The Peril, Potential and Promise of Distance Education

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UND’S SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM
Fall, 2005

- 146 undergraduate students
- 30 graduate campus students, Concentration only (with BSSW)
- 8 Department Faculty
Distance Program: January, 2006

- Hired a part-time Distance Coordinator
- Implemented the first “on-line” Foundation MSW Program January, 2006
- Twelve students admitted to first cohort
- First 5 students graduated December, 2008; 21 in May, 2009
186 undergrads
40 campus students, Concentration only (with BSSW)
125 Distance Students (Foundation & Concentration)
15 Department Faculty
First IVIN Social Work Program

- Distance program began in 1989
- Used Interactive Television (IVIN) with students traveling to sites
- First in the nation to offer full degree off-campus
- Request for Alternative Program approved by CSWE
- Five Sites; 28 BSSW Degrees Earned
On the Road with IVIN

- Serving isolated rural and reservation communities to meet workforce demands
- Assisting farm communities dealing with farm stress
- “Farmwives” and “place-bound” students
Lessons Learned

- Lesson #1: For most of us in higher education, there is very little preparation for teaching.

- Lesson #2: Those of us who gain some modicum of teaching skill have had to work very hard to overcome that deficit.
Lessons Learned

- Lesson #3: Concerns about the quality of distance education are well-merited.

- Lesson #4: Poor teaching is poor teaching—in whatever modality it’s delivered.
Lessons Learned

- Lesson #5: Institutions of higher education seem to have a higher tolerance for poor teaching than I had previously imagined.

- Lesson #6: There is also less accountability for teaching in higher education than I had imagined.
Lessons Learned

- Lesson #7: The temptation to regard distance programs (or any online course offerings) as institutional “cash cows” must be resisted on all fronts—due diligence needed here.

- Lesson #8: A lack of such diligence can lead to some impressive corruption.
Selected Relevant Literature

- Moore’s (1996) TDT (Transactional Distance Theory) gives us a conceptual framework that allows us to tailor instruction to our own unique contexts.
- Distance students tend to be older, self-motivated, and have more years of practice experience (e.g., Theile, 2003).
- There appears to be a positive correlation between level of student interaction and learning in on-line environments (e.g., Stocks & Freddolino, 2000; Wu & Turner, 2006).
Selected Relevant Literature

- Surveys of social work faculty show a widespread resistance to teaching practice courses “online” (Vernon et al., 2009)
- However, there appears to be growing support for hybrid distance education (e.g., Ayala, 2009; Coe, Regan & Young, 2008)
- A recent meta-analysis from the U.S. Department of Education shows on-line learning has advantages over conventional classrooms; hybrid strategies have even great pluses for students (Means et al., 2009)
Selected Relevant Literature

The next step is to find out what blend of F2F and online instruction is most effective and promotes learning across different types of learning and content areas (Ayala, 2009).

Looking specifically at issues surrounding the delivery of Social Work practice courses is still a relatively unexplored area and merits greater attention (e.g., Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006).
Distance Program Structure

- “Blended” or “hybrid” design: Students travel to campus for 5 days of intensive “labs,” primarily for their micro practice courses
- Technology utilized: synchronous (real-time), F2F (face-to-face) web-based videoconferencing technology (“Adobe Connect”)
- Courses are taught in two sections three evenings per week (about 15 students/section)
Distance Program Structure

- Students attend part-time, 6 credit hours per semester, year-round
- Field instruction occurs in students’ home communities with at least one in-person visit from UND faculty
- No graduate faculty “opt out” on teaching in distance program
- Tenure-seeking and tenured faculty are not required to teach Summer Semester
Purpose of Study

To learn more about students’ thoughts, perceptions, feelings, ideas, and suggestions relative to practice courses offered through UND’s Distance MSW Program.
Methods & Study Limitations

Methods

- In-depth, face-to-face, tape-recorded interviews with MSW students graduating in December, 2008, and May, 2009 (IRB approval & consent forms used)
- Open-ended, unstructured interviews using list of “sensitizing topics” (Patton, 2002)
- Analyze data with utilization focus (Patton, 2002)

Limitations

- While issues related to potential coercion were minimized, there still was a power differential between interviewers and respondents
- Timing of interviews – halo effect?
Sample Description

- 24/26 interviewed
- Older than Campus-based colleagues
- 11% male
- 7% ethnic minority
- 100% worked full-time in human services or related field

**Where Students Live**

- 72% In ND/ NW MN
- 14% Broader Region
- 14% Out of Region
Major Themes

- Program structure (synchronous, F2F) was linked to:
  - Greater sense of interactivity
  - Higher levels of engagement
  - Enhanced sense of accountability
Major Themes

Interactivity:

“I definitely think that the interaction enhanced the learning on the computer and I think that made it much more similar to what it would be like in a real classroom. This education is very similar to what you would get if you were on campus.”
Major Themes

Engagement:

“I like having lectures where we’re all together…we have the chat bar going and as the professor is talking, we’re asking questions, and bringing up other points for discussion. If I had just viewed a recorded lecture, I would not be able to participate in that give and take at all.”
Major Themes

Accountability

“I think having structured class times are important to keep everyone on task. I guess you could just go and listen to a recorded lecture when it fits in your schedule. But a lot of times, if it isn’t scheduled for you, then it doesn’t happen. Other things become more pressing.”
Major Themes

- Technical Limitations

*When we had a lot of technical problems, it was really hard to get into the whole therapeutic relationship thing...I remember feeling like I did such a bad job because...I wasn’t focused on what I should have been focused on.*
“It would be very cumbersome to use [Adobe Connect] to do Groups or Families. If you have more than one microphone on at a time, it echoes, and there’s always going to be somebody with technology problems.”
Major Themes

Learning Community

“To get to know the students . . . the bonding part of it was a huge piece . . . To get to know the teachers and being on campus—that experience was invaluable.”

“Before going to campus, there wasn’t that much sharing between us. But after we came back, there was a lot more communication between the students and the instructors. I think that really enhanced the experience.”
Practice Courses: General Recommendations

- Maintain the blended approach for practice classes.
- You must maintain labs for skill development for the following classes:
  - Practice with Families
  - Practice with Groups
- Consider some lab time for Practice with Individuals (especially with Foundation)
- Consider having some macro-labs
Practice Courses: General Recommendations

- Keep finding innovative ways to build learning communities: help students and faculty bond.
- Increase meaningful interactivity in courses to the greatest extent possible.
- Emphasize connections to practice in all courses in both lectures and assignments.
Practice Courses:
General Recommendations

- Students tend to prefer larger projects that are as “hands-on” and relevant as possible.
- Large projects should have established “check-in” times with instructor so students know how they’re doing.
- Review assignment loads for “busy work” and reduce or eliminate
- Maximize sharing of “real world” resources and tools for practice.
Practice Courses: General Recommendations

- “Mix it up” to keep students engaged in learning and appeal to a variety of learning preferences.

- The pedagogy needs to drive the technology to the greatest extent possible.

- Requires instructor training and support.

- Requires instructor willingness to risk and stretch beyond normal comfort zone and preferred teaching styles.
Lesson Learning for Social Work

- The technology is not at the point (and may never be) where a “blended” approach doesn’t add value.
- Students require careful orientation and ongoing support to become competent with the technology, and to build relationships with faculty and staff.
- Faculty also require supports, including training, assistance with course adaptation/development, and consideration of the different demands made on their time.
Lesson Learning for Social Work

- Concurrent with the literature, distance delivery of a graduate program does require more planning, more time, and more resources.

- Faculty tend to be more thoughtful and deliberate about how to enhance interactivity in all their classes.

- Using more technology to teach distance students has transformed the way faculty think about delivery of our classroom-based courses.
The Right Formula for Social Work (and Beyond??)

- Congruence with:
  - Our profession’s values
  - Our departmental and program missions
The Right Formula for Social Work (and Beyond??)

Department mission:

*The University of North Dakota, Department of Social Work’s mission is to advance knowledge and learning and to prepare competent, responsive and ethical social workers who empower vulnerable populations, promote social justice, and are committed to serving diverse populations.*
The Right Formula for Social Work (and Beyond??)

Program Mission:

*UND’s Master of Social Work Program provides broad access to quality graduate education that prepares versatile advanced generalist practitioners with the necessary knowledge, values, and skills to serve their communities in North Dakota, the region and beyond.*
The Right Formula for Social Work (and beyond??)

- Congruence with
  - Our state’s & region’s needs and workforce shortages
  - Our unique context (Advanced Generalist)

- Our emphasis on:
  - Rural, reservation, and other “place-chioeced” students serving vulnerable populations
The Right Formula for Social Work (and beyond??)

- Congruence with
  - Faculty’s interests and preferences
  - Our students’ learning needs and preferences
  - Accreditation standards
  - Expectations of our profession
  - Our profession’s current concerns about distance education and teaching with technology
What Might Be Helpful Institutionally?

- Stable funding model
- Additional vehicles for deeper cross-campus conversations that:
  - Help departments assess interest or readiness beginning with their missions (rather than the technologies)
  - Leverage more systematically the expertise of experienced administrators to mentor other departments
What Might Be Helpful Institutionally?

- Sharing what’s working relevant to faculty development, supports, and incentives
- Sharing what’s working relevant to staff supports for increased teaching with technology
- Faculty Governance Issues
  - What constitutes fairness in terms of compensation? In-load? Overload? Who decides?
What Might Be Helpful Institutionally?

- A centralized and routinely updated repository of literature and practice wisdom that can be accessed by all:
  - What is relevant that can be gleaned from the literature within and across disciplines?
  - What is relevant that can be gleaned from others’ experiences (on our campus and further afield)?
What Might Be Helpful Institutionally?

- Act to counter the stereotype of the “degree mill” (on and off campus) with:
  - Information that dispels myths that:
    - Distance programs are less challenging and effective
    - Graduates are less prepared
    - That we have compromised educational quality to save money and cater to student convenience
  - Mechanisms that insure greater public accountability and scrutiny
References


References, cont.

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