DISPUTES EMERGING IN THE
ONLINE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT:
UNDERSTANDING OUR CONSUMERS

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INTRODUCTION

The world has become smaller and more accessible as a result of globalization, the increasing ease of travel and the explosion of modern technology. These changes have opened up new and exciting mediums for educators to be able to reach far beyond traditional classroom walls to meet the needs of their students...their consumers. The move into the new technological age has resulted in educational institutions becoming major competitors with each other. That is true not only in terms of curriculum and course offerings, but more so in terms of new and emerging high-tech mediums that allow for online delivery of services and distance learning. The changes are opening up many possibilities, including the ability to meet the demands of student consumers in differing regions of the world, at any given time.

CONSUMER DISPUTES

Meeting the academic needs of consumers can be a challenge due to different expectations, skills sets and core values consumers bring to the learning environment. For educators and consumers alike, lack of awareness and intolerance of these differences can lead to conflicts and disagreements that can result in aggression and inappropriate behaviors. In today's online education environment, several factors contribute to student consumer disputes, including generational communication styles, culture, level of access to reliable technology, and geographic location.

In this article, we take a look at students as consumers, engaged in online learning experiences and some issues that can result in disputes if not effectively addressed and managed.

ONLINE LEARNING AND COMMUNICATION

The introduction of online collaborative learning, which compliments the traditional in-class, or face-to-face collaborative learning, can bring about conflicts/disputes between consumers and their peers/fellow consumers, consumers and instructors, and consumers and administrators. The fact that consumers have become more diverse than was the norm in traditional classrooms, contributes to those disputes. That diversity is apparent in the gender, race, age, and ethnicity of today's consumers of further and higher education.

One challenge that is widespread with the phenomenon of online delivery is that of "immediacy" which is sometimes foreign to the thinking and practices of consumers of the traditional mode of learning and communication. For example, in looking at generational communication styles, consider a team consisting of student consumers representative of the different generations. The dynamic of such a team can lead to significant conflict. A "Generation Xer" or "Yer" who grew up with constant computer access may be online several times a day, researching for assignments and e-mailing team members or posting to the discussion board. However, a "boomer" who spends less time online may check in only twice a week or as much as is stipulated by his or her syllabi, to respond to discussions or questions for which other team members have been impatiently waiting.

Though student interactions and collaborations of this nature can lead to high quality and academically sound "masterpieces," the process by which these are produced can sometimes involve intense disputes between student consumers. These disputes can evolve from consumers:

• Not communicating effectively and in a timely manner;
• Not "pulling their weight" in terms of the workload;
• Not exercising assertive and/or interpersonal skills; or
• Not engaging in collaborative, synergistic strategies.

These types of disputes can lead to major conflicts between student consumers, with each imposing sometimes unrealistic or unnecessary demands and expectations on the other. Those dynamics can result in a "war of words." As these disputes emerge, the instructor has to strategically intervene and rein-
force and/or state clear, equitable and workable guidelines for the consumers, at all times taking a neutral stance in mediating the situation. For example, the instructor could clearly impose response times for checking e-mails, responding to discussion board postings and chat sessions. In relation to group activities, it is essential for the instructor to address concerns from team members in a timely manner, encourage peer evaluations and, where necessary, make changes that will benefit all involved.

**Clarifying Expectations**

Many consumers new to the concept of online learning have their own perceptions of what they feel the learning process ought to entail. As a result, disputes between consumers and instructors can occur if students do not read and familiarize themselves with program or course expectations and requirements, and therefore do not work in tandem with the official mode of operations established by an instructor.

Some student consumers perceive they can succeed by treating their online learning experience like that of an independent correspondence course. An independent correspondence course differs, however, from a properly structured online delivery class program, because students in an independent correspondence are expected and encouraged to work at their own pace in completing course requirements. In such courses, they do not have interaction with other students, and they do not work to a set schedule and timetable. An online class, on the other hand, is structured in a manner that mirrors that of a face-to-face class with set schedules. Of the factors outlined before, this is one instance where easy access to reliable technological components is essential, in order to keep with the demands of online learning.

Consumers are part of a core unit, who as a class, are expected to work with a set syllabus that stipulates the requirements and expectations of the course. Group participation is encouraged and assignments have set due dates and times. On-going group, instructor, and one-on-one communications are essential to the process and are accommodated through structured online discussion board postings, instructor-led and/or group chat sessions and e-mails. This structured format of online course delivery and learning requires commitment, discipline and regular online engagement. When these course expectations are not met, and instructors find it necessary to challenge the student consumer, it can lead to disagreements' disputes that have to be addressed. In responding to problems such as these, it is important to ensure that communication is properly documented and that appropriate administrative personnel are made aware of the issue at hand.

**Consumer Affairs**

Working with educators and instructors is only part of the approach needed for student consumers to become adept with the process and guidelines put in place to assist a smooth and seamless educational journey. Student consumers also must maintain a working relationship with student affairs professionals. During service interactions between the consumer and the administration, either party may make demands that are perceived as contentious and give rise to escalatory conflicts. Some of these demands may be justifiable, others may not. Like instructional delivery, most of the consumer affairs services are no longer administered in person, but instead are managed online or through telephone conversations. As such, it is common for consumers to contact the administration regarding academic matters and, again in the vein of “immediacy,” sometimes exercise irrational and unprofessional behaviors while their matters are being investigated. In addressing the factor of geographical location, administrations will often make provisions to meet the needs of their consumers by: offering toll-free telephone numbers; making customer service available outside of regular working hours to accommodate consumers in different regions and time zones; as well as by making available 24 hour online communication tools. Administrators, in their quest to deliver superior customer service, will work hard to accommodate these consumers, with the help and support of other administrative colleagues who will intervene should a problem or dispute arise. Through these collaborative efforts, they usually manage to resolve situations in a manner that is satisfactory to all.

Students, on one hand, are consumers and educational institutions, on the other, are providers. As such, greater awareness, tolerance and collaboration must occur to resolve conflicts that take place in the delivery and consumption of the online educational product. Instructors and administrators need to be trained and kept informed of factors that can contribute to online education disputes, and best practices guidelines should be created by educational institutions to provide insights into how to respond to problems that often arise.

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