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Evaluating ITV-Based MSW Programs: A Comparison of ITV and Traditional Graduates' Perceptions of MSW Program Qualities

C. David Hollister
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SUMMARY. Traditional and ITV-based MSW graduates at the University of Minnesota are compared on their perceptions of learning, relationships with instructors, adequacy of access to resources, connections with others students, staff support, connection to the school. Possible impacts of ITV exposure on graduates' use of electronic technologies are also examined. ITV graduates generally rated the program's impacts on learning and their satisfaction with various program supports equal to or higher than did graduates of the traditional program, with the exception of students' connections to other students and access to resources such as libraries and computer labs. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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A number of studies have evaluated individual social work courses taught at a distance (Rooney, Freddolino, Hollister, & Macy, 1999), but there is still a dearth of studies evaluating distance MSW programs as a whole. While there is evidence to suggest that learning outcomes in distance programs are comparable to traditional programs (Rooney et al., 1999), there remain many questions as to the qualities that are important for facilitating learning in distance versus traditional formats. For example, how much staff support is required? To what extent do students feel connected with the school offering the program, with the instructors, and with other students? How adequate is student access to resources such as libraries, computer labs, reserve readings, etc.? It is important to note at the outset that these questions are as appropriate to ask of traditional formats as of distance formats, in that traditional programs also vary in the adequacy of their solutions to these needs.

In addition to the above questions, the authors were interested to know whether the greater exposure to instructional technology experienced by graduates of the distance MSW program might result in their greater adoption of various electronic technologies, both while in graduate school and after graduation, compared to graduates of the traditional program. Is there a spillover effect?

Graduates' perceptions of their educational experiences can provide important data for faculty and administrators about program qualities, even though such perceptions must be considered alongside other measures and are only one part of the evaluation of a program.

The present study attempts to explore some of these questions by comparing the perceptions and experiences of recent graduates of the traditional and distance versions of the MSW program at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. The School, located in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul, has offered an advanced standing, direct practice concentration by interactive television (ITV) to several remote sites since 1994 (Kalke, Rooney, & Macy, 1998).

METHODS

The subjects in this study were persons who had completed the MSW program at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities anytime during 1998. Questions concerning the adequacy of various aspects of

program support and the impact of the ITV format on learning and on graduates' use of technology were included in a questionnaire sent to all 1998 MSW graduates ($N = 100$) in February 1999. Sixty-seven questionnaires were returned by July 1999 (a 67% response rate).

In order to compare ITV and traditional graduates' perceptions, three categories of graduates were identified according to the proportion of ITV courses taken as part of the MSW program:

- Full-ITV graduates, who took the majority or all of their MSW coursework via ITV.
- Partial-ITV graduates, who took part of their MSW coursework via ITV.
- Traditional graduates, who took no MSW coursework via ITV.

As shown in Table 1, over sixty percent ($n = 42$) of the survey respondents took at least one ITV course during the MSW program. Of these, fifteen respondents completed their entire MSW coursework via ITV, while twenty-five (37.3%) took no ITV courses.

All of the full-ITV graduates and 19 of the 27 partial-ITV graduates (70.4%) were weekend students, while 24 out of 25 traditional graduates were weekday students. (See Table 2.) Weekend students take their courses on Friday evenings, Saturdays, and Sundays.

Among the full-ITV graduates who had been weekend students, twelve graduates (80.0%) completed the MSW program in Moorhead, two graduates (13.3%) completed it in Rochester, while one graduate completed the MSW program in the Twin Cities. All of the partial-ITV and traditional weekend graduates completed the MSW program in the Twin Cities. (See Table 3.)

TABLE 1. Distribution of the Respondents by Exposure to ITV Courses

Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Full-ITV graduates	15	22.4
Partial-ITV graduates	27	40.3
Traditional graduates	25	37.3
Total	67	100.0

DIMENSIONS OF PROGRAM SUPPORT

The above three categories of graduates were compared on their perceptions of the extent to which the program supported their studies. Graduates were asked to rate the following characteristics of the MSW program:

- Staff support for students;
- Students' connection with the school;
- Students' relationships with instructors;
- Adequacy of access to resources, e.g., library, copying, computer labs;
- Students' connections to other students;
- Access to relevant course materials; and
- Site coordination and support (asked of distance students only).

Graduates were asked to rate each item as follows: 1 = poor, 2 = needs improvement, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = good, 5 = excellent. The mean score for each item was compared among the three categories of graduates, as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 2. Distribution of Respondents in Program Tracks

Status	Full-ITV	Partial-ITV	Traditional	Total
Weekend	15 (100%)	19 (70.4%)	1 (4.0%)	35 (52.2%)
Weekday	0	8 (29.6%)	24 (96.0%)	32 (47.8%)

TABLE 3. Location of Weekend Students (n = 34*)

Location	Full-ITV	Partial-ITV*	Traditional
Moorhead	12 (80.0%)	0	0
Rochester	2 (13.3%)	0	0
Twin Cities	1 (6.7%)	18 (100%)	1 (100%)
Total	15 (100%)	18 (100%)	1 (100%)

* Missing data = 1.

Full-ITV graduates rated site coordination and support very highly. They also rated the other items *higher* than did traditional graduates, with the exceptions of adequacy of access to resources, $F(2, 63) = 5.62, p < .01$, and students' connections to other students, $F(2, 63) = 0.96, p > .05$. Full-ITV graduates also expressed higher satisfaction on two items, access to relevant course materials, $F(2, 63) = 8.04, p = .001$, and staff support for students, $F(2, 63) = 2.51, p > .05$, than did either traditional or partial-ITV graduates, although the differences in staff support for students did not reach statistical significance. Curiously, partial-ITV graduates expressed the highest satisfaction on students' connection to the school, $F(2, 63) = 4.72, p < .05$, and students' relationships with instructors, $F(2, 62) = 1.14, p > .05$.

TABLE 4. Graduates' Satisfaction with Program Support

Items*	Full-ITV	Partial-ITV	Traditional	Grand means	Oneway	
	n = 15	n = 27	n = 24**	n = 66***	ANOVA	
					<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Staff support for students	3.67 (0.98)	3.30 (1.03)	2.92 (1.06)	3.24 (1.05)	2.51	.089
Students' connection to the school	2.53 (0.74)	3.07 (0.68)	2.50 (0.78)	2.74 (0.77)	4.72	.012
Students' relationships with instructors	3.33 (0.62)	3.63 (0.74)	3.30 (1.02)	3.45 (0.83)	1.14	.327
Adequacy of access to resources	2.93 (0.80)	2.70 (0.87)	3.50 (0.88)	3.05 (0.92)	5.62	.006
Students' connections to other students	3.47 (0.74)	3.41 (0.89)	3.75 (1.03)	3.55 (0.91)	0.96	.387
Access to relevant course materials	3.93 (0.80)	2.96 (0.76)	3.63 (0.88)	3.42 (0.90)	8.04	.001
Site coordination and support	4.47 (0.74)	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	

* Possible ratings were 1 = poor; 2 = needs improvement; 3 = satisfactory; 4 = good; 5 = excellent.

** n = 24, except students' relationships with instructor (n = 23).

*** n = 66 except students' relationships with instructor (n = 65).

() = S. D.

PERCEIVED IMPACT OF ITV ON LEARNING

Full-ITV graduates and partial-ITV graduates were asked whether ITV courses enhanced or hindered their learning. The questionnaire asked: “When you compare the ITV courses to more traditional classroom courses you have taken in the past, did the delivery of the ITV courses: (1) enhance your learning very much, (2) enhance your learning somewhat, (3) make no difference in your learning, (4) hinder your learning somewhat, or (5) hinder your learning very much.”

As shown in Table 5, over two-thirds of the full-ITV graduates said that ITV instruction either made no difference to their learning or enhanced their learning. Only four indicated that ITV hindered their learning somewhat, and none said that it hindered learning very much. The partial-ITV graduates were more mixed in their responses with only half indicating either that ITV made no difference or that it enhanced their learning. Likewise, in Table 5 the mean rating (3.29) of partial-ITV graduates is somewhat less favorable toward ITV instruction than is the mean rating (2.79) of the full-ITV graduates. However, this difference is not statistically significant, $t = -1.248$, $p > .05$.

TABLE 5. Comparison of ITV Courses to Traditional Courses by Full- and Partial-ITV Graduates

	Full-ITV Graduates	Partial-ITV Graduates
ITV enhanced learning very much	2 (14.3%)	1 (7.1%)
ITV enhanced learning somewhat	3 (21.4%)	2 (14.3%)
ITV made no difference	5 (35.7%)	4 (28.6%)
ITV hindered learning somewhat	4 (28.6%)	6 (42.9%)
ITV hindered learning very much	0	1 (7.1%)
Total**	14 (100.0%)	14 (100.0%)
Mean (S. D.)***	2.79 (1.05)	3.29 (1.07)

* Possible ratings were 1 = enhance learning very much; 2 = enhance learning somewhat; 3 = make no difference; 4 = hinder learning somewhat; 5 = hinder learning very much.

** $\chi^2(4, 28) = 2.044$, $p = .728$

*** $t(26) = -1.248$, $p = .223$

PERCEIVED IMPACT OF ITV COURSES ON USE OF TECHNOLOGY

It is conceivable that exposure to ITV technology could have an effect of stimulating ITV graduates' adoption of newer technologies in other aspects of their work, a so-called "spillover" effect, in that instructors of ITV courses usually encouraged students to make use of e-mail to communicate and the World Wide Web to help compensate for reduced in-person access to libraries. To test for such an effect, the authors queried graduates about their use of various technologies, both while still a student and later, after graduation. Graduates were asked whether they regularly used e-mail, and whether they used the World Wide Web to get information. In addition, they were asked whether they had participated after graduating in at least one ITV training or workshop or staffing. Each item was checked yes or no. The means for the items are shown for the three categories of graduates in Tables 6 and 7. The closer to 1 (yes) the scores were, the higher the proportion of graduates in that category who used the technology.

Contrary to expectations, the traditional graduates appear to have made *more* use of e-mail and the Web than did the full-ITV graduates. It is possible that this difference is due in part to reduced access of the full-ITV respondents to computer labs while in the MSW program. As noted earlier, full-ITV graduates rated access to resources such as computer labs lower than did traditional graduates. Unfortunately, the question on access to resources does not break down the responses to specific types of resources.

Traditional graduates varied in comparison with partial-ITV graduates on use of these technologies.

TABLE 6. Use of Technology While in the MSW Program

	Full-ITV	Partial-ITV	Traditional	Grand means
Items*	(n = 15)	(n = 27)	(n = 25)	(n = 67)
Used WWW	1.47 (0.52)	1.33 (0.48)	1.24 (0.44)	1.33 (0.47)
Used e-mail	1.67 (0.49)	1.41 (0.50)	1.20 (0.41)	1.39 (0.49)

* Possible ratings were 1 = yes, 2 = no.
() = S. D.

TABLE 7. Use of Technology After Graduation

Items*	Full-ITV (n = 15)	Partial-ITV (n = 27)	Traditional (n = 25)	Grand means (n = 67)
Used WWW	1.47 (0.52)	1.15 (0.36)	1.28 (0.46)	1.27 (0.45)
Used e-mail	1.47 (0.52)	1.22 (0.42)	1.24 (0.44)	1.28 (0.45)
Participated in at least one ITV training/workshop/staffing	1.67 (0.49)	1.74 (0.45)	2.00 (0.00)	1.82 (0.38)

* Possible ratings were 1 = yes, 2 = no.

() = S.D.

The only technology used more (after graduation) by full-ITV graduates was participation in an ITV training, workshop, or staffing. Both full-ITV (mean = 1.67) and partial-ITV (mean = 1.74) graduates had some experience with ITV training/workshop/staffing, while no traditional graduates (mean = 2.00) had this kind of ITV experience. The “spillover,” if any, seems limited to ITV itself, but it could also be that ITV meetings are now in greater use in rural areas, where most full-ITV graduates work and where travel costs are greater, than in the Twin Cities, where most of the traditional graduates work.

When technology usage is compared before and after graduation within each category, it appears that full-ITV graduates’ mean usage of e-mail increased, but not the mean usage of the Web. Partial-ITV graduates’ mean usage increased a small amount for both media, while traditional graduates’ mean usage decreased a small amount for both media.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

ITV and Program Support. Little difference was found between full-ITV and traditional graduates in their perceptions of their connections to the school and in their relationships with instructors. This finding is reassuring, since many faculty members and administrators are concerned that distance students may feel very isolated from the sponsoring institution (Coe & Elliot, 1997). Moreover, full-ITV grad-

uates' rating of staff support for students was considerably *higher* than traditional graduates' perceptions. This higher rating is probably a result of the School's substantial investment in staff support for distance students, including assignment of a MSW-level coordinator to classes at each distant site, substantial training and supervision of these site coordinators, assignment of teaching assistants to each distance course at the originating site, a required visit to the remote sites by the instructors, and site coordinator and instructor availability before and after class. This investment may also account for full-ITV graduates' higher rating for access to relevant course materials, in comparison to traditional graduates. These findings confirm the importance of investing in supports for distance students, even though it adds considerably to program cost. There is a growing realization that distance education programs do not save money compared to traditional programs. However, they do enable institutions to reach student audiences that hitherto found graduate education inaccessible. This is an important consideration for all institutions of higher education, but especially so for land grant institutions like the University of Minnesota.

The two aspects of program support which received lower ratings from full-ITV graduates than from traditional graduates were students' connections to other students and adequacy of access to resources (e.g., library, copying, computer labs). Neither of these findings is surprising. It is understandably more difficult for students at one location to relate to students at another location, because there is no opportunity for before- and after-class socialization and the televised image of students at another location is quite small, even when the camera has zoomed in on the student speaker. Paradoxically, however, the students at a particular remote site sometimes build even stronger relationships with other students at that site than typically occur in the traditional classroom setting (Macy, 1999). This is probably not due to the ITV technology itself, but instead is a result of students at the remote site taking so many of their classes together and thereby coming to know each other very well.

Instructors in the University of Minnesota distance MSW program utilize several techniques to help build community among students across sites. First, all students are brought together in the same physical location for one class session early in the course. Second, instructors are encouraged to try to stimulate cross-site dialogue between

students at different sites. Exercises, including roleplays, are sometimes structured so that students at one site must interact with students at another site. However, these techniques in themselves apparently were not fully adequate to bridge the distance between sites. Perhaps this is an inherent attribute of distance education. However, there may be ways in which other technologies can help to reduce the gap. The MSW program studied began in 1999-2000 to offer Web-enhanced courses, using WebCT software. While this technology is expected to benefit both traditional and distance MSW students, it may have special utility for increasing cross-site communication among students. WebCT is designed to easily facilitate the use of course chat rooms, discussion groups, bulletin boards, and e-mail (Wernet & Olliges, 1998). These features may enable students to relate more to each other both within and across sites (Mills & Payne, 1998; Huff & Johnson, 1998).

WebCT may also help the program address the second issue: better access to resources. Part of the problem of accessing resources for these distance learners is that most ITV courses are offered on the weekends. Students driving in to the remote site sometimes find the campus libraries and computer labs on reduced hours or closed entirely. Software like WebCT enables instructors to post a wide variety of materials, including articles, as well as syllabi and lecture notes. Likewise, the University of Minnesota libraries initiated in fall 1999 an electronic reserve system for distance courses as part of its overall effort to make its libraries more accessible to remote users. (See their website for distance learning services at www.lib.umn.edu/dist/.)

As more and more students purchase computers on their own or gain access through their employment, the issue of access to computer labs on weekends at distant sites may diminish. In the meantime efforts are underway to expand the weekend hours of libraries and computer labs at those sites.

ITV Impact on Use of Technology. The speculation that exposure to ITV might have a positive impact on adoption of electronic technologies such as e-mail and use of the World Wide Web was not supported by the data. There was, however, higher usage of ITV conferencing by both full-ITV and partial-ITV graduates than by traditional graduates. Some of this difference could possibly be due to the growing utilization of ITV for training of rural practitioners to save travel costs. However, the partial-ITV graduates, who tend to work more in urban than in rural areas, also reported higher post-graduate usage of ITV

than did traditional graduates. The latter also tend to work in urban areas. Unfortunately the questionnaire did not ask whether the respondent's work location was urban or rural, so a more precise analysis of this data was not possible, but this question is planned for next year's survey.

ITV Impact on Learning. Full-ITV graduates generally were positive about their learning through the ITV-based MSW program. Over seventy percent indicated either that ITV delivery made no difference to their learning compared to traditional classroom courses or that ITV delivery actually enhanced their learning. Partial-ITV graduates were not quite as enthusiastic, however, with only half indicating that ITV either enhanced learning or made no difference to learning.

Possible explanations for the more favorable view by full-ITV graduates could be: (a) they simply had no other means than ITV for accessing the MSW degree and were therefore more appreciative of the opportunity, or (b) they had no concurrent non-ITV (traditional) courses for comparison, and therefore tended to rate them higher than did partial-ITV graduates, or (c) the numbers of respondents in each category are small and the difference is due simply to chance. Therefore the higher rating of ITV by the full-ITV graduates must be viewed cautiously. Yet, even if the rating of ITV MSW course delivery made by the partial-ITV graduates is the more valid rating (because those graduates had a better basis for comparison), the rating *at worst* suggests that ITV does almost as well as traditional classroom courses. If there is at the same time a big gain in opening access to MSW education for students living at considerable distance from schools of social work, one can argue that offering graduate social work education with only a small difference in learning effectiveness is indeed justified. While more research is needed comparing learning effectiveness for ITV and traditional MSW programs, there is growing evidence that the differences between the two formats are not great (Rooney et al., 1999; Hollister & McGee, 1998). It seems likely that distance education in social work will continue to grow in the years ahead.

This exploratory study has identified some areas for improvement in one ITV MSW program. The number of respondents, however, was small, and they were all graduates of one school of social work. Additional studies are needed of the questions raised here, both from analysis of additional data still to be collected from future cohorts of

graduates of this same program, and from data from other ITV MSW programs.

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