

# **Self-Customizable Online Courses: One Size Does Not Fit All**

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*Through self-customizable online courses, students can design more satisfying learning experiences that are more compatible with their needs and preferences. By choosing an assignment mix that provides more focused and personally relevant course content, students can balance their diverse interests and learning goals against course/program-specific learning objectives. A review of relevant literature and anecdotal evidence gleaned from multiple sections of a self-customizable marketing research course suggest a series of research propositions, several course-design recommendations, and several future research studies.*

*Keywords: self-customization, marketing research, online, course development*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite students' diverse interests and learning goals, faculty often rely on standardized learning modules, assignments characterized by rigid rubrics, and inflexible deadlines (i.e., a 'one size fits all' pedagogical model). For faculty, standardization boosts grading efficiency (and objectivity across students), facilitates assurance of learning measurement, and avoids unfair treatment accusations because 'all students are treated identically'. Unfortunately, students whose idiosyncratic interests and learning goals are ignored may resent personally meaningless course work; thus, their course satisfaction and performance may suffer (Estelami, 2012; Fornell et al., 1996; Miller, 2017; Perry & Dickens, 1987).

Faculty face two seemingly incompatible course design mandates: (1) to satisfy an increasingly diverse student population's needs, which concurs with market segmentation and customization approaches, and (2) to show accrediting bodies' assurance of learning standards are met by tracking and analyzing student progress and performance (with cross-sectional, longitudinal, objective, and consistent measures), which concurs with quantitative marketing research practices (Bandara & Wijekularathna, 2017). Faculty can

address the first mandate by creating a menu of variform assignments and exams (Twigg, 2003); in contrast, they can address the second mandate by uniformly administering identical assignments and exams.

Economic and other social forces compel more online course delivery, and business is the most popular discipline for online instruction (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016). Many university administrators recognize online courses can enhance their institution's enrollment, visibility, and total revenue (Ulmer, Watson, & Derby, 2007). Online courses afford faculty convenient opportunities for supplemental income (e.g., remuneration for out-of-load teaching) and increased scheduling flexibility (e.g., teaching off-site during summers) (Maguire, 2005). Students believe online courses enhance their scheduling flexibility (e.g., taking courses remotely while interning) (Choe & Mahoney, 2013). Thus, administrators, faculty, and students embrace such courses enthusiastically (Bandara & Wijekularathna, 2017; Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016; Dykman & Davis, 2008a, b, c; Eastman & Swift, 2001).

Can self-customizable online courses balance diverse interests and learning goals against the need to address course/program-specific learning objectives and assess course quality? The services marketing literature suggests the answer is 'yes'. Through enhanced content and flexible deadlines, self-customizable courses give students greater control over learned material and tackled assignments (Twigg, 2003; Wilson, 2011). For example, students keen on advertising ethics may resent an advertising course focused exclusively on ad design and placement; however, a self-customizable version could include ethics-related content.

The exposition proceeds as follows. First, self-customization and value co-creation is introduced. Second, anecdotal evidence from multiple sections of a self-customizable online marketing research course is summarized. Third, a series of researchable propositions grounded in the marketing and pedagogy literature is posited. Fourth, design recommendations for self-customizable online courses are suggested. Finally, a concluding discussion and several future research studies are presented.

## SELF-CUSTOMIZATION AND CO-CREATION OF VALUE

Self-customization now defines many consumption experiences, including education (Judson, Black, & Beggs, 2018). For example, the hundreds of video channels transmitted by cable or satellite distributors eliminated the classic 'least objectionable program' selection strategy that homogenized viewers' experiences during the 1960s (Klein, 1971). Students already have many options for customizing academic-program-related experiences, including completing minors to supplement major area courses, selecting a preferred course delivery method (i.e., online, hybrid, or in-class classes), buying electronic or physical textbooks, and participating in study-abroad opportunities. Yet faculty tend to minimize students' choices in course assignments (Fulton & Schweitzer, 2011; Weimer, 2014). If people now generally reject 'one size fits all', should colleges and universities offer their students self-customizable online courses?

Value co-creation is defined as *the joint effort between service providers and customers to identify and solve problems via an 'experience environment' in which proactive customers and providers co-construct personalized experiences* (Bharti, Agrawal, & Sharma, 2015; Gebauer, Johnson, & Enquist, 2010; Grönroos, 2012). This definition implies that consumers prefer sufficient interaction with a service provider to ensure a value co-creation process that best satisfies their needs. In essence, the joint consumer-provider effort to co-create value boosts consumer self-involvement and self-control, which ultimately enhances consumer satisfaction (i.e., consumer satisfaction correlates positively with customization level) (Fornell et al., 1996).

Co-creating pedagogical value requires trust between faculty (i.e., frontline service personnel) and university students (i.e., consumers) (Athanasίου, 2007). Trust is essential to boosting students' satisfaction with the instructor and the course, which boosts performance (Wise et al., 2004). Faculty offering self-customizable courses signal their greater trust of students, which fosters online course success (Dykman & Davis, 2008b, c).

Although curriculum objectives are somewhat course-dependent (e.g., oral communication skills are more pertinent to personal selling than marketing research courses), faculty generally nurture students' analytical and communication skills. Faculty who ignore students' diverse abilities and interests may miss

an opportunity to foster those skills. Providing an assignment smorgasbord helps students self-identify strengths they should bolster and weaknesses they should overcome. For example, marketing research students with stronger qualitative and weaker quantitative skills may prefer to focus on survey design and depth interviewing rather than experimental design and MANOVA.

## **ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE**

Because many undergraduates abhor technical detail and statistical analysis, Marketing Research often is an unpopular course. Also, online courses receive systematically lower evaluations than face-to-face courses (Young & Duncan, 2014). When unengaged students perform poorly, they retaliate by submitting critical course evaluations. Thus, online Marketing Research courses, which students generally rate poorly, provide an ideal testbed for self-customized course design (Sun & Ganesh, 2014).

Since fall 2015, the first author taught four sections of a self-customizable online Marketing Research course. The mean grade earned was 2.51 (on 0.00 to 4.00 scale;  $n=196$ ;  $\sigma=1.43$ ), which is roughly three-quarters point lower than the mean grade for his college's undergraduate courses. Despite his course's technical nature, online administration, and meaningfully lower grades, his mean student evaluations of teaching scores on the two main items—overall evaluation of teacher and overall evaluation of course—were 3.99 ( $\sigma=1.11$ ) and 3.87 ( $\sigma=1.11$ ), respectively. (Note: Evaluation data were collected online via open- and closed-ended questions. The two main closed-ended questions were assessed on a five-point scale ranging from 5=Excellent to 1=Very unsatisfactory.) These means, which are similar to the means for other courses his college offers, represent an almost three-quarters point improvement over his pre-2015 means for this course. Furthermore, students infrequently answered either of the worst two response categories—12.0% and 13.3%, respectively—indicating they generally found the instructor and course satisfactory or better. Hence, anecdotal empirical evidence suggests that students prefer this structure for an online Marketing Research course.

## **RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS**

Based on the literature review and the anecdotal evidence, several research propositions about students' attitudes and preferences toward self-customizable courses are posited.

### **In-class Versus Online Course Propositions**

Reported differences between traditional in-class students and online students are mixed (Choe & Mahoney, 2013). Some studies suggest in-class learners seek more interaction, motivation, and familiar environments (Tichavsky, Hunt, Driscoll, & Jicha, 2015). Other studies report little to no difference between online and in-class students (Gundlach, Richards, Nelson, & Levesque-Bristol, 2015). However, learners seek in-class or online courses based on their self-discipline, autonomy, and work-school schedule (Johnson, Stewart, & Bachman, 2013; Braun, 2008; Robinson & Doverspike, 2006). Compared to students who prefer face-to-face courses, students who prefer online courses are more motivated by their flexibility (Nandi, Hamilton, & Harland, 2012; Horspool & Lange, 2012). In a marketing context, consumers given more flexibility and greater control in their purchase and consumption decisions develop more positive attitudes toward the experience (Chang, 2008; Breugelmans & Liu-Thompkins, 2017). Hence,

- P1a: Students will be more satisfied with online than with in-class self-customizable courses.
- P1b: Students will participate more in online than in-class self-customizable courses.
- P1c: Students will more strongly prefer online to in-class self-customizable courses.

### **Customization Propositions**

By offering an extensive set of self-selected assignments rather than a smaller set of mandatory assignments, faculty can cater to diverse learning styles and student needs (Baxter & Kirpalani, 2012). Self-customizable courses balance diverse interests and learning goals against the need to address course/program-specific learning objectives, and give students greater control over learned material and

tackled assignments. For example, students keen on teamwork and interpersonal communication may prefer group projects instead of solo assignments.

Customer involvement is a critical element in defining mass-customization approaches (Duray, Ward, Milligan, & Berry, 2000). Students who self-select assignments to complete are customizing their course experience. For students, believed loss of control (or lack of input in a course design) and achievement correlate negatively (Perry & Dickens, 1987). Self-customization should boost satisfaction and achievement (Estelami, 2012). Empirical evidence indicates customization increases perceived customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Coelho & Henseler, 2012; Fornell et al., 1996; Wilson, 2011). Hence,

P2a: Students will be more satisfied with more self-customizable courses.

P2b: Students will participate more in more self-customizable courses.

P2c: Students will more strongly prefer more self-customizable courses.

### **Complexity Propositions**

Product/service complexity plays a vital role in how consumers view their experience and outcomes (Coothoopermal & Chittoo, 2017). Consumers generally become less confident (controlling for their experience) as product complexity increases (Lopes et al., 2020; Wang & Shukla, 2013). Complex purchase decisions may induce greater situational involvement by consumers (Lopes et al., 2020; Shankar et al., 2016), and acquiring complex products usually occurs idiosyncratically (Schmitz et al., 2014; Shankar et al., 2016). As a result, lack of familiarity often leads consumers to believe complex products are riskier (Lopes et al., 2020). For complex purchase decisions, the greater cognitive processing and elaboration needed to reduce perceived risks and uncertainty can cause consumers to develop less favorable product-related attitudes (Wang & Shukla, 2013). If the course topic and execution can influence students' attitudes toward a course (Curran & Rosen, 2006), then

P3a: Students will be more satisfied with less complex self-customizable courses.

P3b: Students will more strongly prefer less complex self-customizable courses.

## **DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SELF-CUSTOMIZABLE ONLINE COURSES**

To ensure sufficient mastery of basic course content, customization requires (1) a broad and varied assignment mix, (2) a course structure that precludes students from earning a passing grade by completing assignments with identical or similar learning objectives, and (3) sufficient instructor-student interaction to facilitate student engagement and learning (Mehta, Makani-Lim, & Easter, 2017). To satisfy a diverse set of students, faculty could adopt a simple philosophy: to think of themselves predominantly as *providing educational opportunities* rather than *certifying subject matter mastery*. Faculty focused on the former could base grades relatively more on learning effort (e.g., number and variety of assignments completed, participation in tutorial or extra-credit activities) and relatively less on exam or assignment performance, which many students prefer (Weimer, 2012).

Faculty adopting an *educational opportunities* perspective could offer online courses with an extensive menu of alternative assignments and exams that students can opt to complete or ignore. Students can earn points on each submitted exam or assignment, with their final grade determined by comparing total points earned to a predetermined grading scale (e.g., 900 or more points earns an 'A', 800-899 points earns a 'B', et cetera). Students completing a smaller fraction of assignments and exams still could earn a passing grade, whereas students completing a larger fraction of assignments and exams should earn a higher grade.

Additional written assignments would encourage students to master course content and develop writing skills. Faculty would identify substantial sets of supplemental books, practitioner-centric articles, and practice-related videos. Students would read texts or view videos of interest and then write an essay relating that material to other course content or marketing practice. For example, essays on marketing research articles could include (1) research question description, (2) research methods summary, (3) research findings summary, and (4) research question/methods/findings critique. By providing alternative reading or video content, students can explore personally relevant ones.

Basic implementation strategies are crucial to avoiding problems. Faculty must create appealing alternative assignments requisite to a customized learning experience. To ensure relevance and enhanced student engagement, all assignments must relate sufficiently to a course's domain. Assignments must vary meaningfully in content and style (e.g., commentaries on posted videos, short library research papers, case study analyses, interviews with subject matter experts). Earnable points must be commensurate with assignment difficulty and effort (e.g., ten-page library research papers can earn more points than two-page personal essays). Assignment design should be sensitive to macro-level skill development (e.g., critical thinking skills, written communication skills).

Issues for self-customizable courses include student aversion to challenging assignments and managing deadlines. As faculty must ensure course objectives are met, alternative assignments should be grouped by learning outcomes and structured to discourage tough-assignment avoidance. Passing students who fail to master course basics—for Marketing Research, proficiency in conducting and interpreting data analyses—would be irresponsible. Properly grouping and structuring assignments should ensure adequate skill and knowledge acquisition upon course completion (i.e., preclude ignoring key course objectives).

Hence, each activity can earn a syllabus-specified maximum number of points, with course grade determined by total points earned. Three ways to implement this approach are:

- (1) Unrestricted menu choice. Students may undertake any menu option. Activities may vary substantially on content coverage or mastery demonstration (e.g., term papers or projects, exams, short assignments, case analyses).
- (2) Restricted menu choice. Within each menu category, students may undertake a specified number of options. Faculty could organize categories by content (e.g., questionnaire design) or measurement approach (e.g., essay versus objective exam).
- (3) Mix of required and elective activities. To ensure students obtain fundamental/core knowledge and skills, they may be required to complete the same final exam or research project. At their discretion, students would complete additional assignments.

Although self-customization encourages flexibility, faculty must ensure that students submit completed assignments on time. In keeping with Quality Matters guidelines, syllabi must establish clear submission deadlines. Student autonomy gained at the cost of deluging faculty with end-of-semester submissions would sacrifice grading quality and revision time, especially under a multiple-submission policy. Although students without a university-sanctioned excuse are likely to file successful extension appeals with administrators, repeatedly reminding students via email about missed deadlines creates an electronic record useful in refuting grade appeals.

## CONCLUSION

The pedagogy literature suggests self-directed learning, by which students manage their own educational experiences, can improve their academic performance, aspirations, curiosity, and life satisfaction (Edmondson, Boyer, & Artis, 2012). Based on university-provided information, students who know the knowledge and skills they need to acquire can decide what to study and how to apply that knowledge (Artis & Harris, 2007). Self-customized learning is one mechanism for implementing self-directed learning (Boyer, Edmondson, Artis, & Fleming, 2013).

Course self-customization addresses many pedagogical challenges. Students empowered to select from a menu of assignments with flexible deadlines gain a sense of control; in contrast, compelling them to work through syllabi with mandatory assignments and completion deadlines sacrifices that sense. For students, believed loss of control and achievement correlate negatively (Perry & Dickens, 1987).

Self-customization is adaptable to face-to-face marketing courses. Because feedback on content mastery is immediate and less prone to impression management in such courses, an instructor could allow students to select among various in-class activities meant to achieve the same learning goals. The instructor can then assess learning outcomes and intercede—perhaps suggesting an alternative activity—if warranted.

Customer satisfaction correlates positively with customization level (Fornell et al., 1996). Students who self-select the assignments to complete and when to submit them are customizing their course experience.

Self-customization should boost student satisfaction and achievement, which in turn should boost student ratings of the course and instructor.

### **Future Research**

Other self-customizable dimensions. Course self-customization can occur along three dimensions: content, schedule, and length (Wilson, 2011). Students can customize content by choosing included or excluded assignments, the schedule by setting assignment due dates, and the course length based on content and schedule. Future studies could address these dimensions.

Assignment choices that maximize learning. In addition to dedicated students, class rosters often include time- and effort-stingy students (Hyman & Conte, 2002). Time-stingy students (e.g., full-time employees, parents of young children) are so overcommitted to non-course-related activities that they only try to master subject matter basics and course content they believe relevant to a future job or career. Effort-stingy students try to earn adequate grades while exerting minimal effort. For them, learning is incidental to earning a degree needed for acceptable employment.

Although time- and effort-stingy students try to optimize time spent on courses, other students may prefer more time-consuming but less mentally taxing assignments. What type and mix of assignments would best satisfy this range of preferences? Students most likely achieve topic mastery when chosen assignments jointly cover most course content. To achieve this goal, should faculty arrange assignments according to the topic or some other criterion? Although grade and effort considerations encourage students to attempt assignments that play to their strengths, they often learn more from assignments that require them to confront and overcome their weaknesses. How can faculty structure their courses so that students attempt a few personally challenging assignments?

Many time- and effort-stingy students will attempt fewer—especially reading-related—assignments (Hyman & Conte, 2002). Such students will complete all exams and quizzes first and then complete other assignments believed necessary to earn a targeted grade. Future studies could explore motivating students to attempt more reading-based and written assignments, which are more conducive to developing reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

Restricted versus unrestricted choice of assignment. Many Millennials prefer grading schemes based on effort rather than topic mastery (Weimer, 2012). Self-customizable courses lend themselves to such schemes. Future studies could explore allowing students to complete as many assignments as wanted to earn their targeted grade (i.e., grades relate to predetermined point totals).

Unrestricted choice will reduce problems caused when students ignore menu-related instructions (e.g., complete two assignments from group one, one assignment from group two, et cetera). Telling a student, “I’m sorry, but you already completed enough assignments in group ‘x’, so the last one you submitted will not count toward your final grade,” is likely to induce a student complaint. Also, students who realize they are ‘on pace’ for an unacceptable (to them) grade will ask faculty at the semester’s end, “I didn’t do well on exam ‘y’, so can I submit assignment ‘z’ to boost my grade?” As assignment ‘z’ is structured into the course, saying ‘no’ will anger many of those students. That anger will translate into poor teaching evaluations and fabricated complaints about the course (e.g., “I didn’t learn anything in Dr. X’s class. It was a total waste of my time.”).

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