Orientation Practices for Effective Distributed Learning Coursework: Students Speak Their Minds

William Brescia, Assistant Professor
Educational Technology
University of Arkansas
brescia@uark.edu

Michael Miller, Associate Professor
Higher Education Leadership
University of Arkansas
mtmille@uark.edu

Poda Ibrahima, Project/Program Specialist
College of Education & Health Professions
University of Arkansas
ipoda@uark.edu

John Murry, Associate Dean & Associate Professor
Higher Education Leadership
College of Education and Health Professions
University of Arkansas
jmurry@uark.edu

Abstract

As an increasing number of graduate education courses are moved either online or into hybrid formats, instructors and administrators need to consider strategies for how to transition students into these new learning environments. This exploratory, qualitative study looked at one case study course and provides practical recommendations for stronger orientation programs.

Colleges and universities have increasingly moved coursework and professional development programs from traditional classroom environments to online or hybrid forums in an effort to maximize potential participation and minimize costs. This drive for online learning has been well documented in a variety of forums, and has been estimated to be worth $23 billion per year to higher education (Wei, 2001).

The primary challenges to moving courses into a technologically mediated forum have typically fallen into two categories: instructor and technology. Technological limitations have been dramatically reduced in recent years as commercial providers such as WebCT and Blackboard have begun to provide commercially available products marketed specifically to higher education. The dominant problem, documented by a number of scholars and practitioners, has been trying to get faculty members to participate in offering courses online or in hybrid formats (Pajo & Wallace, 2001; Lynch & Lynch, 2003). Faculty resistance might have initially been based on technology ability or apprehension (Crooks, Yang, & Duemer, 2003), and has most recently been discussed in the form of motivation and compensation. Many institutions initially provided financial incentives to faculty to develop courses that used an online component, and increasingly, colleges and universities are expecting faculty to make the transition to mediated

instruction without special compensation or consideration as online learning becomes more common.

Recently, a third problem domain has arisen: student participation. The pace of moving courses online has been so rapid that many students who have anticipated a more traditional collegiate experience have been frustrated and hostile to the online and hybrid delivery of courses (Brescia, 2002). Although mediated instruction has been a positive step in serving students who are physically removed from campus by some distance or who have competing demands, such as a full-time job or familial responsibilities, some students who participate in higher education expect a traditional in-class experience. As institutions have become even more cost conscience, they have placed courses to serve traditional on-campus students online, thus serving two populations (those removed and those on campus) simultaneously and saving financial resources. This type of scheduling, while logical from an efficiency standpoint, can produce anxiety, anger, and frustration for those who anticipate and believe that they are paying for something different than what they are receiving.

The purpose for conducting the current study was to identify and describe the feelings of one class of students who anticipated a traditional course experience and were actually enrolled in a mediated course. Findings from the study would be particularly valuable to college administrators, distance education administrators, continuing education personnel, and department chairs, and faculty members who have responsibility for transitioning students into an online environment.

Students and the Emergence of Online Learning

As colleges and universities have embraced online, hybrid, and mediated instruction, they have made attempts to bridge the design of the coursework with the pedagogical needs of the institution or discipline. In many cases, institutional and discipline-based variables have dominated course design. Hegert (2003) stressed the importance of not forgetting about student needs and that a holistic approach to planning online programs should be advocated.

Hsieh (2004) highlighted some of the challenges of developing mediated instruction by looking at human resource training at Texas A&M University. She noted four dominant challenges in their case: personnel, dynamism, content expertise, and evaluation. In the Texas A&M case, few personnel were available to transfer the human resource coursework to an online environment, thus creating a heavy workload and a lack of differences of creative thinking. Similarly, the human resource materials covered fell within the domain of the highly specific (and dry, she argued), or extremely soft, and in both cases, developing "memorable instruction" (p. 61) was problematic. Much like the lack of personnel involved in developing courses, many professionals with content expertise were not available for coursework transfer or might be responsive only with some additional motivation, such as financial. In addition, traditional visions of evaluation do not always translate well to web-enhanced instruction, particularly when that instruction is focused on soft-skills such as leadership. From the experiences at Texas A&M, Hsieh suggested that those developing online courses should understand learner characteristics, keep programming simple, and to rely on a few bug-free, coding templates. These conclusions are supported by Nielson (2000) in his classic D*esigning Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity* with his list: learnability, rememberability, efficiency of use, reliability in use, and user satisfaction.

Despite the range of challenges faculty and instructional designers face in developing online or blended courses, they generally have reported positive feelings of quality for online programs

(Baxter, 1997). Dillon and Walsh (1992) similarly identified that distance education and online programs are seen as having an equal or better quality as traditional classroom environments, and they stressed that in the complexity of developing distributed courses, faculty quality is often forgotten or neglected. They argued that assuring a highly qualified and well-trained faculty are key elements in making a mediated course or program successful. Vignare and Trippe (2002) noted that well-trained faculty have the skills and knowledge to create environments that lead to student satisfaction and learning, and as Ehrmann (1998) pointed out, training prepares faculty for ill-structured situations they are likely to encounter and improves the likelihood of students learning in those circumstances.

Kelsey and D'souza (2004) analyzed student interaction as a variable in student learning in online courses using Holmberg and Moore's theoretical frameworks of didactic conversations to build learning. They found that student interaction with others, such as faculty, may indeed be a predicating variable for student success, although student to student interaction was identified as less important to student learning. Shea, Frederickson, Pickett, and Pelz (2004) also found that online interaction with other students and instructors could not be underestimated as a factor in improving learning. This concept supports much of the traditional student affairs literature that argues faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom is one of the greatest variables that positively impacts student learning (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991).

Methods

Grounded theory was the theoretical approach used in conducting this study, and qualitative research methods were employed to collect data aboutorientation practices for effective distributed learning coursework. A random sampling method was utilized to obtain the participation of seven students in the professional preparation program with the emphasis on student affairs in higher education. These students were drawn from the roster of a course being converted into a hybrid format and, they volunteered to be the respondents in this study. To address the research questions posed in this study and to triangulate data sources, standardized open-ended interviews and observations were conducted, and written documents were collected Patton, 20 02).

Interviews

Interviews were conducted through the use of a standardized open-ended interview format, which was comprised of a battery of open-ended questions developed from a literature review and professional experience as sources of theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The questions were posed to the students according to themes including experiences, challenges, and strategies to be implemented by instrcutors to facilitate student transition in an online/hybrid coursework. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Informal conversational interviewing to gather additional data from the participants was also conducted throughout the study.

Observation

To provide a descriptive account of the situation being observed, focus was shifted from classroom attendance, amount of logs in the virtual class, email messages to instructors, participation in online discussions, problems encountered, students' thoughts and remarks, degree of satisfaction, and overall students' behavior in the hybrid environment. A handwritten account of each observation was recorded for analysis.

Written Documents

Written document collection was an on-going process throughout the study. Course evaluations and emails messages during and after the course were used. Reports, studies, and articles about o rientation practices for effective distributed learning coursework were initially collected.

Data Analysis

As the qualitative researcher seeks patterns which emerge from the data, coding is a process used in grounded theory to analyze data and determine patterns significant to the study. Following a progression of three levels of coding including open, axial, and selective levels (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the analysis of data allowed the investigator to think systematically about the data and to relate them in very complex ways.

Findings

Student comments were transcribed and reviewed by the research team conducting the study. Transcripts of interviews were provided to the participants to check for accuracy, and no changes or alterations were made to the original comments. Comments were initially categorized into three broad themes: experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

Student Experiences

Student experiences with the courses were then further categorized into five subcategories, including exposure to the new technology, reading assignments, self-paced learning, increased personal responsibility, and anxiety. The initial exposure to the new teaching method solicited a range of reactions from students, all of which were supportive of the new technology. One student commented "as a graduate student preparing for the professional field and dealing with these new media, I think it's good to have exposure to something like this." Another indicated that "this new technology allows you to do the work on your own time," and yet another said "I was excited about the fact that I would be able to work at my convenience using the internet." This enthusiasm was also noted in the identification of reading assignments accessible through the internet, as one student noted "I think this course is great for an online course because there are a lot of alternate readings and this course made it easy to clink on a link and get those." Students similarly were excited about their ability to find additional readings of various difficulty and relevance on the internet.

The ability to be self-directed was also noted in the students' ability to work at their own pace between class meetings. A student commented "I enjoyed being able to work at my own pace and not have to go to class," and another said simply "I think that it allows students to pace themselves accordingly and work on their own time." They did, however, also comment that the hybrid format was a good way to keep them on track with assignments, and that they felt a sense of responsibility to have the readings done by the time classes met.

This notion of self-responsibility was identified as both as positive, as noted, and negative aspect of the course. A student said "there are so many things to do, and finally, I don't really know how to prepare for this class." A peer, however, saw this as a good thing, saying "it teaches you responsibility to follow up with the instructor and course materials and how to communicate with classmates." Another said "graduate students need to be responsible." And for another student, the lack of regular in-class sessions was an excuse not to do the work. She said "I felt less pressured to read so I didn't do all of the required readings because I knew I wouldn't be sitting in front of a class being asked a question about the reading."

The result of independence for reading and completing assignments coupled with the positive exposure and excitement about taking a mediated course resulted in a combination of students with and without anxiety about the process. One student confessed "this is my first experience. I found the course extremely challenge and frustrating to be honest." Another confirmed this anxiety by saying, "I was a little anxious at first about the whole online setting because I was afraid that I was going to miss something that was supposed to be done because I didn't visit all of the necessary online places." For three of the other students, however, the anxiety generally faded with the progression of the semester. A representative comment was made by one male student, "I was nervous at the beginning and after a while, I felt really comfortable with it, and honestly, this one of the better courses I've taken."

Challenges

The second general theme identified by student comments were those related to the challenges of taking a hybrid course. Challenges identified by the students were subcategorized into six subcategories, including accessibility issues, lack of navigation skills, resources for e-learning, the amount of work and the time required to complete it, the need for documentation, and writing skills.

Accessibility issues were demonstrated by comments such as "internet access is sometimes challenging, " and "I don't have a computer at home and I have to make sure I do the work here at school and not at 10 PM as other people do from their home." An extension of this thinking was displayed in the lack of navigational skills. One student said, "it seemed like nobody knew where to go on the web page," and to remedy this, she continued, "I think for some people, more computer skills orientation might have been helpful." Another student echoed these thoughts, saying "a technology savvy person also has a bit of an advantage, and this class seemed to take a lot of time trying to learn the concepts on our own." These navigational challenges were heightened by the abundance of information available on the internet. A female student commented, "there are so many resources available online and its just difficult to know what to do." Similarly, a colleague commented, "the resources on the internet are tremendous and we have to select the best ones."

The biggest challenge faced by students in the class was the seemingly incongruent thoughts about the amount of work required for the course. For example, a student said, "I have no one to fall on but myself and its about being disciplined." He continued, "I thought with not having to go to class that it would be easier, but really it turned into a lot of work late a night." Another student put it this way, "there is something with this class…it's like there is too much work. I'm taking nine hours this semester and with this class, it feels like I'm taking 12. There are so many things to do." Only one of the students blamed the issue of work and attempting to accomplish it on someone other than themselves. A student commented "there would be no new info for weeks and then tons at one time – and it was frequently posted just days before it should have been covered!" To deal with these time management issues, some students called for or better orientation, saying "a formal orientation to the technology and support materials are needed" and "basic directions about Blackboard and tools available through technology were helpful, but I didn't know what I would need when we got started." Yet another student said "I do think a lot of it was about students learning something for the first time. But, I think the introduction to the Blackboard needed to be more extensive."

A minor theme identified within the challenges was the notion of reliance on written communication skills. Several students reported parallel comments, including "writing skills are much more important in an online course," "students have to be driven, self-motivated, and

possess good writing skills," and "you have to write quickly and be able to communicate what is important in an online course."

Coping Strategies

Students discussed a variety of activities that could be considered 'coping strategies.' These strategies to cope with the new, technologically modified learning environment were categorized into five subcategories, based on the research teams interpretation of interview data, and include orientation, mentoring, reviewing materials and content, accessibility, and enthusiasm.

Orientation was the most prominent of the subcategories, with each student mentioning either the need for additional orientation activities and time or that the existing orientation session, which was conducted 'live' was important. One student who lamented the lack of a more comprehensive orientation said, "just an orientation is what we need…it might seem obvious, but there were times on Blackboard where I was lost completely." Another student commented "a little more talk at the beginning of the class about how to do the online portion would probably be helpful, particularly if they used the computer on the projection screen to navigate through everything and involve everyone in the navigation process." A typical response from students who identified a lack of orientation was also a lack of support from the teaching faculty. One student commented, "I did not feel a lot of support or interaction from the professors. It was challenging, but not really what I expected." Another said "the professors gave us a great start, but after that, you really had to structure your interaction with them – I mean you couldn't just ask them a question real quick like you could if it was a normal class." Other students provided a different feedback, noting the effort of the faculty: "the professors were awesome, and they really did a great job of answering questions and creating a great website," "they (the professors) were willing to accommodate, and I really can't complain," and "I think the professors did a perfect job mentoring and motivating students."

Part of the role of the faculty member that was identified as a possible stronger support mechanism or coping strategy was the review of course content and material. These comments ranged from "in this class it's almost essential. You have to know what you learn at home is right," to "instead of focusing on certain materials, a lot of students in the class including myself were not aware of some materials that were not required reading." Other students applauded their involvement in determining learning activities, as demonstrated by the comment "we got to choose which assignments we wanted to do for grades and that really made us feel more a part of the class process."

A fundamental key to teaching and learning in any environment is the interaction of faculty and students both in and out of the formal classroom. This proved to be no different with the online course, as students clamored for faculty availability outside of class. "They were always there for us and it made a big difference," one student said, and another offered a supporting comment with "the profs have totally been accessible to those who need help!"

The final cluster of student comments related to being energetic and enthusiastic about the course. One student indicated, "the professors were enthusiastic in this class and I think they did a great job," and another said "I think our professors have done a very good job with this course, and I hope that they stay that motivated as long as they continue to deal with this course."

Discussion

As colleges and universities have integrated technology more aggressively into their delivery

formats, several challenges have arisen for students. While there is a segment of the student population that has flocked to online and hybrid courses, as evidenced by the popularity of such providers as the University of Phoenix, there are a number of students who have been either slow or reluctant to engage in these types of courses. The result for some students is the double challenge of mastering course content along with navigating delivery methods. This is a substantial departure from some conversations about technology being 'invisible' in instruction.

The current study was designed to look specifically at the reaction of a group of graduate students as they enrolled and participated in a graduate education course that was taught in a primarily online format. The course did make use of four 'live' meetings in a traditional classroom environment, but the equivalent of the remaining 14 weeks of class were delivered online. Findings from the study offer an insight into how students perceive their experience and the transition to an hybrid environment. Students struggled at times with the self-regulation of workload, but they also enjoyed the flexibility and autonomy that accompanied the course. Respondent comments did not clarify whether students' who would normally invest more time in completing class assignments are the same that spent more time during this class. An area for further study, then, would be to see if asking students for their comments about time outside the once a semester evaluation forms provided an opportunity for identifying a continuing student concern.

While a faculty member is present in the classroom during traditional classes, establishing a faculty presence in an online course can be a challenge. The support and encouragement of faculty members was a key to students learning in the course, similar to the support faculty must offer in traditional, 'live' courses. The difference for faculty support in the hybrid environment, however, must be related to more open lines of communication (as more formal, technologically structured communication might be seen as more formal or restricted) and a willingness by faculty members to be open to concerns and questions by students about both the content of the course and the method for delivering the course. Students in a traditional lecture hall, for example, might not have the class time or opportunity to ask questions, or they might ask questions and for clarification about material presented, but would most likely not be in a position to question a faculty member about the lecture method. This difference, e.g., questioning about instructional delivery, is perhaps one of the more defining characteristics of hybrid or online learning.

There were also mixed reactions to the extent and effectiveness of the orientation to the new course format. Some students experienced difficulty working with the interface while other adapted to the elearning environment with few concerns. One key finding from the study was the need to clarify expectations, workload, and navigation for students in the course. Some students were initially overwhelmed with information and data about how to simply 'take the class,' something many take for granted in developing instructional protocols. Strategies should be developed to address the concerns of students who self-identified as needing special orientation to this new learning environment. Helping students feel comfortable in online and blended classes should be as important a concern for faculty as it is in face-to-face classrooms.

The challenges presented to students were a particularly important finding, as it is often an area that administrators can have some control over. Administrators of distance learning programs can control, for example, access to computer labs, technical and software help desks, technical support, as well as designing effective transitional experiences for students new to the technologically mediated environment. Transitional programs should acknowledge multiple stages of the integration and acceptance of technology. A possible taxonomy to consider might include initial awareness, acceptance of technology as an instructional paradigm, basic

knowledge of applications, advanced knowledge of applications, and ultimately, acceptance into a personal learning style. These students were aware of the technology and accepted its integration at various levels, but the data did not verify an acceptance into their personal learning styles.

A successful orientation or transitional program should recognize differential levels of technology apprehension, previous exposure, and adoption to an individual's learning style. As a result, programs might consider modular implementation throughout a course or semester, or might even embed just-in-time orientation or training into an online course. Distance learning administrators will especially find it helpful to consult with orientation professionals on their campus to at the very least recognize some of the difficulties students encounter in their transition to new environments.

The transition to the hybrid learning environment was critical to how students perceived the entire experience, reinforcing the need to have a strong orientation that predicts student concerns in the future and provides reference material that students will need to rely on in the future.

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