

Distance Learning in Colleges and Universities

-Pamela Shultz

As technology advances so do schools. Colleges and universities try to keep up with these technological advancements. It was not long ago that computers were installed in schools and colleges, now students have access to the internet on computers. It makes sense then to add distance-learning courses, where students can be enrolled in internet classes. Not only are there internet courses, but also compressed video courses; compressed video courses allow students from one campus to attend the same class as other students on another campus through live televised courses.

Are distance-learning courses beneficial to students? Many students enroll in distance-learning courses in order to take classes on their own time, in the freedom of their own home, and on a campus close to home. Distance courses allow for less travel time, which benefits the students in a tough economic time. With these benefits, what are some of the consequences of distance education? With so many schools going to online degrees, do the students suffer? How do students feel about distance education? How do the administrators feel about distance learning?

Students now have the option to take a course online at a college or university. Students can even complete a degree program that was designed to be completed exclusively online. How do these technological advancements affect the education the students receive? This paper will look at past research conducted on distance education and some of the current trends affecting distance education, as well as, alternative futures in distance education.

Literature

Floyd (2003) states the term 'distance education' is used to include every form of delivering off campus instruction. The models included in this definition include satellite, television, video conferencing, cable, audiotapes, computer systems, fax, correspondence courses, home study, and independent study. Webster and Hackley (1997) looked at technology-mediated distance learning, which is a new method of distance education. This technology mediated distance learning is becoming important in education; aiding in costs, information, and knowledge among multiple sites by providing education to distance or disadvantaged locations. Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1998) stated that it was only in the past few years that an overabundance of new distance learning programs has been introduced, in particular the community colleges have seen a significant growth in distance education. Floyd (2003) also agrees that community colleges have seen significant growth, and mentions that in 1994, "80% of community colleges offered some form of distance education" (p. 338).

Traditional Versus Distance Learning

Merisotis and Phipps (1999), try to assess the difference between distance and traditional classroom learning. They claim that past research suggests that the learning outcomes of students using distance education are similar to those who participate in traditional classroom education. They sought to examine distance learning's effectiveness and compare it with traditional learning.

They found that students and faculty have a positive view toward distance learning.

Current Trends

Howell, Williams, and Lindsey (2003) studied the current trends affecting distance education. One such trend is student and enrollments; with the growing student population and enrollments, distance education programs are becoming necessary. Because of the many responsibilities students face such as family, and full time jobs, many students search for classes that meet their schedules and circumstances. For students not able to get to the campus, distance education has provided opportunities to students wanting to continue their education (Owston, 1997). Today many universities are online, offering programs that can be completed online; such universities include the University of Phoenix, Kaplan University, Walden University, and Capella University. The University of Phoenix has 200 locations including online programs around the world; this shows the growing trend of distance education.

Consequences

Possible consequences of distance education could involve loss of quality interaction with peers and instructors, distance education creates more stress for teachers, problems with delivery models, learning is not as hands on, poorer student performance, as well as many other issues. Rovai (2002) revealed that one area of concern is dropout rates, which are higher in distance education, programs than in traditional programs. However, Webster and Hackley (1997) state that "research comparing the effectiveness of educational television and face-to-face instruction have found no or small differences in student achievement" (p. 1283). They asserted that many researchers feel scientists need to move beyond grade point averages as indicators of student achievement; therefore, they looked at student involvement, participation, engagement, technology self-efficacy, attitudes toward technology models, usefulness and attitudes toward technology-mediated learning (1997). They allege that learning is best accomplished through active involvement; and many educators have argued that active involvement of students cannot be accomplished through videoconferencing, and other technology mediated learning. Students may even participate less if they feel they are on video or television. Rovai (2002) states that physical separation of students in distance education programs may contribute to the dropout rates. These students feel a sense of disconnection, and reduction of a sense of community. This lack of a sense of community can affect the student's ability to bond, sense of cohesion, feelings of friendships, trust, and interaction. Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003) claim that studies on online course retention rates compared to traditional courses are inconclusive. They state individual schools and organizations report online programs have as higher or higher retention rates. These retention rates are a concern for university administrators and faculty.

Benefits

Possible benefits of distance learning involves student access on remote locations, student access at convenient times that fit their schedule, increase access to education, costs less than a traditional education, as well as many other benefits. Owston (1997)

states that one advantage of the internet is that it is compatible with the way students would like to learn. Visual learners also benefit from the internet because it is a visual stimulus. Distance education enables new kinds of learning; for example, students develop critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, written communication skills, and collaborative skills (1997). Spooner, Jordan, Algozzine, & Spooner (1999) claim that distance education started as a way for rural universities to increase course offerings by cutting costs. Distance education is popular for students because it works and is flexible (1999). It also allows universities to increase their enrollment.

Research has found that distance education is beneficial. Distance education allows students to enroll in courses that fit their hectic schedules, it allows universities to increase enrollment without having to acquire additional resources. Studies have found that distance education loses the personal one on one interaction students have with instructors; it loses a feeling of a sense of community, and attributes to poorer student performance. Technology has increased over the years and changes have been made since most of the research has been conducted. It would be useful to look more closely at how the technology has changed today and what new technology has been introduced into the classroom since these studies. It would also be beneficial to look at student and faculty opinions on distance education and what they feel they gain from technology-mediated learning. From this project, I intended to learn whether students and administrators feel traditional or distance education courses are

Method

Participants: Fifty-three administrators, faculty, and students were included from Arkansas State University and Ozark College in the study.

Materials

Materials included an email script, a consent form, and two questionnaires. The questionnaire for faculty contained 27 questions, and the questionnaire for students contained 24 questions. The questions were open-ended questions; however, there were a few closed ended likert scale questions, taking approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. Likert-scale questions consisted of items such as: compared to traditional classrooms, how useful do you think the instructors consider distance education using the models of technology; how important are reducing costs, enrollment, time, access, and quality to your institutions distance education programs? The questions assessed their knowledge and opinion on distance education courses.

Procedure

The participants were notified by email of the study, and asked to participate in the questionnaire. In the email, they were told that they could either mail or email me the consent forms and questionnaires. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected.

Results

The results of the qualitative questions were analyzed using qualitative methods through a coding scheme, while the results of the quantitative questions were analyzed using methods such as t-test and Pearson's correlations. Each question was analyzed and some of the answers were used as comparison from the survey. I sought to assess and compare distance education courses of community colleges and four-year universities, as well as

compare administrators' views with the views of students. As for whether the participant preferred a traditional or distance education course, what I found was there is no difference between student and faculty preference for traditional courses, but there is a significant difference between faculty and student preference for online courses, students prefer online.

Some of the reasons given for why participants prefer traditional courses were as one administrator stated, "Because in class the student has a better opportunity to have discussion on topics." One student stated, "I prefer traditional as it has so many ways to retain information. However, the convenience of distance education being when I can do it makes it the ONLY way I can continue my education." Another student preferred traditional courses, but claimed she would take distance courses if it would allow for completion of degree program more quickly, seeing scheduling is a problem with traditional courses. Only one participant listed they preferred distance education, and they stated that distance education is a "better use of my time. At the college level you should be teaching yourself." Other participants did not mark a preference but listed why they would prefer distance and why they would prefer traditional. Most of the answers included scheduling and access. One student stated they preferred type of course stating, "Traditional offers structured class time and face-to-face interaction, distance education course provides flexibility and more relaxed learning environment."

Some of the benefits students listed they received from taking a distance education course were earning a degree while working, "learning on my own time," flexibility in schedule, and comfort. Some of the benefits administrators listed the students received from taking a distance education course were students learn to manage time, able to work job, convenience, ability to teach themselves, more responsibility for their own education. What about the consequences received from taking a distance education course? Many of the students listed they lose relationship skills gained in working with others on projects, lose interaction with other students and faculty, lose exposure to other perspectives, and one listed she felt other people discount it as "not a real education." Administrators listed the following as consequences loss of the classical human experience, there are types of classroom engagement that do not happen easily through distance education, lose one-on-one with instructor and explanation of topics, lose social interaction with professor and other students, ability to clarify a point, and one stated "some prefer the traditional classroom setting and the college experience."

When asked if they feel they or the students perform better, or receive better grades, in a traditional or distance education course, one administrator stated it depends on the student, another stated in distance education courses, and another stated in traditional courses. The students stated they perform better in distance education courses because if she missed a class in a traditional course she could not go back, another student stated she performed better in class, and another said that the grades are the same either way, but she believed more in-depth knowledge is acquired in a well led traditional class.

Between the two colleges, the four-year university has been offering distance education courses for 20 years, while the

community college has only been offering distance education courses for the last 10 years.

When asked the question "Compared to traditional classrooms, how useful do you think the instructors consider Distance Education using the types of technology available," almost all of the participants ranked the usefulness between 6 and 8 with 10 being the most useful. Another question asked among administrators was "What are the characteristics of students and teachers who profit from distance education experiences?" the difference between the community college and four-year university was not considerable. One administrator stated the characteristics of the students are students who "enjoy using the technology, do not procrastinate, are self-motivated and disciplined." Another administrator said the characteristics are, "non-traditional students with families and a full-time job." When asked "how important are the following goals to your institution's distance education program?: reducing institutions per student cost; increasing enrollments; reducing time constraints for students; increase student access by making courses available; improving the quality of course offerings; and meeting the needs of local employers," it was found that reducing costs was important for each of the participants differently. It was also found that increasing enrollments, access, and quality was somewhat to very important for all of the administrators. After running a Pearson's r correlation, it found that there is a significant negative correlation between access and enrollment.

The findings from what comparisons I conducted were not significant, and both types of colleges seemed to agree when it came to traditional and distance education courses.

Discussion

Although there was a small sample size, the study yielded several interesting conclusions. The first interesting finding was that as for whether the participant preferred a traditional or distance education course, there is no difference between student and faculty preference for traditional courses, but there is a significant difference between faculty and student preference for online courses. This states that students prefer online courses, whereas, faculty did not. Some of the reasons students preferred online courses were because it is a better use of time, convenience, comfort, and flexibility. Another interesting finding was that students believed they performed better in distance education courses.

Another interesting conclusion was that there were more benefits to taking a distance education course than there were consequences, some of the benefits included ability to work while earning a degree, time-management, convenience, comfort, and flexibility; and the consequence listed more prevalently was loss of interaction with students and faculty. The findings this research between community colleges and four-year universities were not comparable. The administrators of both colleges seemed to agree when it came to their opinions on distance education.

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Book Review

An Application of Cooperative Learning to Teach English as a Foreign/Second Language in Nepal, 2011



Krishna Bista published his book entitled *An Application of Cooperative Learning to Teach English as a Foreign/Second Language in Nepal* from Lambert Academic Publishing in March, 2011. In the book, Krishna writes about cooperative learning to teach English as a second language in Nepal. He says, "Co-

operative learning is an old method of classroom activities in the Western educational setting, but it is not widely exercised in Nepalese academia." In the book, the author applied cooperative learning in Oral Communication and English Composition class in a public college of Nepal to examine how effective it is perceived among students of various learning levels. His study found that cooperative pedagogy as an effective approach to be promoted by teachers and educators in Nepalese ELT. He has made some recommendations for the use of cooperative learning techniques in EFL classrooms in Nepal.

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