

# Social Intelligence of Undergraduates Enrolled in Traditional vs. Distance Higher Education Learning Programs

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## Abstract

Many academics, policy makers, and laypeople remain concerned that distance education can adversely affect one's social development. The purpose of this quantitative study was to test that concern by comparing the social intelligence of distance undergraduates with the social intelligence of traditional undergraduates.

## Problem

There is little in the literature about the effects of distance learning on one's social intelligence development.

It has been suggested that an online environment is not conducive to social intelligence development. This possibility undoubtedly negatively influences people's opinions of distance education, perhaps unjustly.

A traditional learning environment with face-to-face interaction with faculty and peers can reasonably be understood as an environment conducive to social intelligence development, but there is no known evidential support for how distance higher education compares to traditional higher education in social intelligence development.

## Purpose

The purpose of this quantitative study was to compare the social intelligence (DV) of distance undergraduates with social intelligence of traditional undergraduates at different class ranks while limiting the age of the participants from 18–24 years.

An increasing difference in the social intelligence levels between the learning environments as the class ranks progress would suggest an association between learning environment and social intelligence.

## Relevant Literature

### Theoretical Frameworks

Bandura's **social learning theory** (1977) and Goleman's theory of **social intelligence** (2006), which provide adequate justification for the hypotheses in this study.

Social learning theory states that people learn human behavior through observing others' behavior and the outcomes of those behaviors, which is accomplished through continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences.

### Background

Some research has provided support for the claim that, under the right conditions, social learning can take place in Web-based environments. However, neuroscience's explanation of social learning as accomplished through the activation of mirror neurons that sense both movement and feelings of another would seem to be inhibited by a distance environment.

**Social intelligence** is a multifaceted construct comprising (a) **social information processing**, (b) **social skills**, and (c) **social awareness**.

## Research Questions

**RQ1:** Is learning environment (distance versus traditional) associated with the level of social intelligence as measured by the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale among undergraduate college students?

**RQ2:** Is college rank (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) associated with the level of social intelligence as measured by the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale among undergraduate college students?

**RQ3:** Is the difference between learning environments in social intelligence different across levels of class rank?

## Procedures

### Design

The study used a nonexperimental design.

### Sample

This study used a non-probability sample of 184 qualified adults ages 18–24 who

- claimed to reside in the United States;
- were currently enrolled in a 4-year, degree-granting, distance or traditional undergraduate program; and
- had not had one or more years of formal distance schooling or homeschooling as an alternative to a public or private high school.

### Instrumentation

The Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale was used in conjunction with qualifying items and items related to the independent variables of class rank and learning environment.

The TSIS measured the dependent variable of social intelligence.

## Data Analysis

The data on the two independent variables (learning environment and class rank) and one dependent variable (social intelligence) were analyzed by a two-way ANOVA.

## Findings

After an exhaustive analysis of the data, the only significant differences that materialized were mean levels of social intelligence between class ranks.

No significant differences were observed in the mean level of social intelligence or any of the three factors of social intelligence, between distance and traditional undergraduates, and no significant interaction effects were found.

## Limitations

Any claim that either learning environment (traditional or online) is more or less conducive to social intelligence development could not be made without a true experiment.

I collected the data for this study using an online, (a self-report measure that may have been subject to responder bias.

The TSIS may not have been effective in measuring such a complex psychological construct as social intelligence.

## Conclusions

In spite of the hesitancy among academics, leaders in education, and the general public to adopt and support online education; the results of this study can be shared with educators, distance course designers, parents, and students who may be concerned with the social development of students in an online environment.

## Social Change Implications

### Educators

Educators should use the information in this study along with the body of research discussed to inform the public about the lack of evidence in support of online education hindering social intelligence development.

### Distance Course Designers

It is imperative to keep social intelligence development in mind when designing online courses. The strategies for fostering social intelligence development overlap with those in facilitating learning, such as student/instructor and student/peer interaction.

### Parents and Students

When looking for an online university, parents and students should consider the course structure and the available opportunities to interact with the instructors and peers.

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