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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ON-LINE AND CLASSROOM-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL FORMATS FOR TEACHING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Dr. D. G. Nejkar

Associate Professor , Department of Social Work Karmaveer Hire Arts, Science , Commerce and Education College, Gargoti, Kolhapur.

ABSTRACT

*R*esearch contrasting courses educated solely in traditional face-with face settings versus courses instructed completely online have demonstrated comparable levels of understudy fulfillment. This reports discoveries from a near investigation of understudy accomplishment in research skills from classes utilizing two distinctive instructional arrangements. One gathering utilized a classroom-based instructional organization and the other gathering utilized an online electronic instructional configuration. Discoveries demonstrate that there were no measurably noteworthy contrasts between the two class designs for eight out of eleven result understudy execution exercises and ten out of 13 instructive systems. There were expansive impact measure contrasts in view of class arrange-ment on four of the understudy execution exercises and for understudy fulfillment with six of the pedagogical techniques. At the point when factually critical contrasts were discovered, it was resolved that understudy execution on learning exercises and fulfillment with educational strategies were higher for the understudies in the customary class. The discoveries bolster the finishes of a few studies concerning the viability of internet educating. Confinements and suggestions for further studies are additionally proposed.

KEYWORDS:WEB-based instruction, social work research, distance education.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has become an integral component of today's higher education system. Distance education is defined as any formal approach to learning in which the majority of the instruction occurs while the educator and the learner are at a distance from one another (Ve rduin & Clark, 1991, p.8). For the purpose of the article, distance education, online education, Web-base instruction, and technology- supported instructional environments will be used interchangeably to reflect the use of computer technology and advanced communication networks as the primary means for delivering instructional materials. Approximately two-thirds of the accredited four-year colleges and graduate schools complement traditional campus based courses with courses offered via the Internet (Perrin & Mayhew, 2000). Many research studies have concluded that student learning, performance, and achievement in distance education classes is comparable to that of students enrolled in traditional campus-based classes (Dalton, 2001; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2003; Knowles, 2001; Rivera & Rice, 2002; Tucker, 2001; Ouellette &c Chang, 2004; Patracchi, Mallingr, Engel, Rishel, & Washburn, 2005). Courses offered via Internet allow colleges to reach individuals who wish to advance their education, bat who would otherwise be unable to take courses offered in a traditional

classroom set¬ting due to constraints of time, location, or lack of other resources (Perrin & Mayhew, 2000; Tucker, 2001). While much research has concluded that online learning envi¬ronments have yielded positive outcomes related to student learning, performance, and achievement in other professions, less research has been conducted in social work on how to implement online courses effectively and how to evaluate online courses.

This article report's findings from a comparative study initiated to examine social work student achievement in a social work research course that used two different instructional formats. One group of students was taught research utilizing a face-to- face, classroom-based instructional format and the other group of students was taught online using web-based instructional methods. Findings indicated that there were statistically significant differences in both student performance and student satisfaction between the two groups but for a number of comparisons there were no differences. In addition, empirical findings support the conclusions of several other studies concerning the effectiveness of web-based teaching and learning. Limitations and implications for further research initiatives are suggested. To begin our discussion, we will review the literature in three areas: (a) distance education in social work courses and programs in general, (b) the use of distance education methods for teaching research skills, and (c) the evaluation of distance education in social work education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social work educators have had substantial concerns regarding the use of technology to provide distance education to students (Knowles, 2001). Educators have cited possible negative impact on social integration, role modeling, mutual monitoring, and social distance as reasons for not utilizing distance education in social work education programs (Knowles, 2001). However, over time and with research progressively providing more and more positive feedback concerning use of distance education, social work programs are increasingly embracing use of distance education to provide courses to students (Dalton, 2001; Knowles, 2001; Macy, Rooney, Hollister, & Fred- dolino, 2001; Seabury, 2003). Approximately 20% of social work programs now offer distance education courses (Dalton, 2001; Macy et al., 2001).

As distance education has become more widely utilized in social work courses, the number of studies evaluating the use of distance education has increased. the majority of research performed has yielded positive results when comparing distance education to traditional education (Dalton, 2001; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2003; Knowles, 2001; Macy et al,, 2001; Ouellette & Chang, 2004; Seabury, 2003).

A number of social work classes taught by distance education have been evaluated. Courses concerning social work policy, substance abuse, human behavior in the social environment, social welfare history, practice methods, and field instruction have all been taught via distance education and evaluated (Macy et al., 2001). The integration of technology for teaching many social work courses has often been used as a way to enhance classroom-delivered content (Ouellette, 1999). Some have reported that students enrolled in distance education courses acquire comparable knowledge and skills when compared to students taught in traditional classrooms (Kleinpeter & Potts, 2003; Petracchi, et al., 2005). Macy et al., (2001) reported that among students enrolled in distance education courses for social work, 77% indicated that the quality of instruction was comparable to traditional courses, and 78% felt that distance education met their learning needs. One study compared results of a web-assisted practice course with a pracrice course using face-to-face instruction. This study found no statistically significant differences between the two groups on assignments, a mid-term exam, and a videotaped exam project (Petracchi, et al. 2005). Another study found no statistically significant difference in actual interviewing skill acquisition at the completion of a practice course taught entirely online in a Web-based instructional environment versus the same course taught in a face-to-face classroom instructional environment (Ouellette, Westhuis, Marshall, & Chang, 2006).

Many instructors are teaching courses through traditional face-to-face instructional means and supplementing course work with online materials using course management software such as Web CT. Wernet, Olliges, and Delicath (2000) surveyed 39 students in a social work education course concerning the use of WebCT in the course as its course management platform. All students responded that they found the course materials and the course website helpful. Rivera and Rice (2002) evaluated student satisfaction and performance in an undergraduate introductory course in management information systems. Three sections of the class were offered;

traditional, web-based, and a hybrid section that utilized traditional means of delivering lectures, assignments and tests, while using Web CT to deliver course materials and conduct discussions. Results of the study indicated no significant difference in student achievement across the three sections. However, student satisfaction was significantly higher in the traditional and hybrid sections of the course.

Other studies have indicated that web-based learning has been found to enhance teaching methods of traditional classroom-based courses. One study evaluated student satisfaction regarding use of the web to enhance learning in a mental health course. Students in this study strongly supported the use of web-enhanced teaching for the course and reported that the online environment enhanced their learning (Knowles, 2001). McShane (2004) reported findings from a qualitative research study that examined the teaching self-concept of university professors who combine online and traditional methods of teaching. Several themes emerged from the results of McShane's analysis. The professors reported that use of the web to enhance traditional teaching allowed for the development of a stronger rapport between students and professors. They also stated that using both online and traditional instructional methods of communication enabled them to get to know the students better, and interact with students with more ease. An additional benefit to using web-enhancement that was reported was that using the web encourages conscious planning and teaching of course materials. Professors stated that this increased consciousness promoted active implementation of methods that would best integrate online and face-to-face teaching. Professors further stated that utilization of the web to enhance teaching increased the proficiency of teaching and allowed for additional ways to teach and reach students. Utilization of web-enhancement allowed for the benefit of the immediacy and physical proximity of face-to-face teaching while also allowing students to be linked to multiple resources.

Distance Education and Social Work Research Courses

Some of the major objectives of social work research courses are to teach students how to use and evaluate quantitative and qualitative research, collect data, analyze data, and interpret data (Steckler, Farel, Bontempi, Umble, Polhamus, & Trester, 2001). Studies have shown that use of distance education to teach social work research methods is a promising approach (Dalton, 2001; Steckler et al., 2001).

Dalton (2001) compared three sections of a social work research methods course. One section of this course utilized in the comparison was a distance education course. After controlling for extraneous demographic variables, such as the participants' race, no significant differences were found between the online section of the course and the other sections.

Steckler and colleagues (2001) examined the use of a web-based model to train pub¬lic health professionals to use qualitative research and evaluation methods. Results of the evaluation indicated no specific changes in knowledge or beliefs concerning qualitative methods. However, participants' self-efficacy increased, and self-reported perceptions of skills in data collection demonstrated significant changes. Participants reported that they found the information provided valuable and the reaching methods used to be satisfactory. This study demonstrates that use of computer technology and web-based instruction to teach qualitative methods is a promising approach. Participants reported that they found the information provided valuable and the teaching methods used to be satisfactory. Evalu¬ation of this study demonstrates that use of computer technology and web-based instruc¬tion to teach qualitative methods is a promising approach.

A technology-supported training environment was also used to enhance the devel¬opment of research skills of minority researchers in the children's mental health field. This Web-based training initiative provided a unique context for minority students to experience the actual research process as well as provided them with the necessary supports that beginning researchers require (Ouellette & Briscoe, 2002).

Evaluation of Distance Education in Social Work

The benefits of utilizing distance education in social work education are numerous. One of the greatest benefits of distance education is the flexibility that it allows students. Utilization of distance education provides educational access to students who otherwise may have been unable to attend more traditional classes (Knowles, 2001). Universities theorize that by utilizing distance education, they will be able to save money. As more students are able to access distance education, class sizes will increase, while overhead for the university will remain the same (Valentine, 2002). Additional benefits of distance learning may include promotion of self-directed learning, the potential for enhancing relationships and mentorship, and integration of the capabilities of technology and the

vast resources of the Internet (Jurczyk, Kushner-Benson, Savery, 2004; Knowles, 2001; Valentine, 2002).

While the benefits to utilizing distance education are numerous, there are several issues to consider when utilizing distance education (Knowles, 2001; Macy et al., 2001; Steckler et al., 2001). Knowles (2001) identifies several of these issues as: concerns about student academic performance, issues related to quality and accrediting standards, loss of face-to-face interaction, types of courses suited for online learning, loss of relationship building and mentorship, student adjustment to alternative learning, proper training for faculty teaching distance education, access to technology, and technical and institutional support. Other issues that merit consideration include thorough evaluation of student learner characteristics; students' age, gender, ethnicity, culture, professional experience, learning style, and motivation are important variables to consider in the implementation and evaluation of distance education (Macy et al., 2001). Faculty concerns and characteristics should be considered as well. The instructional style and characteristics of the instructor will substantially impact the delivery of course materials. The teaching style, pedagogy, of different courses should be considered. Methods that may be effective for teaching one course may be ineffective for teaching a different course (Macy et al., 2001). Types of technology, access to technology, and competence in utilizing technology of faculty and students should be considered in implementing and evaluating distance education. The effect of technological difficulties on the successful outcomes of courses should be evaluated as well (Macy et al., 2001).

With very few exceptions, students utilizing technology in distance education have similar learning outcomes when compared to students in a traditional classroom (Dal¬ton, 2001; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2003; Knowles, 2001; Macy et al., 2001; Seabury, 2003). Students have cited several advantages to utilizing technology in distance education; the ability to link resources in many different formats, efficient in delivering course materials, resources can be available from any location at any time, flexibility, encourages independent and active learning, and can provide supplementary materials for use in traditional classes (McKimm, Jollie, & Cantillon, 2003). Disadvantages to utilizing technology in distance education as reported by students are as follows; problems accessing appropriate computer equipment, affordability of necessary equipment to access technology, quality and accuracy of course material may vary, and some students may feel isolated (McKimm, Jollie, &C Cantillon, 2003).

In sum, the literature in distance education appears to suggest no significant difference between social work courses taught in a technology-supported instructional environment with traditional face-to-face classroom instructional settings. In addition, evaluation studies have identified teaching styles, pedagogical methods, accessibility, and learner characteristics as some of the important issues to consider in distance education courses. While the success of distance education compared to more traditional classroom education has been well established (Abels, 2005; Dalton, 2001; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2003; Knowles, 2001; Rivera &L Rice, 2002; Seabury, 2003, Steckler et al., 2001), little research has been performed to evaluate how to improve distance educa¬tion courses by making the learning experience more effective for students (Macy et al., 2001). More research appears needed to further investigate student achievement and student satisfaction with respect to medium-specific pedagogical strategies and assignments

METHODOLOGY Description of the Study

This study was initiated to investigate student achievement and student satisfaction with respect to medium-specific pedagogical strategies and assignments. This will further advance our understanding on how students learn research skills in a totally Web-based instructional environment compared to a classroom-based instructional setting. For this investigation, we defined a Web-based instructional environment as a course that uses solely Internet resources and Web-based instructional strategies to teach course content. A classroom-based environment is defined as a course taught entirely in a face-to-face classroom setting with supporting materials provided both in the classroom and some online via On Course, a course management software program.

GOALS OF THE STUDY

The goal of this study was to compare the efficacy of learning outcomes in these two class formats. The study compared student achievement in these two groups on eleven identical topic specific assignments throughout the semester. It also compared their satisfaction on 13 pedagogical issues for the classes. The students' knowledge on two specific content areas, single subject designs, and program evaluation were measured at the start of the course by completing pretests. This was followed by assessing student learning throughout the

semester on the basis of the grades they received on 11 assignments and tests. Identical assignments and tests were used for both groups. In addition, at the end of the class, each .student was ask to rate their satisfaction with the 13 specific pedagogical issues (Noted in Table 3) such as quality of lecture and online content, professors ability to communicate, professor's ability to adapt to different learning styles, professors ability to use technology, and several other classroom processes.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study consisted of students from a large mid-west university enrolled in two sections of an undergraduate social work course in research methods. The number of students enrolled in the traditional course was 24 and the number of students enrolled in the web-based section was 27. Students self selected which class format they wanted to take and also volunteered to participate in the study. Ninety- four percent of the students were females and six percent were males. Approximately 78% were Caucasians and 22% were minorities. Most of the minorities were African American.

COURSE DESCRIPTION & FORMAT

The course used for this research initiative was an undergraduate social work course on research methods. The same instructor taught both sections of the course during the same fall semester. The research course was the second in a series of classes that all Bachelors in Social Work (BSW) students take to meet their requirement for research.

The focus of the class was on program evaluation and single subject designs. The two sections utilized the same text books and class materials. The following describes the class format used for each of the two class sections of the same course:

METHOD OF STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Student performance was evaluated by comparing exam scores and assignment grades for the two class format using the Mann-Whitney U test. Comparisons were also done using the Mann-Whitney U test on the applicable classroom process variables. The goal was to determine if there were significant differences in student performance between classes and with their comfort with the classroom processes. Nonparametric test were used because the class sizes were below 30 and did not meet the requirement of a normal distribution needed for a parametric test (Rosenthal, 2001). Nonparametric test were used since the class sizes were below 30 and it was thought it would be difficult to meet the requirement of a normal distribution needed for a parametric test. Several of the outcome variables were also ordinal level and thus not appropriate for parametric statistics. Effect sizes (Cohens d) were also computed to assist in helping to determine the magnitude of the differences between the groups since sample size was small and thus statistical power low. Effect size allows one to characterize the magnitude of the difference between the two classes rather than a raw difference score or a simple percentage difference. Cohen (1988) suggests that an absolute value effect size of 0.20 to 0.49 can be considered small, effect sizes of .5 to 0.79 to be medium, and an effect size of 0.80 and above to be large, "The effect size hypothetically could run the gamut from -3-70 to +3.70, although the most commonly reported effect sizes are in the 0 to 1.5 range." (Bloom, Fischer, &C Orme, 2006, p. 350)

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this study include the lack of random assignment to the two different class formats and the small sample size. Student variables such as access to technology, knowledge of web technology, and motivation may have affected student selection of class type and it is unclear if they affected student performance as well as selection. The small sample size and the lack of variability in demographic, primarily Caucasian females sample, makes it difficult to generalize the findings to other student groups.

A further limitation that may have negatively impacted the performance of students in the online section is that this was the first time this class had been taught online. Other difficulties that may have impacted the online section include the design of the Web-based instructional environment for presenting course materials and the lack of consistent instructional support provided to students,

CONCLUSION

The Result of this study shows that there were no factually noteworthy contrasts between the two class groups for eight out of eleven result understudy execution exercises and ten out of thirteen academic methodologies. There were extensive impact measure contrasts in light of class configuration on four of the understudy execution exercises and for understudy fulfillment with six of the instructive techniques. At the point when measurably huge contrasts were discovered, it was resolved that understudy execution on learning exercises was higher for the understudies in the conventional class. Students also reported greater satisfaction with pedagogical methods. These finding do not support the findings of previous literature stating that online learning is as effective as traditional learning. The researchers believe that this statistical difference in student performance occurred for several reasons. First, while the online class had. access only to On course for lecture materials, assignments, exams, and communication tools, the traditional classroom-based section had access to the same On course materials and communication tools in addition to the face-to-face communication with peers and instructor. In this situation, the traditional class was at a communicative advantage. They were able to communicate with the professor and peers during class time, in addition to class email and online discussion groups for answering questions and sharing information. This result does support the findings of several studies concerning the effectiveness of online teaching (Knowles, 2001; McShane, 2004; Potts, 2005; Rivera & Rice, 2002).

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Dr. D. G. Nejkar
Associate Professor , Department of Social Work Karmaveer Hire Arts, Science , Commerce and Education College, Gargoti, Kolhapur.

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