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Quarterly Review OF Distance Education

RESEARCH THAT GUIDES PRACTICE

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Michael Simonson
Anymir Orellana

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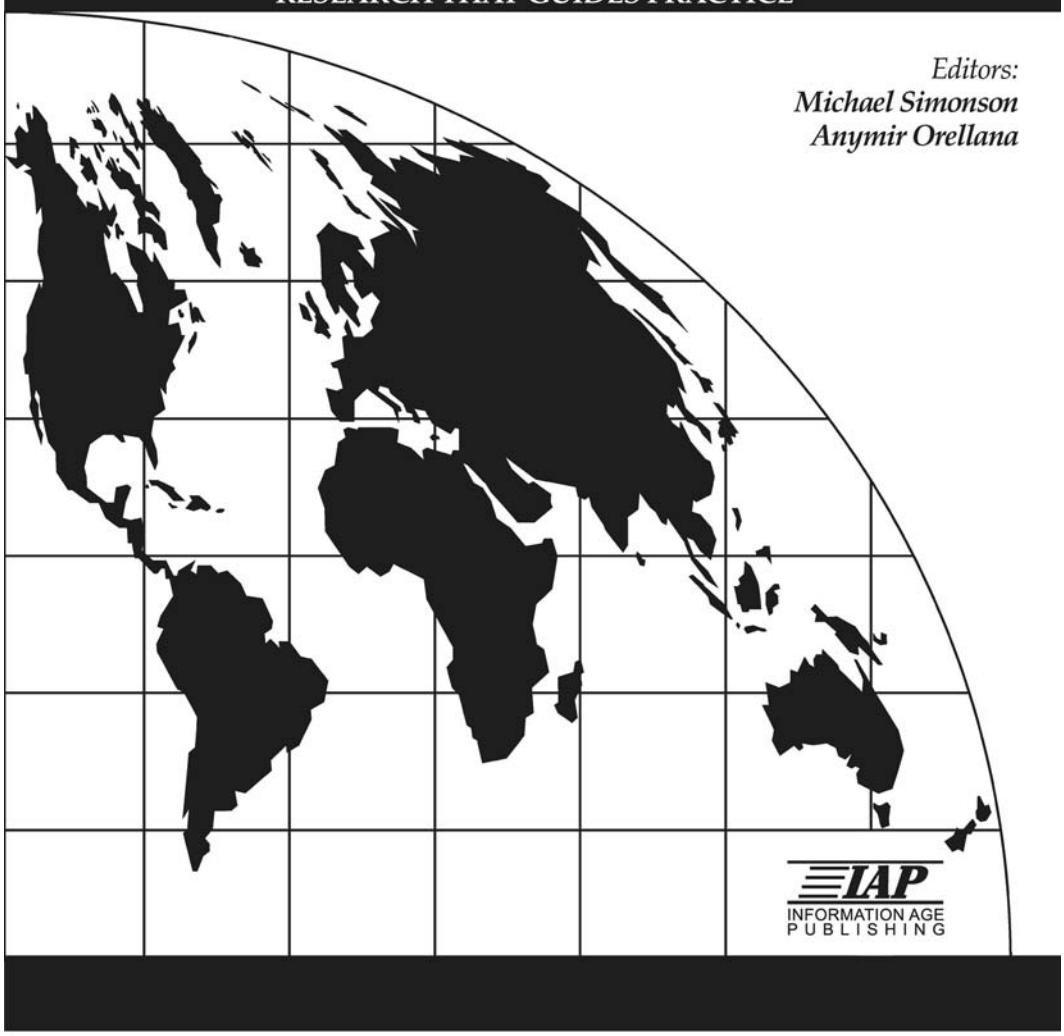

Quarterly Review of Distance Education
Editors and Editorial Board

Michael Simonson
Editor
Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice
Nova Southeastern University
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314
800-986-3223 x8563
simsmich@nova.edu

Anymir Orellana
Editor
Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice
Nova Southeastern University
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314
orellana@nova.edu

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"Research That Guides Practice"

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ARTICLES

Graduate Student Perceptions Regarding the Impact of Class Size on Effective Online Teaching and Learning
Maureen Walsh Koricke, Dixie Abernathy, and Teneal Pardue 1

Tools to Create Interactive Digital Communities as Our World Embraces Virtual Learning
Jeanette Abrahamsen, Glenn Gordon Smith, and Vanya Tsvetkova 17

Adjunct Faculty Satisfaction With Online Teaching
Shane Kelley and Michelle Kilburn 31

Reflective Course Evaluation as a Complement to Traditional Course Evaluations
Mary Risacher and Sara Fier 43

Student Perceptions of the Importance of Online Course Design Elements
Adeyemi Adelakun, Carrie Lewis Miller, and Michael Manderfeld 63

BOOK REVIEW

Learning in the Digital Age, by Tutaleni Asino
Reviewed by Mohsen Keshavarz and Maliheh Ahmadian 75

Professional Almanac of Distance Education and Educational Technology
Vanaja Nethi and Alexander Martinie 79

Author Biographical Data 83

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* is a rigorously refereed journal publishing articles, research briefs, reviews, and editorials dealing with the theories, research, and practices of distance education. The *Quarterly Review* publishes articles that utilize various methodologies that permit generalizable results which help guide the practice of the field of distance education in the public and private sectors. The *Quarterly Review* publishes full-length manuscripts as well as research briefs, editorials, reviews of programs and scholarly works, and columns. The *Quarterly Review* defines distance education as institutionally based, formal education, where the learning group is separated and where interactive technologies are used to unite the learning group.

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Submit your manuscript, typed double-spaced. Manuscripts are generally between 30 and 50 pages in length and must conform to the style of the most recent edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Longer manuscripts will be considered also. Research briefs may be shorter, normally between 3–10 pages.

The name(s), affiliation(s), address(es), and phone, fax, and email address(es) of the author(s) should appear on a separate cover page. A one-paragraph biographical statement should be submitted for each author.

To ensure anonymity in the review process, names of author(s) should not appear elsewhere in the manuscript, except in appropriate citations. An abstract of 100 words should also be submitted on a separate page.

Manuscripts should be submitted using a recent version of Microsoft Word. The file should be clearly labeled with the author(s) name(s). Graphics should be included as part of the Word document.

Manuscripts will be reviewed by at least three consulting editors. This process normally takes from 3–4 months.

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Michael R. Simonson
Editor
Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice
Nova Southeastern University
4118 DeSantis Building
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314

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Editorial Office: *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*
Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice
Nova Southeastern University
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314
800-986-3223 ext. 8563
simsmich@nova.edu

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GRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE IMPACT OF CLASS SIZE ON EFFECTIVE ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Maureen Walsh Koricke, Dixie Abernathy, and Teneal Pardue
Queens University of Charlotte

Student perception of class size remains a consideration in the online setting. This study explored graduate student perceptions of class size and impact on instructor effectiveness and student engagement. Data was gathered via a web-based survey with a sample of online graduate students. Respondents noted 20 or 25 students as the point that instructor effectiveness was impacted in a negative manner. Respondents indicated 20 or more students had a negative impact on student engagement, including connections with other students. Class size is important for administrators to consider when determining online graduate class size limits to support a positive learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

Increased flexibility. Cost-efficient classroom settings. Utilization of 21st-century technology. These positive attributes, as well as others, have led an increasing number of undergraduate and postgraduate students to take advantage of the ever-increasing online educational offerings of colleges and universities across the globe. Even as online offerings balloon, course learning and student success are still dependent on interactions and engagement. These can be student-student, student-professor, and student-course interactions (Falloon, 2011), and the strength or lack thereof of these interactions may play a prominent role in the success of online learners. While the administrative wing of a university or college may see larger online class sizes as contributing to tuition-producing higher enrollment, professors or instructors may be advocating for exactly the opposite, citing instructional strategies and the all-important student relationships (Taft et al., 2021). As increasing numbers of online courses are offered in universities and colleges across the

• **Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:** Maureen Walsh Koricke, walshkorickem@queens.edu

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country, measures must be taken to ensure that online instruction will be as respected and as effective, as a learning modality, as traditional face-to-face instruction (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). One of the considerations that may play a role in these determinations is online class size—what is most effective, what is too large, and what impact does it have on student learning?

Although online teaching and learning are more prevalent now than ever in the history of education, the topic of online class size has not garnered much interest in terms of recent research (Schaffhauser, 2019), and certainly not in a way that focuses particularly on graduate learning. As pointed out by one researcher, "Even though online classes have existed for 20-plus years, administrators, faculty members and staff are frequently tripped up by what seems like a basic question: How many students should be in an online class?" (D'Orio, 2017, p. 1). While universities increase sizes of online classes to make them cost efficient, students and instructors are left to wonder at what impact to student learning are such changes made.

In this study, researchers set out to explore graduate student perceptions of class size and the impact on teaching and learning, specifically as it related to instructor effectiveness and student engagement. This research was unique in that, while studies exist on the undergraduate online experience, this study focused specifically on graduate level online studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A logical place to begin in considering what has been studied or written about online class size is *U.S. News and World Report,* the monthly magazine that produces an annual analysis of the top colleges and universities and what makes them so. In producing this report, it is evident that online class size matters, just as traditional face-to-face class size matters (Morse & Brooks, 2020). This often-referenced source, through which colleges and universities annually garner much global attention and consideration, makes no secret of the fact that class size is considered as part of their ranking system. Morse and Brooks cover this in their analysis of just how schools are ranked through *U.S. News and World Report* (2020):

> Class size: This assesses the ability of students to engage with their instructors in class. This was based on fall 2019 class size data. Schools receive the most credit in this index for their proportions of undergraduate classes with fewer than 20 students. Classes with 20 to 29 students score second highest, 30 to 39 students third highest and 40 to 49 students fourth highest. Classes that have 50 or more students receive no credit. *U.S. News* has not disclosed to any schools the weights assigned to different intervals within the index. (p. 1)

After clearly considering class sizes in their rankings of traditional and online programs around the world, Quillen's research and analysis into the *U.S. News* rankings provided further guidance as to what are acceptable online class sizes and the reasons these are important considerations: "Since the majority of online community college courses are not competency-based, that leaves instructors with classes of students whose instructional needs vary widely" (Quillen, 2015, p. 1). Variance is also seen in the range of class sizes across online programs:

> Online class sizes range from small to huge. Some schools limit online course enrollment to 15 or 20 students, similar to the enrollment caps in a small face-to-face course. At the other end of the spectrum are MOOCs—massive open online courses—where enrollment is pretty much unlimited and it's not unusual for thousands of people across the country, or even the world, to be taking a single class. "Average class size ranged from one to 150" at the various online programs studied, according to *U.S. News & World Report*, which means that online courses are truly tiny at some colleges, while at others the average is the size of a large lecture hall. To put that in perspective, average class size among traditional, on-campus college

> courses is more along the lines of 25 to 30. (Best Colleges Online, 2021, p.1)

Pedagogical intent and programmatic priorities were also the focus of a joint study conducted over the course of 5 years with faculty from Kent State University and George Washington University. These faculty were all from nursing programs, and the primary question being explored was how to balance the needs of the university (primarily fiscal) with the intent to keep online learning relevant and effective (Schaffhauser, 2019; Taft et al., 2019). In this multiyear study, researchers synthesized findings from 43 higher education journals in which class sizes were discussed. The team was able to establish a connection between smaller online courses and desirable content and instructional qualities, such as individual faculty feedback and use of higher order thinking, but also, interestingly, found that there was not substantial interest in research on this topic. Taft and associates also recommended, from their qualitative research analysis, that the question of class size may be an ever-moving target.

It is clear that no one size fits all. Findings reflect that large classes (≥ 40 students) are effective for foundational and factual knowledge acquisition requiring less individualized faculty–student interaction. Small classes (≤ 15 students) are indicated for courses intending to develop higher order thinking, mastery of complex knowledge, and student skill development. Pedagogical intent should dictate class size. Using well-established learning theories, the authors describe current understandings of online enrollments and propose an analytical framework for pedagogically driven, numerically specific class sizes. (Taft et. al., 2019, p. 1)

While there are few studies that focus on student perception of optimal online class size, it has been identified that instructors and students differ between their perceptions of the most effective class size (Roby et al, 2013). With variances in course content clearly established as a relevant consideration in online class size decisions, others exist as well, including the student and professor's perspectives and interactive experiences in the teaching and learning process.

The Student Experience—Autonomy and Engagement

In considering the student experience in any online course, Moore and Kearsley presented one of the most well-known and longitudinally established theories guiding distance and virtual education through their theory of transactional distance. As stated by the team, the lack of in-person communication and relationship building that is inherent in online courses can "lead to communication gaps, a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the behaviors of instructors and those of the learners" (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 200).

In his analysis of Moore's theory of transactional distance, Falloon highlighted the importance of learner autonomy, and proposed that the use of synchronous tools in online learning formats may contribute to stronger perceptions of such autonomy by alleviating some of the more commonly acknowledged feelings of isolation (2011). As the tools and the design of online learning have changed, so too must the impact of transactional distance for students (Shearer & Park, 2019), but in the absence of synchronous tools and other autonomy-building approaches, a smaller class size may be the most significant factor in ensuring these gaps do not develop.

The issue of student engagement is perceived differently from institution to institution and from program to program. In his study of various universities and their approach to this challenge, Wayne D'Orio discovered various perspectives:

> University of Massachusetts at Lowell caps undergraduate online classes at 27, with 25 the max for graduate courses, said chancellor Jacqueline Maloney. UMass Lowell's face-to-face classes can be as large as 75 students, with the average being 29 for undergraduate and 16.5 for graduate students.