

Do Online Courses Work for Middle Grades and High School Students?

Online Students Have Their Say

SREB

William R. Thomas

Can a middle grades or high school student really take a course for credit just by using a computer connected to the Internet?

Is the teacher really that important for the student who is taking a course on the Web?

Do students taking Web-based courses miss working and interacting with their peers?

Parents, educators and policy-makers often ask these questions about the online courses that middle grades and high school students take for academic credit from today's Web-based state virtual schools. In spring 2008, the Southern Regional Education Board asked online students in SREB states for feedback about their experiences through a voluntary, anonymous online questionnaire. The results, reported here, provide insight into what these students think about online courses and what they believe can be done to improve them.

More than 2,000 students completed the questionnaire at the end of the 2007-2008 school year. Thirteen of 14 items asked students to indicate their responses using a four-point scale: *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Agree*, and *Strongly Agree*. The last item called for an open-ended short response.

The questions asked about three basic elements of online courses that are essential for student success:

- I. Was the course well designed and were instructional materials available when needed?
- II. Did the teacher set high academic expectations, support and facilitate student learning?
- III. Was the student prepared for the online course?

In most areas, four out of five students responded positively to key items. (Depending on how each item was worded, a positive response could be either "agree" or "disagree.")

I. Course design and instructional materials: Course organization and registration issues were addressed in three of the items. (See Appendix, Items 1, 2 and 4.) Four of five respondents replied positively to each question. About 6 percent of the students expressed serious concern about how their courses were designed or managed. *These results indicate that, overall, students believe their online courses in SREB state virtual schools are well designed and delivered.*

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Board

592 10th St. N.W.
Atlanta, GA 30318
(404) 875-9211
www.sreb.org

II. Teacher expectations and student interactions: The questionnaire explored student perceptions of the role of the teacher in online courses in three items. (See Appendix, Items 3, 5 and 13.) Nearly four of five students reported that their instructors responded promptly to their questions and communicated with them when needed. Nearly three of four agreed that they had opportunities to interact with other students in their online classes and received extra help from the instructor when they needed it.

These responses indicate that SREB state virtual schools perform well on two extremely important issues: the relationship between student and teacher, and student interaction with peers. Responsiveness on the part of the teacher, in particular, is extremely important to student learning. Research has shown that students do not want to wait long periods of time to receive assistance and support, especially middle grades and high school students working in online courses. In addition, just as traditional schools provide students with academic and social opportunities to interact with their peers, online classes enable them to communicate in a medium with which they are comfortable and often prefer to use.

III. Preparation for the online course: Some SREB state virtual schools report that students often say they drop out of online courses because the content is too difficult or because they are not comfortable with the online instructional style. Two items focused on this issue. Two others addressed the reading and writing skills students need to be successful in online courses. (See Appendix, Items 6, 7, 8 and 9.) *Most students who completed the survey responded positively to all four questions.*

Eighty percent of the students said they were academically prepared for the course they took online. This signals that online instructional developers for state virtual schools have paid excellent attention to the issue of student preparation. For students to be successful in advanced courses such as Algebra II, research has shown that foundation courses (such as Algebra I) that students may have taken in their local schools must be high quality and taught to high standards. While instructional designers have expected some students to be unprepared for the rigors of advanced online courses like Algebra II, they have found that these students also are sometimes not adequately prepared for less advanced online courses as well. This means *all* courses — traditional *and* online — need to be taught to high standards so that students are prepared for courses at the next level.

Three out of four students said that they were familiar with the technology tools and software used in online courses. This likely reflects the improvements in technology used for online learning and the increasing level of technology competence of many students and their teachers.

Student response in open-ended narrative

“My experience in this course has been outstanding. I had the opportunity to ... meet other students. My instructor was ... always willing to lend a helping hand.”

Student response in open-ended narrative

“I came into this course stressing about whether or not I’d be able to comprehend this material without a teacher ... physically there with me. I was very surprised at how organized this course was and how helpful the instructor was. All you had to do ... was follow the lesson plan, study and ask specific questions.”

Nearly all of the students thought they had the reading skills they needed to be successful in the course. Online courses require significant reading. As the quality of online courses continues to improve, the dependence on text appears to be lessening in favor of other ways of teaching, including demonstrations and simulation. Yet reading will always be the foundation of communication in online courses.

Eighty-five percent of the students who responded indicated that their written communication skills were adequate for success in the course. Just as with reading skills, the ability to communicate effectively in writing is essential for online students. Research evidence suggests that online courses promote improvements in student writing skills, likely because students are required to write more in online courses.

The course as a whole: Three items addressed the student response to the online course as a whole. (See Appendix, Items 10, 11 and 12.) While still giving a positive response (ranging from 55 percent to 74 percent), students overall provided less positive responses to these items than to others (where responses ranged from 73 percent to 94 percent).

Online courses require time-management skills that many students are learning as they face competing demands on their time. This may be an issue that state virtual schools need to address by adequately informing students about course expectations. At the same time, local schools need to work with students as they sign up for online courses to ensure they are not overcommitted.

Items 10 and 12 were designed to identify broader student attitudes and perspectives about online learning courses. Personal attitudes about the course in general are reflected in Item 10. Sixty-eight percent of the students indicated they liked the course. Comments from students in the open-ended responses gave insights both into what they liked about the course and what they found frustrating.

*Not only did I learn more about computers and how they work —
I learned more about managing my time and getting my work done.*

*It was a completely new experience for me and, although I can be
technologically challenged at times, I was able to manage very well.*

*I would not recommend this type of class to a student who is not an
independent learner and does not have sufficient computer skills.*

Surprisingly, only 59 percent of students responded positively to the statement “I will take another online course.” What is curious is why roughly 80 percent of students responded positively to so many items — apparently not troubled by perceived barriers to learning in online courses. Yet about 12 percentage points fewer (68 percent) indicated they liked the courses they took, and 9 percentage points fewer than that (59 percent) predicted they would take another online course. There is no single answer for this decline in percentages.

Student response in open-ended narrative

*“The online course ... taught
me how to accurately word my
responses when completing
assignments.”*

Some indications can be found in the open-ended responses. For some students, time was an issue: *“I liked my course, but it took too much time.”* This response indicates that the course may have been more demanding than anticipated. It likely ties directly to Item 11, in which 55 percent of the students wished they had more time to spend on the course.

In addition, one-fifth of the students gave negative responses to the items on course organization/instructional materials, teacher expectations/student interaction or student preparation. Online learning may still be so new that a negative reaction to any aspect of a course may be enough to cause a student to avoid online courses in the future.

Another — perhaps more straightforward — reason students may have responded as they did is that they did not need another online course. Just prior to taking the survey, some students took the online course for credit recovery or to get a specific course they needed that is not available in their school. Some took their first online course in the last semester of high school. In these cases, many did not need to take another online course.

These summary responses from online students should be helpful to SREB states as they strive to further improve the quality of their courses and work with online teachers. Providing quality teachers and quality courses to many middle grades and high schools students who would not otherwise have access to these courses is far too important to ignore these responses — both positive and negative. State leaders and policy-makers can benefit from the thousands of students who took time to share their perspectives about online learning.

Student response in open-ended narrative

“The only drawback I saw from the online course experience is ... that it requires dedicating a lot of extra time to squeeze another course into our already-tight schedules. This, obviously, has to do with my personal time management, and almost all the problems I had with the course were caused by this.”

APPENDIX

Questions	Strongly Disagree (A)	Disagree (B)	Agree (C)	Strongly Agree (D)	Positive Tabulations A + B or C + D
1. The course was managed and delivered well.	6%	14%	58%	22%	80%
2. Course materials were delivered on time.	6	15	56	23	79
3. My instructor responded promptly to my questions and communicated with me when needed.	8	14	44	34	78
4. The registration procedures were difficult to follow.	21	59	16	4	80
5. I had the opportunity to interact with other students in my online course.	8	19	53	20	73
6. I was not academically prepared to take this online course.	33	46	15	6	80
7. I had the reading skills needed to be successful in this course.	2	4	47	47	94
8. I needed better writing skills to be successful in this course.	33	52	12	3	85
9. I was familiar with the online tools and software used in the course.	5	19	53	23	76
10. I liked this online course.	16	16	42	26	68
11. I wish I had more time to spend on this online course.	11	34	35	20	55
12. I will take another online course.	15	26	40	19	59
13. When I needed extra help, I received it from my instructor.	8	18	51	23	74

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