Blackboard®

Redefining Value for Online Students | May 2016

Background

The design team regularly conducts a unique form of research with the users of our products. We visit with students and teachers, in the context of their homes and offices, in order to understand the problems they face and to build empathy with them. As a result of this research, we are better prepared to identify opportunities for design, and ensure that our products have a positive emotional impact on all parts of the academic journey.

This report describes the results of a research effort focused on online learning, in the context of higher education in the United States.

Intent & Method

Our specific research goal was to better understand how students feel throughout their online learning experience, and how those feelings impact their decision making and outcomes. We follow two forms of applied ethnographic research, Contextual Inquiry and Participatory Design. We observe what students do and learn why they do it. We watch and talk with students in three-hour sessions; we explore their homes, computers, habits, preferences and struggles. We learn from them about their journey, and empathize with their unique experiences.

Research participants went through a number of activities that expose how they perceive, organize, and engage with their online classes on a day to day basis as well as how their current experiences fit into their broader educational journey. Students walked us through software and tools they use for their classes in detail. They also constructed timelines and created aspirational mood boards that helped them articulate big decisions, valuable moments, and emotional perceptions. In combination, these open-ended activities quickly inform a layered, rich interpretation of each student's practical concerns and behaviors as well their underlying motivations and intents.

Insights

Redefining Value for Online Students

Overview

Insights are provocations. We synthesize the data we hear in the field into a series of framing statements. Each statement is intended to change the way we think about the academic journey, and to help us consider optimistic futures related to online and hybrid learning.

Our insights focus on motivations necessary for students to succeed in online learning. These motivations are about perception: perceived value, quality of experience, and social constructs of learning.

Foundational Insights

1. When students take a class online, they make a tacit agreement to a poorer experience which undermines their educational self worth.

2. Students perceive online classes as a loophole they can exploit that also shortcuts the "real" college experience.

3. Online classes don't have the familiar reference points of in-person classes which can make the courses feel like a minefield of unexpected difficulties.

4. Online students don't experience social recognition or mutual accountability, so online classes end up low priority by default.

5. Students take more pride in the skills they develop to cope with an online class than what they learn from it.

6. Online classes neglect the aspects of college that create a lasting perception of value.

1 When students take a class online, they make a tacit agreement to a poorer experience which undermines their educational self worth.

Summary

Most students who enroll in an online class recognize and express that they are agreeing to a lesser experience. This creates an emotional context where students are less likely to value or prioritize the experiences they have in an online class. They describe their online or hybrid experiences as isolating, and worry that the isolation will impact their personal trajectory after they complete their studies. When given a choice, they relegate online learning to subjects they perceive to be less compelling or important for their long-term professional goals.

From Students

Sophia, Finance
"Look at what you're trying to gain [from the class]... if it applies to what you want to do with your life, then don't take it online... it's not as enriching of an experience."

Sophia, Finance
"[If all my classes were online] I think it would just make me focus on my own perspective more. I wouldn't ever hear the intelligent side of another story that I may not agree with but I could appreciate if somebody explains it well."

James, Biology
"The online class was 100% the reason I made an A."

Eva, Sports Management
"You're more of a critical thinker in class than you are online."

Eva, Sports Management
"I want to say I would be a more secluded person [if all my classes were online]. I feel like if you have online classes you're gonna get used to interacting less with people. So that's gonna influence your career choice and what you want to do in life because you don't really want to interact with people but I like to interact with people so I feel like that would have probably have changed."

2 Students perceive online classes as a loophole they can exploit, that also shortcuts the "real" college experience.

Summary

Taking an online class feels like a way around the system that allows students to circumvent an arduous class, cram a super-human amount of credits into a semester, or pad their transcript with an easy A. Students are aware that these perceived benefits come with a trade-off: it is unlikely they will develop a genuine interest or connection with the subject.

For students who attend well-known, 4-year universities, the established brand of the school acts as a form of risk mitigation for the student that allows them to experiment with online education without having to thoroughly justify its merits. For students at online universities, irrespective of the quality of the content or format of classes, they feel that they are missing the fantasized social "college experience."

From Students

Sebastian, Undeclared, exploring Nursing
"It feels like I'm jumping hurdles rather than learning."

James, Biology
"To just be completely honest because I knew I was going to make an A. I knew it was online. I knew I would be able to get the answers easily. And I made an A. I took the course in like 3 hours. I sat down and took it and knocked the course out. I don't even remember it."

Eva, Sports Management
"I feel like that secludes you more from everything on campus. You go here for a reason: there's lots of resources, lots of organizations, and there's so many things to do on campus. I feel like that [taking all her classes online] wouldn't have given me a complete college experience."

Gigi, Journalism & Human Resources
"I want it to not hurt my GPA. If it helps it, great, but if it doesn't really affect it, that's okay too. But something where I don't have to take too much time away from the other courses that are more specific to my degree track."

3 Online classes don't have the familiar reference points of in-person classes which can make the courses feel like a minefield of unexpected difficulties.

Summary

On the surface, the flexible and somewhat anonymous nature of online classes is alluring, especially for struggling or over-extended students. But in practice, there are many factors that make online classes feel opaque or unexpectedly difficult. Students are accustomed to the collective awareness of a room full of their peers. Questioning of expectations and calls for clarifications from other students normally serve as queues that help each student decide what to pay attention to. The presence and response of peers gives students only passive access to a steady stream of references points for how they are doing in a class. And without those reference points, students lose awareness of how their pacing compares to other students.

From Students

Gigi, Journalism & Human Resources
"Online courses should be flexible with your schedule. And that, well like, since I'm in a self-paced one, it's flexible and whenever I want to work on it, the time available for that is flexible and I don't have like set times to work on it like I would for an in-person course."

Isaiah, Mass Communications
"It can be helpful, but also very frustrating, cause if you don't plan stuff out you can feel very overwhelmed and very isolated. I think If I was doing some of those online classes without tutors I would feel very isolated and that I couldn't do it myself.

Eva, Sports Management
"You don't pace yourself like you would in-class. If it's an online class it's all on your own and you're responsible for when you do it."

Gigi, Journalism & Human Resources
"Online courses run a greater risk because they're probably not as engaging and it's easier to fall behind and feel more helpless with your coursework."

4 Online students don't experience social recognition or mutual accountability, so online classes end up low priority by default.

Summary

The absence of an actual classroom environment full of people has a direct impact on many students' effort in an online class. Students feel that in-person courses have more confrontation with and external judgement from their peers, which changes the way they view themselves and their in-class contributions.

For many students, demonstrating that they are prepared and engaged to their peers and the instructor is important, and helps them focus. The lack of physical collaborative context causes less self-consciousness, and means they can become socially lazy.

From Students

Sophia, Finance
"I definitely do the work in the other classes first because... I don't want to be the person that isn't contributing... I would definitely do work for this class last. It's a sense of validation. It's good when people are like, 'she knew the answer to that'. That's happened in my classes before and it changed people's perception of me."

Sophia, Finance
"It's harder to be prepared for an online class because you don't have a reference point for where others are and you may not get cold called like you would in an actual class. You're not forced to give any feedback so you're not articulating what you learned in the class or what you got from the lecture... "One time I watched the bachelor in the background at the same time [during her class live stream]... I've never been the kind of person to do that. But in this class I have become one of *those* people."

5 Students take more pride in the skills they develop to cope with an online class than what they learn from it.

Summary

Achieving success as an online student is less about self-discipline or motivation, and more about each student's system of planning, their ability to quickly decipher "what's required", and their tolerance for the emotionally isolating aspects of being online. Successful online students manage their complex schedules through an active planning process, while those who struggle tend to assume the online class will remind them to engage.

Successful students are also able to quickly decipher what is absolutely require, skipping over the majority of content. Some students described online classes as a valuable experience in conjunction with their in-person college experiences and took pride in the development of a separate, complementary set of skills, but also made it clear that they wouldn't value a college experience that was centered only around those skills.

From Students

Eva, Sports Management

"I'll look at what's due but I don't really go by that because I have my planner. Most of this stuff you don't even have to open unless you just really like want to read it. So really I only do stuff that's required for a grade because I don't have time."

Sebastian, Undeclared, exploring Nursing

"I'm getting the grades... I'm getting the course. The course is not really about learning and understanding... I don't feel like it is. It feels like I'm jumping hurdles rather than learning."

Eva, Sports Management

"I think I'm a more well rounded person. Online, you're not social at all. In class and on campus, you're walking, you're talking, you go to events on campus, you interact with other people. So I feel like it's made me more well rounded because I can interact with people but I can also do work online and know what work I need to do on the computer."

6 Online classes neglect the aspects of college that create a lasting perception of value.

Summary

When people describe the experiences that they value from their college educations, they often talk about relationships they formed, mentors that inspired them, cultures they were exposed to in programs like *study abroad*, and internships that changed their perspective. These experiences, which fall outside the requirements for a degree, alter student visions for their future, foster pride in the institution's educational opportunities, and in-turn promote a confident foundation for identity.

Students feel that online learning lacks these opportunities. Without these supplemental forms of support, even experienced students end up in an emotional "holding pattern": waiting for some revelation about their passion to drive their long-term goals while at the same time choosing a path of convenience that is unlikely to inspire them or prompt them to consider new possibilities.

From Students

Adele, Communications
"I think the online experience is basically just about making it possible to get an education. I think that's the purpose. I'm never gonna be like, 'Oh, I'll always remember the time I was taking that online course.'"

Lynn, Pre-Med in Psychology
"I was either going to study for my MCAT or study abroad. I chose to study abroad. This semester has been really stressful because of it, but I wouldn't take it back. That was one the best experiences of my life. Definitely experiencing other cultures by traveling or hanging out with people who are from different cultures is really important to me."

Gigi, Journalism & Human Resources
"I took the class last semester for interpersonal communications and I loved, loved, loved... that was the first class in college that I like loved going to. That was my deciding factor and not mixed in with the feelings and uncertainty about journalism. That's when I added HR [as a second major]... If I had taken this class online, it wouldn't have sparked that initial interest in me."

Adele, Communications
"I think that being an alumni is a big thing because it can connect you in so many ways...And I can't really get that from an online college."

An Opportunity for Change

Summary

The insights presented here represent a synthesis of attitudes from real college students and their actual college experiences. Many of the insights are negative, and seem to paint a hopeless picture of online and hybrid learning. But we view these in an optimistic light. These insights highlight areas that are ripe for product and service innovation, that beg for change, and that can be addressed by all of the constituents in higher education.

The problems described here are not insurmountable. By understanding the issues and empathizing with students, we can collaboratively drive positive change through the academic journey. Instructors, administrators, students, and providers like Blackboard should work together to make positive change in these areas.

Thanks!