University of Oregon – Student focus group

Key Learnings

- Students prefer face to face classes than online learning as they find they are more motivated
- Online courses are more suited to students taking further courses after graduation
- Educators sometime struggle with using the learning platform
- The LMS was valuable for revisiting lecture recordings and for uploading assignments
- Technology is a valuable tool in the classroom

Technology is an integral part of today's university student's lives. Most universities around the world offer both online and face-to-face courses. The following insights are from a small focus group of students at the University of Oregon, a school of approximately 22,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The focus group of students come from disciplines that include math, physics, accounting, education, geography, economics, business, and psychology.

Even though these students have grown up with technology as an integral part of their life, 88% said they preferred face-to-face classes. They felt they were more motivated and engaged when in a class with others where they can interact with their peers and professors. One of the students said:

> *"I need the human interaction to be engaged in a lecture. There is something about social interaction that makes learning easier and more efficient. …………. I would not take an online course unless it was absolutely necessary"*

Another student stated, in reference to her general study courses, not the more focused courses of her major that she: "*just goes through the motions and do what I need to do to receive the grade I want. The course isn't as meaningful to me."* And another stated:

> *"I am much more motivated in a face-to-face setting to pay attention and actually learn the material as opposed to at home where distractions are plentiful, and I can easily convince myself to do something other than coursework."*

All the students in the focus group have taken online courses and most of these courses were ones that fit into their general education criteria as opposed to courses that met the requirements of their major. Most of the online courses taken were asynchronous and the students took them when they fit into an otherwise busy schedule. The only student who had a synchronous class which had web conferencing which he liked because it was live, but he also said:

> *"it also kind of defeated the purpose of an online course if we all had to meet at the same time every week – why not just have it in person in a classroom if we all have this time available".*

What was interesting is one student discussed her online versus face to face classes at different times in her life. She much preferred face to face classes when completing her Bachelors of Science degree as it was an easy transition from high school. Later in her education, she felt her learning style had changed and she is taking more online courses – they fit her schedule better, they are more affordable, and her academic stamina has changed as she has gotten older.

University of Oregon uses Canvas as their online platform, although in the past they have used Blackboard and WebWork. Overall the students really enjoy the platform and feel it is easy to use. But they also stated that some of their professors do not know how to use the platform properly and just dump their files into one section instead of organising it. They did like the use of video lectures and the ease of uploading assignments. What was consistent was they felt there could have been much better use of discussion boards and forums for students to work together and get assistance on problem sets. Students felt that the professors, if using the online platform, need to be educated in how to use it to the best ability to get students engaged, motivated and learning.

Although online classes were not the first choice for these students, all of them took laptops to class. They felt that technology was a necessary part of their educational experience whether it was being used in large lecture halls to take notes, or in smaller seminar classes to complete group work.