes. Prior to the survey, students were informed that this was a new service that the DLC was testing. For confidentiality purposes, the participants were not asked for any identifying information, such as demographics.

Table 1 Survey Instrument Used to Evaluate the Course and Distance Learning Assistant

Question
General Course Evaluation
1. I understand what is expected of me in this course.
2. Course requirements and deadlines are clearly explained.
3. I understand how to turn in assignments.
4. The distance format of this course was consistent with what I expected.
5. My distance learning assistant is very helpful.
6. Course information (calendars, approaching deadlines, etc.) is clearly explained to me by the distance learning assistant
7. The distance assistant provided adequate feedback to guide my progress in this course.
8. My distance assistant lets me know how well I am progressing in this course.
9. My distance assistant has been a helpful factor in my final grade.
10. I believe my distance learning assistant wants me to succeed in this course.
11. I would recommend adopting the distance learning assistant in online classes to.

Chi square analysis was used to compare the cumulative past (sum of three years previously) vs. the intervention period. To estimate student response to the intervention, a continuous Likert-type scale design (Brown, 1988) was chosen. In brief, participants were able to move a slider to the result they felt most comfortable. The two extremes of the slider were labeled “strongly disagree” which translated to a score of zero and “strongly agree” which resulted in a score of 100. After the slider was moved, the numerical result (between 0-100) of the relative location is displayed back to the participant. Respondents could edit all answers before submission of the survey. The slider allows researchers to collect a greater granularity of detail than they can with the Likert scale. Respondents who used the slider scale reported higher levels of satisfaction with this instrument as a means of capturing their true opinions (Taylor, 2010). To test the validity, non-students were utilized to estimate reliability and the general usability of the survey before utilized in the actual study. The final survey was sent out by email to participants from the DLA after the course had concluded. Comparisons were made using SPSS.

3. Findings

All students which participated in Course 1 completed the course (100%), when compared to a previous three year average of 64% (Figure 1). Despite the 36% improvement in completion rate, statistically there was no difference ($P \leq 0.20$). For Course 2 (Figure 2) and following intervention, 67% of the students completed the when course compared to the three year average 52% and like Course 1 was not found significant ($P \leq 0.37$).

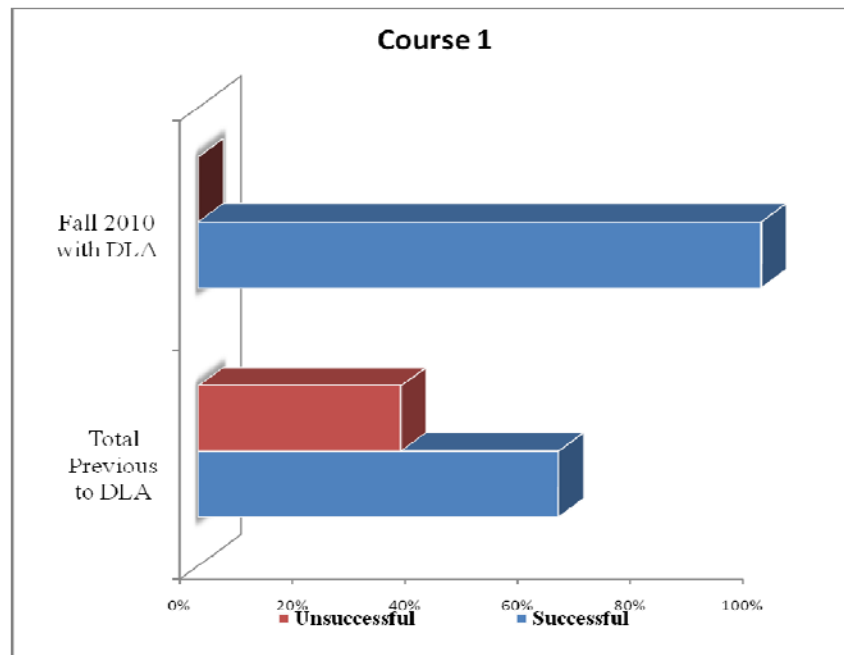


Figure 1 Completion Rates Before and After Implementing a Distance Learning Assistant (DLA)

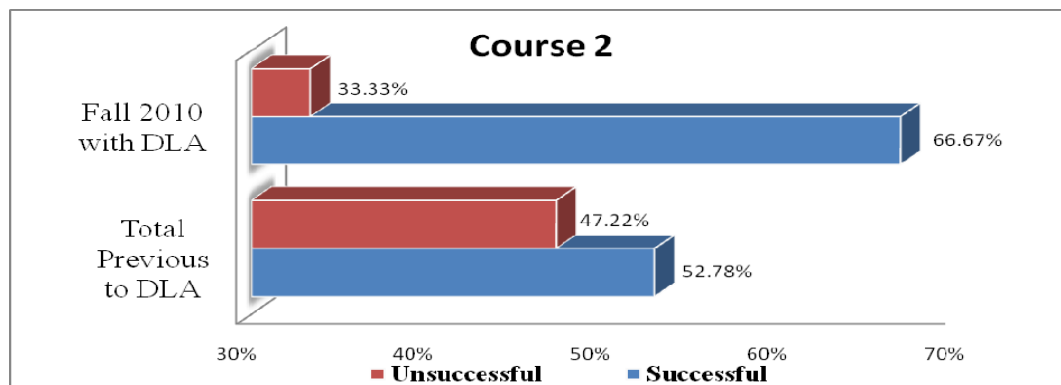


Figure 2 Completion Rates Before and After Implementing a Distance Learning Assistant (DLA)

The general student evaluation questions (1–4) demonstrate (scores from 72–91) illustrating the needs and expectations are being covered, i.e., turning in assignments, expectations (Table 2). Seven questions were asked about the intervention of the DLA specifically (Table 2). The scores for the DLA ranged from 81–97 and suggest the DLA improved the online experience for students; more specifically, the students ranked the DLA at 97 when asked if the university should adopt an online assistant (Table 2). Likewise, student perception that the DLA wanted them to succeed (91) was high (Table 2).

In addition to the quantifiable attributes of implementing a DLC, many unforeseen outcomes did occur. The DLA discovered that students expected almost immediate feedback on questions and struggled to learn it may be a day or two vs. what a student may experience in a classroom where feedback is instant or in a one-on-one conversation. As a result of this valuable feedback through this intervention experiment, the DLA alerted ICN instructors, so adjustments could be made if warranted.

Table 2 Outcomes of Course Evaluations and of the Distance Learning Assistant

#	Question	Mean Score (0–100)	N	Std. Dev.
General Course Evaluation				
1.	I understand what is expected of me in this course.	72.11	9	25.85
2.	Course requirements and deadlines are clearly explained.	81.11	9	23.05
3.	I understand how to turn in assignments.	91.44	9	14.19
4.	The distance format of this course was consistent with what I expected.	74.44	9	30.35
5.	My distance learning assistant is very helpful.	81.11	9	19.86
6.	Course information (calendars, approaching deadlines, etc.) is clearly explained to me by the distance learning assistant	81.00	8	23.79
7.	The distance assistant provided adequate feedback to guide my progress in this course.	91.17	6	15.5
8.	My distance assistant lets me know how well I am progressing in this course.	86.86	7	18.03
9.	My distance assistant has been a helpful factor in my final grade.	81.67	6	21.6
10.	I believe my distance learning assistant wants me to succeed in this course.	91.40	5	14.31
11.	I would recommend adopting the distance learning assistant in online classes to help other students.	97.00	5	4.8

4. Significance

The primary objective of this study was to provide a support model for students, which in turn might improve completion rates and overall satisfaction of online courses. Even though there were no significant improvements in completion rates, the observed outcomes (enhanced completion) merits further investigation; that is, the overall number of students which made up the cohort examined was relatively low, but the positive trend is encouraging especially as universities attempt to expand online opportunities for students. What is unique in this particular experiment is the kind of assistant utilized; more specifically, most courses have “teaching assistants” attached to the course and can help both with logistical and content related questions. In the present study, the DLA was an “assistant” from the standpoint of directing them to resources, encouraging them, providing timelines, clarity, etc., which is quite different from many who may assist with a course.

The survey clearly demonstrated that results indicated that students did appreciate the intervention by scoring “I would recommend Purdue adopt the DLA in online classes to help other students” as 97 out of 100. This survey question may have served as a catch all for the comments and feedback that was in the form of email responses. This question stood out that while the time with a DLA was short, students saw the value in it and wanted the DLA model to continue. Survey results also indicated that “My Purdue distance assistant has been a helpful factor in my final grade” and “The Purdue distance assistant provided adequate feedback to guide my progress in this course” as both much lower than the overall recommendation to continue this intervention. This could be attributed to difficulty attributing success to the role of the DLA rather than their own abilities. Nichols (2010) found interviews with students who were retained revealed that students frequently attribute their success to their own efforts. Student support services in distance education might therefore be perceived by its beneficiaries as a “hygiene” factor in that their presence is not generally appreciated by students. It is encouraging that students found the service to be helpful enough that they would recommend it to people in a similar situation.

5. Conclusions

Additional research should be conducted on support models required for distance learning students with particular attention to those participating outside their primary institution. Findings from this study are based on a small sample size and only two courses. However, the results here do begin a valuable evaluation of supporting the already isolated distance student who is involved with additional institutions for education. The responses to initial emails provided a new awareness of the isolation and difficulties these students. This new awareness was an important lesson for the DLC when considering future support models. This research's survey instrument was designed to evaluate the correlation between the DLA encouraging course progress compared to final retention outcomes. Based on early student feedback, it would be an informative to explore the personal value of the DLA to the students.

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