An Investigation into Instructor Implementation of Alternative Course Offerings in Education Departments in One Private Liberal Arts University

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ABSTRACT

In order to understand whether a "personal" education found in the mission of a private liberal arts university could be delivered in alternative formats, an investigation into the teaching practice of eight instructors in newly designed alternative delivery courses was conducted during the fall and spring semesters of 2013-2014. The faculty taught in education departments across three levels – undergraduate teacher certification, masters and doctoral studies in education. The alternative delivery courses for the study included online, hybrid and one web-camera distance learning course, so that students were in the classroom with the instructor on alternative weeks, and teleconferencing with him through a web camera during the other weeks. Qualitative data indicated that all instructors met the challenges of training, student bias, course design, yet raised questions of interaction, rigor and workload. Personal mentoring of students was not evidenced. Student feedback established that students were amenable to alternative deliveries, but that they wanted a choice or prior knowledge of such delivery. Particularly, both instructors and students missed the discussion rich environment found in face-to-face environments. Recommendations that would help meet the "personal" education mission in alternative delivery courses were continued instructor training, advanced advertisement of alternative delivery, intentional effort for student legal accommodations and mentorship, and continued assessment of such courses.

INTRODUCTION

Private liberal arts universities are joining the highly popular trend found in public and for-profit universities in offering alternative course delivery to their students for numerous reasons – accessibility, increased revenue, classroom accommodations, student demand, higher education competition, and instructor preferences (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Clinefelter & Magda, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). However, the mission of a private liberal arts university whose students live on campus or commute from nearby may emphasize a personal, mentoring atmosphere which, until recently, has been delivered by traditional student-centered, face-to-face with instructor, classroom settings (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Paul & Cochran, 2013). Do alternative course deliveries allow for traditional engagement, attention, and personal mentoring as is expected in face-to-face environments and as stated in a university's mission?

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In order to understand whether a university's mission of a "personal" education could be delivered in alternative formats and how the transition is made from teaching face-to-face courses to alternative delivery systems, we investigated the teaching practice of eight instructors in education departments at one private liberal arts university during the fall and spring semesters of 2013-2014. The instructors under study were faculty specifically teaching in education departments across three levels – undergraduate teacher certification, masters and doctoral studies in education. The mission articulated in the university catalog was one "committed to the principles that each student deserves personal attention... The university endeavors to create a learning environment where each student is provided an opportunity to pursue individual excellence, to think clearly and creatively and to communicate effectively..." (Texas Wesleyan University Graduate Catalog 2014-2016, p. 21). What were the challenges, benefits, and teaching practices from an instructor's view in alternative delivery courses particularly as related to the university's mission?

BACKGROUND

Instructors in private liberal arts universities face the challenge of preserving rigorous, high quality learning environments, while providing personal attention to students through relevant courses and programs students expect and perceive to have value (Bennet & Lockyer, 2004; Jones, 2011). Critical and higher order thinking results from best teaching practice, which includes a rich mix of appropriate tools, experiences, scaffolding, mentoring, and reflection (Bandura, 1986; McDonald, Straker, Schlumpf, & Plack, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Technology applications and blended learning environments may add to the mix of interaction, engagement and experiences, or may not, if instructors are not able or willing to adapt teaching style and practice (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013). Students, as well, may not welcome teleconferencing, hybrid, or online courses in their expected course of study. Enrollment in an alternative delivery rather than in a face-to-face course may be met with anxiety, skepticism, or concern about value and rigor (Paris, 2000). In USA Today, Karambelas (2013) reported that many students continue to prefer traditional, face-to-face instruction in the collegiate atmosphere.

Perhaps intuitively, students understand how they learn. Social cognition and social constructivist learning theory places the individual in a sociocultural context (Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Interaction is a salient feature of the environment as old and new meanings are constructed over time and experience. Learners create or re-create new understandings and knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe and the ideas, events, and activities with which they come in contact. In a constructivist setting, active engagement, inquiry, and collaboration with others, as well as learning from the mentoring expertise of an instructor or peer, characterize activities of learning (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Sergiovanni, 2005). An online or hybrid environment may or may not include interaction, inquiry and collaboration with others, but could, with planning and adaptation, be filled with constructivist learning mechanisms–less instructor dominance but expert instructor feedback and presence, facilitated interaction among peers, and valued mentoring from knowledgeable peers and the instructor (Dennen, 2005; Floyd, Hughes, & Maydosz, 2012). When given these conditions, most students can learn and may feel their coursework is personal.

Studies have confirmed that engaged learning can and does occur in alternative delivery courses (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Gabriel (2004) examined student perceptions of learning in a hybrid course with a student-centered approach to instruction. Students enrolled were encouraged to communicate regularly, collaborate in learning groups, interact throughout the course, and were asked to consistently participate in online discussion forums. Enrolled students met face-to-face on three different occasions to foster communication and to reflect on course content. Results indicated that students both benefitted from the online instruction, yet faced numerous challenges. Beneficially, students claimed to enjoy learning from their peers, learned to ask questions that challenged others to think and form new insights, and shared resources, gained confidence, worked well in groups, and learned to believe that they could be successful in an online learning environment. Challenges included time constraints to read new postings, reflect upon the material, learn course content, and lack of ease with instructional activities.

Likewise, the instructor's presence in alternative delivery is crucial to engagement by students (Farber, 2008; Paris, 2000). Jones' study on teaching presence had "its genesis in concerns that the online environment is too impersonal" (Jones, 2011, p. 78). She found that students rated instructor's presence as high when the course was intentionally designed for personal meaning and value, when the instructor facilitated well, and when the instructor's subject matter expertise and mentoring was evident. Similarly, Hosler and Arend (2012) found three factors positively affected students' critical thinking in both face-to-face and online courses: a well organized course, clear goals and assignments, and relevance of assignments to personal goals.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to understand the application of teaching practice in alternative course delivery, and whether a university's commitment to personal education can be delivered in alternative course delivery, we designed the current study with the following research questions:

RQ 1 What were challenges and benefits experienced by instructors during newly designed alternative delivery courses in one private liberal arts university with a mission of commitment to personal education?

RQ 2 What constructivist teaching practices (engagement, reflection, mentoring) were demonstrated in newly designed alternative delivery courses in one private liberal arts university with a mission of commitment to personal education?

METHODOLOGY

Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to invite eight instructors to participate in the study. All eight participants were full-time instructors in the education departments at the university; six of the instructors were ranked as associate or full professors. The other two were employed in tenure-track, full-time positions. Years of the instructors' teaching experience at the university ranged from five to 26 years. All had served as leaders of education committees, organizations, departments, and/or programs, and six of the instructors shared evidence of ongoing research agendas. Three were men; five were women. All had been rated by education students as effective to highly effective instructors; however, the instructors had little to no experience in planning and implementing alternative delivery for the courses in the study. Seven of the eight had previously taught their courses in a face-to-face course design. Student enrollment in the alternative delivery courses ranged from five to eighteen.

In the current study, alternative delivery was defined as course delivery that varied from the previous traditional delivery system, which had included a 15-16 week long semester and meeting face-to-face with students each week for a total of approximately 45 contact hours. The alternative delivery courses for the study included online, hybrid and one web-camera distance learning course, so that students were in the classroom with the instructor on alternative weeks, and teleconferencing with him through a web camera during the other weeks. Online delivery was defined as instruction that did not mandate face-to-face meetings or interaction in a classroom setting; rather readings, discussion, participation, and assignments were delivered and expected through posts and chat rooms.

Hybrid delivery was defined in that students met face-to-face meetings with the instructor 50% – 60% of the term, while participating in online chat room discussions, posting assignments and responses during the other allotted time. The university controlled Blackboard© system was the primary mode of online delivery and web-assistance; however, Edmodo© and the Good Reads© blog were used as well.

Data were collected from instructors' vitae, course syllabi, semi-structured interviews during implementation, course reflections, and dialogue from an instructors' focus group held after the courses were completed. In addition, triangulation was aided by collecting and comparing student perceptions and feedback from an end-of-course questionnaire.

Data were coded for segments, similarities and differences; charts and tables were used to identify emerging answers to the research questions. Notes from interviews, syllabi analysis, and the focus group revealed nuances in implementation and practice. Student feedback helped clarify course design and implementation. Reflection occurred as a by-product of participating in the study, due to course attention, interviews and focus group discussion. We assumed that because we asked questions, participants reflected more deeply about the change in delivery, and how best to teach so that students (future and current educators) succeeded in the objectives of the course and experienced a strong pedagogical model for learning.

FINDINGS

Challenges

Most instructors in the study were novices at teaching in an alternative format. They overcame their inadequacy in implementing teleconferencing, online and hybrid coursework through direct instruction and coaching from experts housed in the Center for Alternative Delivery (pseudonym) division of the university. The specialized instruction provided the instructors with additional technology aid, such as the use of voice over Powerpoints©, use of Smartboard© software, how to set up group chats, how to use slides at the appropriate rate, and how to use the teleconferencing equipment. The experts helped instructors plan for a tighter schedule with deadline dates. All instructors asked peers and mentors for additional help and devoted numerous hours in planning for the course delivery. One instructor commented that he spent much more time in planning for the alternative delivery than he had previously spent on the face-to-face course. All discovered that preparation for structure, specificity, tight schedule

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TABLE 1
INSTRUCTOR, LEVEL, KIND OF ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY

Instructor (#, Level, & Course)		Description	Assignments	Program
1	Undergraduate	ESL theory course	web-camera, teleconference learning delivery with one group, face-to-face delivery with other group, alternate dates	web-assisted	Blackboard©
2	Masters	Psychosocial research in education course	online course, with one face-to-face meeting	web-assisted	Blackboard©
3	Masters	Introduction to research course	online course, with student choice of attending weekly face-to face meetings	web-assisted	Blackboard©
4	Masters	Trends in education course	online course, no face-to-face meeting	web-assisted	Blackboard©
5	Masters	Administration of schools course	hybrid format, 50% face-to-face and 50% asynchronous web meetings, discussion, assignments	web-assisted	Blackboard©
6	Masters	Adolescent reading instruction course	hybrid format, 50% face-to-face and 50% asynchronous web meetings, discussion, assignments	web-assisted	Good Reads©
7	Doctoral	Organization and policy course	hybrid course, 60% face-to-face and 40% asynchronous web meetings, discussion, assignments	web-assisted	Edmodo©
8	Doctoral	Research and statistics course	hybrid course, 60% face-to-face and 40% asynchronous web meetings, discussion, assignments	web-assisted	Blackboard©

and assignments for the term required strict attention to details in the alternative delivery courses.

A particular challenge faced by online only instructors was that of helping students overcome their fears of online learning and bias against online courses. To ease anxiety, instructors posted welcome videos about themselves, asked students to post photos from family and sports activities, kept up an announcement board, sent weekly reminder emails, and hosted Google Hangout© forums. Instructors also offered face-to-face meetings during the term for students to meet and ask questions and receive clarification about particular topics. Several instructors were willing for students to have their cell phone numbers and they accepted calls from students at night and on weekends regarding assignments. One instructor recorded podcasts to accompany learning modules. It seemed that instructors of teleconferencing and hybrid courses did not experience similar levels of anxiety from students because face-to-face meetings were regularly scheduled during the term.

Another challenge expressed by instructors was the unsettled question about rigor and workload. All instructors

reported that the objectives of the alternatively delivered course were the same objectives as the face-to-face course, with the exception of increased technology use. However, one instructor questioned if she would have time in the hybrid course to rigorously teach material that she normally taught in a face-to-face class. She also conceded that the current course, a doctoral level course in statistics and research, did not appear well-suited for either an online or hybrid environment. Students had many questions and at this point her work online with them was inadequate for the help they needed. She acknowledged that she would revisit her instructional scheme, and that hybrid timing for this course might mean meeting 70%–80% face-to-face rather than less. One instructor felt that his podcasts and slides included too much redundant material, which then made him question the rigor of the course. One instructor wondered if the reading course was rigorous enough, or simply an online book club? Two instructors announced that possibly the work they assigned was greater in volume than face-to-face courses taught previously, and that the experience of teaching the course over several terms would help them clarify the appropriate amount of readings and assignments.

Another instructor stated that she was required to meet the challenge of engaging students in posts and responses by continually reminding and prodding her students. The students did not respond until she asked. She planned to retool her syllabus and add more stringent guidelines. Conversely, another instructor decided he needed to alter the stringent guidelines to allow exceptions to posting. Accommodating learning styles differences and handling inappropriate comments and assignment-created tension emerged as challenges for further consideration.

Benefits

Beside the benefits of course accessibility and less mandated time spent on campus or in class meetings, other benefits were suggested. One instructor noted that he felt he knew his students somewhat better due to the newly established routine he followed with his teleconferencing students; each morning he opened his students' emails first, and responded to all of them about procedures or content specific information. Another instructor commented that a benefit of the hybrid course was that all comments, posts, assignments, and her resources of articles and sites were housed in one place (her online library, online students' backpack, and online folders in Edmodo©), which brought greater efficiency and less paper consumption to the course. She also liked that the material was archived for future reference. One professor believed that students found communicating via posts a more positive and more public method to share reflection. She had purposely addressed how to post with tact and probing questions, and how to build the community rather than disrupt, while disagreeing and stating differences in understanding.

Another benefit that surfaced upon reflection was that two instructors experienced greater zeal and determination for developing in-depth, technological material delivery and meeting student needs through technology. Both commented that the alternative delivery of online instruction had opened possibilities for learning that had not been noted before. One instructor commented that performing the various technology applications had given an impetus to her other courses as well, that her skill at providing engaging activities for students had greatly improved.

Teaching Practices
(Engagement, Reflection, Mentoring)

All instructors agreed that the tools of technology could aid in collaboration and constructing meaning from readings and experiences, even without face-to-face discussion. Efforts of opportunities for students to engage in meaning making, and to be influenced by "knowledgeable others"

who provided scaffolding toward greater understanding were evident in syllabi. Online posts and responses indicated that some students were reaching a deeper level of understanding about topics or objectives. Hybrid course instructors used both face-to-face meetings and postings as a means of constructing meaning. However, in focus group dialogue, the question was raised by an online instructor, "how do I know for sure that my students are fully engaged?"

In order to engage students, instructors used a wide variety of technology tools and assignments. Students were required to view and respond to YouTube© videos, participate in Google Chat©, add further elaboration to Blackboard© and Edmodo© discussion posts and responses to classmates, to post assignments and use the web-assisted format for checking grades and announcements. One instructor insisted on the importance of communication in the online course to students, that she expected to hear from each of them weekly. One online instructor explained, "The issue is feedback. That's the real problem. In a face-to-face class, you know when students don't understand. In an online class there is lag time involved. Students may nor may not ask questions about the assignment or what they don't understand. It shows up in the quality of their work….They think they know the material, but I'm not sure they are understanding it. When they finally contact me, I find many have gone down the wrong path."

One instructor of a hybrid class at the doctoral level questioned engagement by students regarding case change proposals assigned for presentation. She reflected, "I suppose the students could report their proposal in the online Cloud© meeting, but I think the feedback will be richer when we share the proposals in our face-to-face meetings. I'm glad we can see each other." As mentioned, another instructor did not witness adequate growth in research methods and statistics through online discussion and practice.

The practice of student reflection was documented in syllabi, through responses, posts, essays, mid-term and final examinations. Instructor reflection, as well, was evidenced from all participants. One instructor questioned his current ability to facilitate online discussion. He raised his self-doubt and the question of "how to be Socratic, how to be organic, how to be constructivist in an online environment" to the focus group and no clear answer was given. Another instructor admitted, "the most difficult part for me was to authentically engage in their discussion. We did it but it didn't seem authentic." He added, "My feedback to myself was that my course was not as effective. It might have been the newness of the format."

An instructor of a hybrid course reflected that his learning moment was when he realized he was trying to do too

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much at one time, that he should pull back from trying to accomplish a hybrid atmosphere in all classes, and refocus on one course until he felt comfortable. An instructor at the doctoral level commented that she might move to a flipped or inverted model (Mazur, 2009), so that she uploaded lectures for students before class meetings and required that the students hear the lecture before attending class. All instructors were committed to making improvements and changes as they anticipated another term of alternative delivery. One instructor said, "I always make notes of what worked and doesn't work. When I go back to that course the next time I teach it, I have the notes of what to change and what not to change. For me, the reflection piece is vital."

Specific mentoring activity by instructors was not in evidence. However, all instructors made intentional efforts to be available for dialogue with any student through emails, through posted office hours, and via telephone and texts.

Student Feedback

Students in seven of the eight courses were invited to answer six open-ended questions about the course. Sixty-six percent of the enrolled students responded with feedback regarding which alternative format matched the course content best, which assignments worked best, whether opportunities for discourse with their peers and/or instructor were available, what recommendations could be made about future alternative delivery classes, and whether the technology system worked in the various courses. Responses did not reveal any direct mentoring activity on the part of the instructors, except that most students reported that instructors were accessible and readily responded to calls, texts, emails and office appointments. In general, the majority of students responded with positive reactions to the alternative formats; however, three recurring themes were generated from the students' feedback that corresponded with both the background literature and the instructors' observations.

First, a majority of students who were enrolled in online courses without face-to-face meetings, commented that what was missing in their course was a face-to-face setting for peer interaction. One student wrote, "this class had a lot of reading on topics that would be fun to discuss in a group setting. I miss the peer interaction and hearing others' thoughts." Another commented, " I do not feel there was ample opportunity to authentically dialogue with peers even though the comments on the discussion board were very in-depth. It was tough because people were posting during different days. I got the feeling that once someone posted, he or she never went back to read anyone else's postings or responses." One student wrote, "I felt disconnected. I did my work but I did not feel that

the interaction was effective." Another responded with "I liked being able to have discussions with peers online, but nothing replaces face-to-face discussions." Graduate students in hybrid courses, with classes that met face-to-face at least 50% of the time responded with higher satisfaction towards peer interaction, as the nature of their courses allowed full discussion both online and in person.

Another dominant theme gathered from the student responses was the students' insight into technology use and course design. Students found very favorable all courses that were organized and structured, used selected videos, TED© talks, voice over Powerpoints©, and podcasts for online lectures, had assignments that chunked the material into manageable tasks, and were easy to navigate though the chosen technology system. Negative reactions about technology and course design were that there were too many technical locations and directions to follow for posting, that assignments kept changing or were vague, and that Blackboard© technology was not as easy to use as other systems they knew about, and that prepared audio files were not made using their current group. At times, the audio and camera technology in the teleconferencing course did not work; all students agreed that student-student interactions within the two sites were productive, but across-site interactions were non-existent.

Finally, students who were in online or hybrid courses raised the issue that they did not know that the course offering would be online or hybrid, that the expectation at enrollment was face-to-face meetings. Many voiced their dissatisfaction with the discovery that the course would be offered alternatively. One student wrote, "let students know prior to enrollment and offer a face-to-face section for those who don't want online learning." Another expressed his frustration, "the student needs to be informed that a class will have parts online. I think that the use of technology is good, but not everyone is able to learn with online courses." One student summed up the general feeling, "I picked this university because it was small, personal, and face-to-face. I didn't like that the class format changed."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings were clustered into observations, which in turn led to four recommendations regarding alternative delivery formats in a private liberal arts university. We observed that education students themselves brought an interesting dynamic to the course settings. Education students, due to their chosen field and coursework in learning and teaching, understand constructivist learning theory, learning styles, and differentiated teaching, which require a plethora of activities that encourage student engagement. Students in the online courses noted that peer

interaction, in the format they had expected, was missing. Instructors also were not satisfied with discussion boards and chat rooms as the only modes of peer interaction. One instructor wrote, "for a face-to-face teacher, online is not satisfactory. My joy comes from working with the students face-to-face. It's not the same in an online class." The current study found that teleconferencing and hybrid courses did allow for face-to-face interaction that students expected. We recommend that teleconference or hybrid designs be advertised in advance of enrollment and that the teleconference or hybrid design be the primary model of alternative delivery in private liberal arts universities whose population lives on campus or commutes from close proximity.

A second observation was that while instructors designed an intentional welcoming platform and planned content rich activities for engagement and forming a community, they expressed doubts about knowing their students personally. Those who established online windows into personal lives, music, and photos were more satisfied with the community that was formed. However, it appeared that important knowledge about a student's legal rights regarding accommodations was absent from the online environment. In order to follow a university's commitment to providing personal education, we recommend that intentional welcome and building of community occur in teleconferencing, hybrid and online courses at private liberal arts universities, with intentional effort or policy established towards identifying and meeting a student's legal accommodation needs.

We observed that in order to become proficient at alternative course design and delivery, instructors purposively engaged in the daily experience of teaching such courses, found time for reflection, gained expert training, and developed a repertoire of technology applications. However, recognized mentoring actions such as shared stories, office appointments for advising, collaborative research papers and projects, informal explanations of professional work in the field, were not readily identified. Students in this private liberal arts university are mentor seekers, and the kinds of mentoring communication that occurs before, after and during face-to-face class meetings will need to find a place during alternative delivery courses. We recommend that the practice of mentoring students, especially during alternative delivery courses and/or degree programs, become intentional. Mentorship in alternative delivery courses will help to fulfill a university's mission of providing a personal education.

A final recommendation resulted from the observation of growth in alternative delivery formats in both instructor and student groups. Several students expressed surprise and greater confidence in online, hybrid or teleconference

learning as the term ended. Instructors also found that their growth and agility in technology had increased. We recommend that instructor training and feedback, as well as student satisfaction questionnaires and focus groups in technology applications and alternative delivery systems become yearly constructs in order to assess and design best learning environments for students in private liberal arts universities.

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