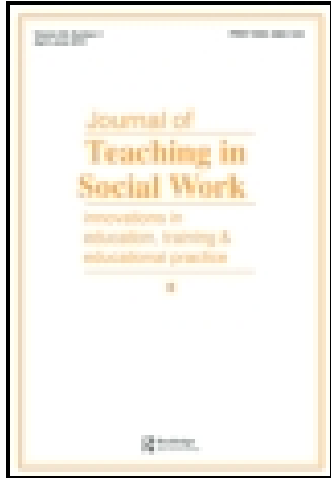


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Jan Ligon PhD^a, Martha J. Markward PhD^b & Bonnie L. Yegidis^b

^a Department of Social Work, Georgia State University, Atlanta, USA

^b School of Social Work, University of Georgia, Athens, USA

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Comparing Student Evaluations of Distance Learning and Standard Classroom Courses in Graduate Social Work Education

Jan Ligon
Martha J. Markward
Bonnie L. Yegidis

ABSTRACT. This study compared the student course evaluations of standard education and distance learning courses in the school of social work of one southern university. The sample included 14 distance learning (DL) and 122 standard education courses. A 20-item quantitative student course evaluation and a 7-item qualitative questionnaire were used to compare differences between social work courses taught in a standard classroom setting with those taught using distance learning technology. Comparisons of identical courses taught in both formats found that students rated distance learning higher than the standard classroom for a course having predominantly lecture content. Conversely, ratings for clinical practice courses were just the opposite with lower ratings for distance learning than the standard classroom. Results of a qualitative survey ($n = 39$) of students conducted at the end of a course taught by distance learning found that 73% of the students felt that distance learning technology interfered with class participation. However, 73% of the students felt the instructor handled technological problems in a professional and patient manner. Although 54% of the students reported that they would take another course by distance learning, more research is needed to determine what social work courses can

Jan Ligon, PhD, is Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Georgia State University, Atlanta. Martha J. Markward, PhD, is Associate Professor and Bonnie L. Yegidis is Dean and Professor, School of Social Work, University of Georgia, Athens.

Address correspondence to: Jan Ligon, Georgia State University, Department of Social Work, University Plaza, Atlanta, GA 30303-3083 (E-mail: jligon@gsu.edu).

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According to Thach and Murphy (1995), the use of distance learning in education continues to expand due to “advances in the technology, emphasis on cost-savings, and changing demographics.” Blakely and Schoenherr (1995) define distance education as “the delivery of an education program via a telecommunications medium that connects geographical sites” (p. 8). Thach and Murphy (1995) further define distance education as having geographic distance between instructor and participant, communication which is two-way and interactive, and “uses a form of technology to facilitate the learning process” (p. 57). Harrison, Seeman, Behm, Saba, Molise, and Williams (1991) note that “distance education programs have increasingly come to be viewed as complex systems with a variety of organizational, administrative, instructional, and technological components” (p. 65).

According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for social work programs, “social work education options have been expanded to offer a multiplicity of educational program designs, some of which qualify as alternative programs” (1994, p. 111). Distance learning is identified as one of these alternatives which also includes off-campus and collaborative programs. Previous studies have identified a number of benefits of this technology including its ability to reach individuals who are unable to attend classes in primary campus locations such as those who are located in rural areas (Paulet, 1990). Although social work educators have been challenged to utilize distance learning, Petracchi and Morgenbesser (1995) note that “absent from this literature are evaluation studies addressing the effectiveness of distance education technologies for the learning experiences of social work students” (p. 19).

Since 1994 one southern university has offered advanced social work courses using interactive (two-way audio and video) distance learning technology. Students register for courses at either the main campus or through a branch location of the university. Consistent with the recommendations of Blakely and Schoenherr (1995) each faculty is assigned a doctoral student teaching assistant so that coverage is provided for both locations. Also, both faculty and teaching assistants receive technical training and support. The purpose of this study was to compare course evaluations for students who attended standard classrooms with those who received distance learning (DL).

METHODOLOGY

The survey design of this study allowed researchers to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the effectiveness and usefulness of distance learning technology in social work education. The following sections describe the samples identified for the study, the instruments which were used, and data collection and analysis procedures.

Sample

One purposive sample of courses selected for the study included 14 distance learning (DL) and 122 standard classroom courses which were taught between 1994 and 1996 in the school where the study was conducted. Included in the sample are courses covering practice, human behavior in the social environment, research, policy, cultural diversity, and field seminars; all courses were advanced level master's courses. Courses taught in winter quarter, 1995, were unavailable for inclusion in the sample; in contrast, one practice course taught in the summer quarter of 1996 was included as a case study.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect the data. First, a 20-item course evaluation form was used to obtain a mean rating of course instruction in 14 DL and 122 standard classroom courses. Each item is scored using a five-point scale (1 = low; 5 = high) and all 20 items are added to yield a total score which can range from 20-100. The items include: (a) instructor's preparation for class meetings; (b) instructor's interest and enthusiasm; (c) instructor as a model for professional conduct; (d) organization of course; (e) instructor's ability to stimulate thinking; (f) extent to which course requirements are definite; (g) instructor's ability to convey clear ideas, (h) atmosphere in classroom; (i) instructor's self-confidence; (j) tolerance of different opinions; (k) approachability; (l) contributions of text to understanding the course; (m) contribution of course requirements; (n) clarity of criteria for evaluating students; (o) standards for performance; (p) student responsibility; (q) overall value of course; (r) instructor's teaching ability; (s) ranking of instructor relative to others student has had previously; and (t) inclusion of cultural diversity in class.

Second, a 7-item questionnaire asked students in one assessment class to give feedback regarding the usefulness of the DL format. Item 1 asked students to share whether the course was their first by DL. Items 2 and 3 inquired about the extent to which the DL format interfered with learning and affected their participation in class. Items 4 and 5 asked students to comment on audio, overhead transparency, technician, and "other" problems. Items 5-7 asked

students to comment on how the instructor handled the technological difficulties, whether the course should be taught by DL (if technological difficulties were worked out of the process), and if they would be willing to take another course by distance learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data on the 14 DL and 122 standard courses were collected by reviewing reports in the graduate records office of the School of Social Work. The records showed mean ratings of students on the effectiveness of course instruction in both distance learning and standard courses. The instructor collected data on the usefulness of the DL format by asking 38 of the 39 students enrolled in the assessment course to complete the 7-item questionnaire described in the preceding section at the end of the instructional session. This course is not included, however, in the course effectiveness data.

RESULTS

This study examined both the effectiveness and usefulness of distance learning in social work education. In doing so, the researchers compared student course evaluations of distance learning and standard courses in one school of social work over a two-year period of time. The researchers also obtained students' perceptions about the usefulness of the DL format in one advanced methods course.

Comparison of Student Course Evaluations for DL and Standard Courses

Using SPSS, version 6.1 (Norusis, 1994), the mean score for all 136 courses was 86.6 ($SD = 8.25$). The results in Table 1 show the summary of mean scores by type of course for six social work course content areas. Scores on policy course evaluations were highest, and scores on cultural diversity were lowest.

Three courses, two family practice courses and a substance abuse course, were taught in both formats over the study period. The summary of scores in Table 2 show the ratings for both formats by course type. Mean ratings on the distance format were lower than the standard format in the family practice courses. The mean rating on the substance abuse course was higher for the distance format than for the standard format.

Usefulness of DL in Format: A Case Study

The usefulness of DL in social work education was studied by focusing on one five-hour practice course entitled "Assessment and Psychopathology

TABLE 1. Mean Scores of Student Course Evaluations by Type of Course

Type of Course	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Policy	3	89.7	2.88
Research	10	88.3	5.65
Practice	84	86.9	2.88
Field Seminars	25	86.9	8.97
Human Behavior	9	82.5	7.38
Cultural Diversity	5	80.9	3.99

TABLE 2. Comparison of Mean Scores for Distance and Standard Classroom Formats

Course	Format	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Abusive and Neglectful Families	Standard	3	87.9	2.62
	Distance	2	83.0	9.30
Family Treatment	Standard	6	88.0	7.87
	Distance	3	78.0	9.64
Substance Abuse	Standard	4	87.5	11.23
	Distance	4	91.4	3.74

with Children and Youth.” The course was offered one day each week from 4:30 to 9:30 in the evening over a seven-week period during the summer quarter of 1996. Of 36 respondents (missing data = 2 cases), 20 students were enrolled at the main campus and 16 were enrolled at a satellite location. The majority (74%) were full-time students and 89% ($n = 38$) had never taken a DL class before. It is noteworthy that the instructor of the course was present in each site every other week to provide the students with an equivalent amount of live instruction. At the end of the course, students provided feedback on the following aspects of DL.

Interfered with Learning. Of 37 respondents (missing data = 1 case), 12 students indicated that DL “definitely interfered” with learning and 13 students indicated that it “somewhat interfered” with learning. The results in Table 3 show the explanations students gave for the interferences. Specific comments about the lack of discussion in class included “did not get usual

interaction,” “cut discussion time down,” “could not talk freely,” “could not discuss material as much as in the traditional classroom,” and “interaction stifled.”

Affected Class Participation. Twenty-one of 38 respondents perceived that the distance learning format “definitely” affected their class participation negatively and another 10 students perceived that the format “somewhat” affected their students’ explanations of the negative effects that distance learning had on their class participation are shown in Table 4. Specific comments about how the “process,” in general, negatively affected class partici-

TABLE 3. Students’ Explanations of Learning Interference Caused by Distance Learning Format

Explanation	Number of Students
Difficult for discussion/interaction	15
Class time taken away due to faulty technology	4
Technology in general (flow of class)	4
Technology was distracting	4
Difficulty hearing	3
Did not like self-image on monitor	2

Note. All responses are included. Some students gave no responses; others gave several.

TABLE 4. Students’ Explanations of Negative Impact on Class Participation Caused by Distance Learning Format

Explanation	Number of Students
The process (waiting for camera, difficulty being understood, repetition; forgot ideas; raised hand but not recognized; could not hear)	13
Uncomfortable in front of camera	7
Couldn’t interact freely; felt intimidated	4
Felt reticent to participate	3

Note. All responses are included. Some students gave no responses; others gave several.

pation included “difficult to clarify assignments and comments,” “questions go unnoticed,” “too long for camera to focus,” “did not feel like my comments were understood,” and “an ordeal to communicate.”

Course Should Be Taught by DL. Twenty-two of 37 respondents (missing data = 1 case) thought the course should be taught again using the DL format if the technological problems could be corrected; 13 students thought it should be taught using the DL format; and two students were unsure. The reasons students gave for using the DL format included: “it could be [taught]-just difficult for conversation/discussion,” “allowed more students to register,” “easy for people to travel back and forth,” “only way for everyone to get to class,” and “it is preferable to no class.”

Willingness to Take Another DL Course. Nineteen of 35 respondents (missing data = 3 cases) reported that they would be willing to take another course by distance learning technology; 12 reported that they would not be willing to take another course; and four were unsure. A small number of students ($n = 7$) explained why they would be willing to take another DL course. Their responses included “yes, no other choice to get the class I want,” “I have no choices,” “if it was the only way to get the class,” “I would prefer not but I would,” “because of location not because of distance learning,” “dependent on the course,” and “it means that I don’t have to comment [in class].”

Technological Problems. Students reported that audio difficulties were more problematic than either visual or technician support problems. The major audio problems identified were “echoing” and “not being able to hear.” One student explained a major problem with the technology saying that there was “lots of echo, so the technician muted us a lot.” In turn, this “made flow of conversation difficult.” Students reports of both audio and visual problems reported are shown in Table 5.

Although 24 of 33 (missing data = 5 cases) students commented that the instructor handled the technical difficulties “professionally,” “patiently,” “slowly,” and “calmly,” nine students commented that the instructor was “frustrated,” “stressed easily,” “was distracted,” and was “nervous.” Fifteen of 22 students reported less favorable comments about the support of the technician including “did not pay attention,” “was slow,” “was not knowledgeable about solving problems,” “seemed bored,” “was defensive when problems arose,” “left class at times,” or was “impatient.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings in this study. First, it seems that there is little difference in ratings of students on the effectiveness of distance learning and standard courses, even though the DL format is

TABLE 5. Students' Perceptions About Audio and Video Difficulties in Distance Learning Course

Difficulty	Number of Students
Audio	
Echoing	13
Couldn't hear/microphone weak	11
No audio	5
Static/needed to be fine tuned	3
Video	
Could not see/video monitor did not work/ out of focus	16
Videotape did not work	5
Unable to get everyone in picture	1

Note. All responses are included. Some students gave no responses; others gave several.

presumed to interfere with students' learning and class participation. Second, audio difficulties associated with the DL format are rated as more problematic than visual problems, and technical support seems to need more improvement than does the instructor's handling of difficulties. Last, and perhaps most important, many students seem willing to overlook the technological difficulties with DL in order to take the course.

The latter conclusion brings into question whether the DL medium is the best means to an optimum graduate education in social work. On the one hand, it seems that in order to take a particular course, students are willing to sacrifice an ideal learning experience. On the other hand, it seems that students value distance and standard classes similarly. In fact, the results in this study indicate that, in the absence of technological difficulties, students might actually rate DL courses higher than standard courses. This was certainly the case for the three courses where, in fact, the scores for distance learning were higher than for the standard classroom.

However, future research is needed with larger numbers of courses to compare the differences between distance and traditional classroom teaching mediums. More data is needed to investigate differences by type of course. There may be differences between ratings for practice classes and other types of courses. It is possible that DL courses which rely more heavily on lecture

content will be rated higher by students than those which are more participatory in nature, such as practice courses. Also, more data is needed to investigate differences in foundation and advanced level courses. Other variables to consider include the amount of time in class, the numbers of students enrolled, and the number of sites connected to the instructor.

Harrison et al., (1991) note that "the complex nature of distance education programs makes the assessment of individual components such as technology use, management systems, or instruction difficult, unless the component is viewed as part of a total system" (p. 74). Further investigation is needed to determine the effect of training and differences in the quality and the level of sophistication of equipment on educational outcomes, including student course evaluations. It is important to know the correspondence between the instructor and participants and the educational setting and technology employed. Furthermore, it is essential to assist educators through training and technical support in order to develop the competencies (Thach & Murphy, 1995) which have been identified as essential to the effective use of distance learning.

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