

Abstract

Web Shock: Community College Students and Adaptation to the Culture of the Online Classroom

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The use of online technologies in higher education represents a significant and provocative change in the classrooms of today's colleges and universities, and the growth in the numbers of course offerings and student enrollments in fully online classes has been phenomenal over the last ten years. In spite of glowing reports about the benefits of online course work, many educators remain concerned about the quality of online classes and high rates of attrition. In this study, I contend that students enrolling for the first time in an online class are actually engaging in the process of adapting to a different culture, a culture where the familiar rules and patterns of a lifetime of classroom education no longer hold true.

Three strands of research underpin the study: retention, cultural adaptation, and the nature of online culture. Educators recognize that retention involves an intricate interplay of factors, characteristics of both the individual student and the institution that impact a student's ability and desire to stay in a class, a program, or the institution as a whole. When a student enters an online class, all of these interwoven factors are taken into account; the challenges of adapting to a new culture should be considered as well. Community college students, so often non-traditional students and first generation college students,

may find this transition even more challenging. Like a traveler immersed in another culture, many of these students find that they themselves have changed and grown as a result of this adaptation.

Strongly qualitative, the study uses survey data – student responses to the Cross Cultural Adaptability Inventory – to identify subjects for closer study through interview and observation. These puzzle pieces are used to put together an image of the world of online culture as these students find it, as well as narrative profiles of each student.

Future research is suggested in several areas: ways the institution can continue reducing cultural differences; instructional design of courses to take into account patterns of adaptation; adaptations made by educators as the culture of the classroom changes around them; and further exploration of the nature of the personal transformations and lasting impacts of online education for both students and instructors.