

Online Learning and the Japanese Freshman : Candid Opinions of First Year College Students

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出版者	法政大学多摩論集編集委員会
journal or publication title	TAMA BULLETIN
volume	37
page range	35-54
year	2021-03
URL	http://doi.org/10.15002/00024038

Online Learning and the Japanese Freshman: Candid Opinions of First Year College Students

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Abstract

In the spring of 2020 most Japanese universities made a sudden shift to online learning programs due to the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak. However, distance learning has often failed to provide the most important benefits of face to face instruction, and improvements are urgently needed. Educational literature stresses the desire of college students for communication with other students and with teachers. Feedback on assignments is an important part of that communication. In western countries university freshman are particularly vulnerable to frustration during times of isolation and change and are inclined to drop out. An online survey was distributed to nine of this writer's classes at a long established university in the Tokyo area to help identify the most distressing problems first year students encountered with their online learning first term. An overwhelming majority of the 90 respondents felt overburdened by the amount of homework and disturbed by the lack of feedback. A revised homework and feedback policy are suggested as well as insight into some of the critical comments collected from the surveys. A similar survey of online instructors should be done as a follow-up at the end of second term.

Introduction

In this report *distance learning* refers to a form of instruction whose main feature is the physical separation of student and teacher. Interaction among teacher and students and among students themselves may be rare. *Online learning* is similar to distance learning in that students and teachers are in different locations, but online learning is

delivered via computer or similar technology and allows for more teacher-student and student-student communication.

Distance instruction is not a new phenomenon. In America it started in the 1800s in the form of correspondence courses delivered by the post office. In the 1900s radio and television broadcasted lessons, and these lessons began appearing online in the 1980s. By 2013 in the U.S. almost 30% of all high school graduates were involved in some kind of distance learning program (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Courses were often a series of carefully coordinated materials produced commercially or through respected schools. They were primarily designed for a person wishing to acquire the skills or knowledge necessary for obtaining college credit or professional advancement. Although the dropout rate was high, distance courses were largely considered an opportunity for self-betterment.

At a number of universities worldwide this spring the move to distance learning was sudden and without optimal preparation time. In the worst cases it resulted in technologically inexperienced teachers working with undependable equipment and materials not suited for online use. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Japan's teachers are the least comfortable or trained to use technology among all member nations and the most behind in adapting technology to meet the needs of the modern classroom (O'Donoghue, 2020, April 21). Many students, particularly entering freshmen, were taken by surprise by the suspension of face to face classes, and some may have felt that they were missing out on a full educational experience.

The purpose of this research is to try to determine the aspects of a particular university online learning system causing the most distress to students during spring term and the areas most amenable to improvement. This writer created a questionnaire to administer to her students, similar to those used for Action Research, to identify problems in the classroom with the aim of correcting them. The questions were based on the frustrations which students and teachers had shared on homework and in faculty meetings respectively. These complaints included malfunctioning devices, heavy workloads, and unsuitable methods and materials. The literature regarding online

learning also guided the writer's choice of questions.

In the literature, even staunch supporters of learning management systems concede that they fall short on providing meaningful interaction among students and between teacher and student (Britt, 2006). Authorities on the dynamics of learning, including Piaget (2006) and Vygotsky (1997), speak to the need for social interaction and meaningful discussion among peers. Dewey (1997) maintained that real learning occurs by working with knowledgeable others, which would include the teacher. It was presumed that lack of communication would be a major frustration for students using online learning systems.

Surveys of this nature are more likely to occur at the end of an academic year rather than in the middle. However, this is not a typical academic year. Some regard the current distance learning situation as an example of crisis learning (Pace et al., 2020). Though schools have been shut down in the past in certain areas due to war and pestilence, McCarthy (2020) states that the global scope of this shutdown coupled with the shortcomings of the instruction presented online are unparalleled in history.

Such adverse circumstances are likely to particularly impact the university's most vulnerable population, incoming freshman, and could have lasting effects on students' mental states and attitudes toward higher learning (McCarthy, 2020). It seems reasonable for us to investigate the areas in our remote learning programs causing students the most distress and for us to make timely improvements where possible.

Methods

The present research was conducted in mid-July, 2020 at the end of first semester at a Tokyo area university to discover the most effective ways to improve the online learning program for future terms. This section describes the participants, instrument and procedure of the research.

Participants

The participants in this research were all first year students in this writer's nine spring term courses. Useable data was obtained from 90 students, 38 males and 52 females. A

total of 48 students were business/economics majors and 42 were pursuing degrees in the social sciences.

Materials

The original survey contained 16 questions, most with multiple choice answers, presented on a five-point scale. The questions covered four topics: demographic information (gender, department, year), time demands, online system use, and homework. An optional final section at the end of the survey allowed students to voice any concerns not covered in the main survey. The language of the survey was English, but Japanese was supplied in questions that might be misinterpreted. Students were free to use either English or Japanese in the comment section to encourage more participation. Most students wrote their remarks in Japanese. The survey appears in full in Appendix 1.

Procedure

Participants all received their surveys through their online class site the last week of their first term courses and were given seven days to complete and return the questionnaires.

Survey instructions appear below.

Please answer the questions honestly about your background and experience with this term's distance learning program. The university is hoping to improve its learning program by receiving information from this year's students. Statistics from this survey will be gathered and analyzed. Student names and IDs will not be recorded to protect your privacy. Your answers will not affect your class average.

Please answer the questions about your classes in general, not about any one particular class. Please answer all questions. There is space for any extra remarks at the end of the survey.

Results

The most important data collected from the main survey are displayed in boldface in Question Banks A, B, C and D. For some questions only a single figure is provided. A

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fuller set of survey results is available upon request from the author.

Data Bank A: Time Demands

1. Number of classes you are enrolled in this term

0	1%	93%	3%	2%
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1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-

2. How many of these classes mainly use

20% Zoom lessons

70% Materials on the online learning system

10% Internet materials, such as YouTube videos

3. Which devices do you have for receiving lessons and sending assignments?

86% Personal computer

11% Smartphone

3% Neither one

4. How many hours do you work per week? Number of hours on average

42%	28%	21%	5%	2%
-----	------------	------------	-----------	-----------

0 1-10 11-20 21-30 31-

5. How many hours do you spend attending online university classes?

Number of hours

2%	72%	16%	3%	5%
----	------------	------------	----	----

0 1-10 11-20 21-30 31-

6. How many hours per week do you attend other types of educational classes, such as technical school or classes for qualifications?

0 (84%) (number of hours)

7. How many hours on average per week do you spend doing homework for university classes?

1%	43%	37%	12 %	5%
----	------------	------------	-------------	-----------

0 1-10 11-20 21-30 31-

0 (86%) for technical school or qualifications (hours per week)

8. How many hours per day on average do you use your cell phone

1-3 hr. (75%) for university study or school research (hours per day)

1-3 hr. (49%) for free time activities or for killing time (hours per day)

4-6 hr. (39%)

Summary of data: The majority of students took 11 to 15 classes spring term. The largest number were online classes using textual material (not Zoom or YouTube). Most students used personal computers as their learning device. The number of students working somewhat exceeded the number not working. The largest group spent 1 to 10 hours online per week attending online classes. Few were engaged in other types of study. A full 80% of students spent from 1 to 20 hours doing weekly homework. Cellphone use was moderate.

Data Bank B: Use of the Online Learning System

9. How often do you do the following:

a) Read the Announcement section for your particular class

82%	10%	7%	0%	0%
------------	-----	----	----	----

Weekly

Never

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- b) Carefully read the directions in the Assignment section

69%	21%	6%	2%	0%
------------	-----	----	----	----

Weekly Never

- c) Complete your weekly homework on time

61%	23%	7%	6%	1%
-----	------------	-----------	-----------	-----------

Weekly Never

- d) Check for returned homework

30%	30%	29%	8%	1%
-----	------------	------------	-----------	-----------

Weekly Never

- e) Have problems using the online system with your device

6%	8%	28%	40%	10%
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Weekly Never

10. Check any problems you have had regularly with the online system

24% Opening your class site

12% Opening attachments

10% Reading small print on materials

17% Typing into the Assignment box

34% Being thrown out of the system unexpectedly

Summary of data: The majority of students read learning system Announcements weekly though about 30% do not read directions carefully. Over a third of students do not submit their homework on time. Over 2/3 of students do not check for weekly homework returns. The largest number of students have technical problems with the

system irregularly, and the number one problem is being thrown out of the system unexpectedly.

Data Bank C: Homework Demands

11. How many of your courses usually give you weekly homework?

23%	69%	6%	0%	0%
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All Most Half Few None

12. In how many of your courses do teachers assign at least four hours of homework and review per week?

7%	31%	30%	28%	1%
----	-----	------------	------------	-----------

All Most Half Few None

13. Among teachers who assign homework, how many return the homework within one week of submission?

1%	5%	25%	62%	4%
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All Most Half Few None

14. What is your opinion of the amount of homework given per week?

37%	40%	21%	1%	0%
------------	------------	-----	----	----

Too much Too little

15. In your opinion, what percentage (0% to 100%) of your classes are

10%	48%	40%	1%	0%
------------	------------	-----	----	----

Too hard Too easy

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Summary of data: Most teachers gave students weekly homework although very few assigned the four hours of homework/preparation required by the university. Almost 2/3 of students did not receive their homework back before their next class, another policy of this university. Still, at least 77% of students considered the homework to be a burden or too much, and 58% felt the work was hard or too hard.

Data Bank D: Additional Comments

Survey language appears below.

Any comments you would like to make about distance learning at this university or how this system could be improved. English or Japanese is okay.

Collected comments were grouped into the seven categories listed below. Since responses often dealt with more than one topic, the number of topical replies exceeds 73, the number of participants commenting. A notable 82% of students chose to complete this optional part. Topics are listed according to number of occurrences, with the topic most often mentioned listed first.

	Total comments
1. Homework (12 regarding no feedback)	24
2. Online technology (3 requesting Zoom)	24
3. Methods and materials	20
4. Face to face classes	12
5. Communication	10
6. COVID advice	10

7. Money, tuition

2

Quoted comments will be included in the Discussion to illustrate the points made below.

Discussion

Although the literature regarding online learning suggested that lack of live communication might be the biggest complaint of new students, the amount, scheduling and return of homework appeared to be bigger concerns. Most students had typical class loads (11-15) and manageable work hours (0-20). Even though the majority reported doing only 1-20 hours of homework per week, 77% of students stated that the homework was burdensome or too much, and almost 40% reported not submitting homework on time.

“I think students are physically and mentally tired out from completing all assignments. Online lessons add more pain mentally, compared to face to face lessons. Even if we submit one assignment, we receive the next one so quickly. We have no time for breaks.” (female student, social sciences)

At the same time, 62% of respondents indicated that their teachers did not hand back homework on schedule (one class period after being assigned according to university policy), and half of the students’ comments on homework concerned non-returns. The fact that 82% of students voluntarily added comments to their surveys, suggests that they truly wished to communicate their feelings on these matters.

With the efforts that many Japanese universities are devoting to developing their Zoom or real time classes, the problem of slow or no return of homework may seem insignificant. According to Long et al. (2006), however, feedback on homework plays an essential role in defusing negativity, especially among freshmen, and helps them adjust and feel supported in their new university life. Rust (2002) reminds us that feedback must be timely to be effective. Otherwise, students are not likely to review it.

Low-tech, distance learning institutions have thrived for hundreds of years in America. Professor Michael Barbour, of Touro University in California, a specialist in distance learning and instructional design, credits the success of distance learning

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enterprises to a solid curriculum, a dependable delivery/feedback system and the sequencing of lessons based on that feedback. The fundamentals of education must be in place. Technology is a secondary consideration (German, 2020, September 2).

It should be noted that the results of this survey have not been analyzed by a professional statistician. No p value analysis has been done, and there was no possibility of running a control group of face to face classes at the same time and comparing results. However, the raw data would probably be sufficient for Action Researchers to conclude that this university should consider allowing more time for students to produce homework and teachers to grade and return it. Research shows that homework production and correction take 30% longer online than with paper and pencil (Lieblein, 2000). Giving online students and teachers half the time that they would have in regular classes to produce, grade and return homework does not seem logical.

Finally, it should be noted that many comments on the surveys were direct and critical. This may not be so much a reflection of the particular online program but a predictable reaction of freshmen college students. According to Crisp (2006), such critical remarks, including complaints about volume of homework, are typical of first year college students who have not yet made the transition from high school to college study. McCarthy and Kuh (2006) assert that there is a definite increase in study load at the college level and less connection with instructors and other students, which may greatly contrast with the expectations of many freshmen, who anticipate a carefree, social environment or a very personally fulfilling experience in college. In response to the high dropout rate of those who do not adjust, universities in the U.S. are developing nonspecialized transitional programs to help students lower their expectations and cope with study demands (Brinkworth et al., 2008).

In Japan, where transitional courses are not common, it is likely that freshmen class teachers ease students into academic life and study. In our present distance learning situation, teachers have probably not been as effective in helping students make the transition, and freshmen particularly may retain many unrealistic expectations about college life.

Feedback on assignments may ease the transition. Harvey & Knight (1996) maintain

that providing prompt feedback on homework is one of the best ways to nurture transformative learning, learning which results in personal change.

Also, the unique situation this year, with the fears of the coronavirus and the stresses of lockdown, may have contributed significantly to student dissatisfaction. This author was particularly struck by the similarity in language between America students in news reports and the Japanese freshmen studied.

“I chose to enter a general university, not a distance learning university” (first year Japanese male social sciences student).

“If I wanted to go to an online school, I could go to an online school. I paid to go to class and sit in a lecture” (American female, University of California, Irvine student) (Anderson, 2020, April 13).

“I think all students should receive a full tuition refund and a cash handout” (first year Japanese female business/ economics student).

“I feel they should refund some of the money because I feel like I’m not getting what I paid for” (American male Vanderbilt University student) (Hill & Mitropoulos, 2020, April 27).

“The poor level and quality of lessons were unbelievable to be doing at university” (first year female Japanese business/ economics student).

“Class discussion has been stymied and the ‘quality and academic rigor of courses has significantly decreased” (Attorney representing freshmen suing Vanderbilt University) (Binkley, 2020, May 4).

Further Conclusions

The following conclusions might be drawn from this research even given its non-scholarly nature.

1. The literature cannot always identify problems that students are having with a new program. Students need to be polled.

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2. The key to improvement is identifying problems quickly and making necessary changes.
3. With the current interest in state-of-the-art technology, it is easy to overlook the importance of educational fundamentals, such as feedback on homework.
4. Universities which allow instructors to research system problems and to publish the results are to be commended. They may be contributing to the improvement of education nationwide.

Limitations

This study was limited by the small number of college students representing only two departments. A university-wide survey of freshmen might have produced somewhat different results.

The survey also depended on students' accurate reporting of their first term experiences. It is possible that some students could have over-reported the amount of homework they did or underreported teacher feedback. It might be helpful to give a similar survey to teachers second term and compare their answers to those from this study.

Finally, if the university returns to full-year, face to face classes, this survey should be administered to the new freshmen at midterm and the data compared to these results. This might enable us to estimate to what extent the online learning environment and the stress of the epidemic contributed to the gap between students' expectations and the reality of the 2020 college experience.

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Appendix 1

Spring Term 2020 Distance Learning Survey

Please answer the questions honestly about your background and experience with this term's distance learning program. The university is hoping to improve its learning program by receiving information from this year's students. Statistics from this survey will be gathered and analyzed. Student names and IDs will not be recorded to protect your privacy. Your answers will not affect your class average.

Please answer the questions about your classes at this university in general, not about any one particular class. Please answer all questions. There is space for any extra remarks at the end of the survey.

Part 1: General Student Information

1. Gender: (What gender does this university consider you to be?)
_____ Male
_____ Female

2. Faculty (Department you belong to)
_____ Business/ Economics
_____ Social Sciences

3. Your year at this university
_____ First
_____ Second
_____ Third
_____ Fourth
_____ Fifth –

4. Number of classes you are enrolled in this term (今学期は何クラス受講していますか?)
_____ (Number)
How many of these classes mainly use (以下の物を使用するクラスは何クラスありますか?)
_____ Zoom lessons (ズームでの授業)
_____ Materials on the online learning system (大学内のオンライン教材)
_____ On-line materials, such as YouTube videos (YouTube などのオンライン教材)

5. Which devices do you have for receiving lessons and sending assignments?
_____ Personal computer
_____ Smartphone
_____ Neither one

Part 2: Time Demands

6. How many hours do you work (either part-time or full-time) per week?
_____ (Number of hours on average)
7. How many hours do you spend attending online university classes?
_____ (Number of hours)
8. How many hours per week do you attend other types of educational classes, such as technical school or classes for qualifications? (専門学校や資格取得目的で受講している大学以外の授業は週何時間受けていますか?)
_____ (Number of hours) (時間数)
9. How many hours on average per week do you spend doing homework
_____ for university classes (hours per week)
_____ for technical school or qualifications (hours per week)
10. How many hours per day on average do you use your cell phone
_____ for university study or school research (hours per day)
_____ for free time activities or for killing time (hours per day)

Part 3: Use of Online System

11. How often do you do the following:

Circle your answer on the scale. (下記の行いをどの位の頻度でしますか? 該当する頻度の目盛りに丸を付けてください。)

例) 毎週なら… 5 4 3 2 1
 ○_____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Weekly

Some

Never

Weeks

- a) Read the Announcement section for your particular class

5	4	3	2	1
_____	_____	_____	_____	
Weekly		Some		Never
		Weeks		

- b) Carefully read the directions in the Assignment section

5	4	3	2	1
_____	_____	_____	_____	
Weekly		Some		Never
		Weeks		

- c) Complete your weekly homework on time

5	4	3	2	1
_____	_____	_____	_____	
Weekly		Some		Never
		Weeks		

- d) Check for returned homework

5	4	3	2	1
_____	_____	_____	_____	
Weekly		Some		Never
		Weeks		

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e) Have problems using the online system with your device

5	4	3	2	1
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Weekly		Some		Never
		Weeks		

f) Check any problems you have had regularly with the online learning system

- _____ Opening your class site
 - _____ Opening attachments
 - _____ Reading small print on materials
 - _____ Typing into the Assignment box
 - _____ Being thrown out of the system unexpectedly
 - _____ Other. Please explain in either English or Japanese.
- _____
- _____

Part 4: Homework Demands

12. How many of your courses usually give you weekly homework?

_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
All	Most	Half	Few	None

13. In how many of your courses do teachers assign four hours of homework and review per week?

_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
All	Most	Half	Few	None

14. Among teachers who assign homework, how many return the homework within one week of submission?

|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____| |
All Most Half Few None

15. What is your opinion of the amount of homework given per week?

5 4 3 2 1
|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____| |
Too much OK Too little

16. In your opinion, what is the level of most of your classes?

5 4 3 2 1
|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____| |
Too hard OK Too easy

Part 5: Any comments you would like to make about distance learning at this university or how this system could be improved. English or Japanese is okay.

Thank you for your participation in this survey. This term was the university's first attempt at distance learning, and we appreciate any ideas on how to give you the best learning experience.