Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE April 2006 ISSN 1302-6488 Volume: 7 Number: 2 Article: 4

Comparison of student perceptions of classroom instruction: Traditional, hybrid, and distance education

Mary Jo Garcia BIGGS
Texas State University
San Marcos, USA

ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of a project that examined student perceptions of the psychosocial learning environment in a distance education classroom. The study utilized a survey instrument, Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (DELES) that was distributed as a pre-test/post-test to three sections of the same course taught in three distinct formats: traditional classroom instruction, distance learning, and hybrid (partially on-line/partially face-to-face). The DELES survey is a web-based tool specifically designed to assess the learning environment using a standardized, validated instrument. At the beginning of the project, the DELES-Preferred was administered to the three pilot groups. It measures the perception of the "actual" environment, perceptions of the preferred environment, or the "ideal" learning environment of the students.

In addition, a brief overview of the DELES instrument is described as well as the implications of the research project findings. Project results, based on the DELES administration, indicate that *Instructor Support* was rated highest by the students enrolled in the course taught in the traditional manner (4.68 mean) closely followed by the Hybrid course (4.66 mean) while the course taught totally at a distance averaged a 3.62 mean. However, *Student Interaction and Collaboration* averaged higher scores in the course taught in the Hybrid manner (4.23) followed by the traditional course (3.97) and then the distance course (3.12). Specific scales of *Personal Relevance, Authentic Learning, Active Learning, Student Autonomy* and *Satisfaction* (scale of affect) are further addressed in the article.

Keywords: On-line, student perceptions, distance learning, DELES.

INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCH PROJECT

The distance education program in the School of Social Work provides an excellent opportunity to explore how students actually perceive "psychosocial environmental" dynamics of three formats of university instruction: Traditional, Hybrid and Distance learning. In the study, the term *Psychosocial* refers to peoples interactions with their environment. In distance education, less than three-quarters of studies focus on learning, only about one-third of those are research based (Murphy & Cifuentes, 2001).

The study will provide additional research based practices to add to the field. The goals of the project were to explore the following:

- **What are the learning environment preferences of graduate level social work students enrolled in the Master of Social Work program?**
- **What are the actual perceptions of the learning environment of those students regarding classroom instruction?**

The study utilized the Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (DELES), a validated instrument for post-secondary distance education. The DELES is the "the first instrument of its kind and significant for utilization on a global scale. It is also a useful tool for distance education researchers and those desiring to conduct action research or evaluation of their own distance education courses or programs (Walker, 2005, pg. 10)."

Additional information regarding the development and results of analysis performed on DELES during field-testing and Item Analysis can be obtained from http://insight.southcentralrtec.org/ilib/delesa/delesainfo.html. By administering the DELES-Preferred and DELES-Actual, comparisons could be made based on what the students perceive should be in place for instruction and the actual perceptions after instruction occurred. In addition, the researcher sought to determine if a notable difference in perceptions occurred among the three differing forms of instructional settings. Utilization of student perceptions of the learning environment will help instructors in the designing of courses presented.

Twenty-six students enrolled in the MSW program at Texas State University-San Marcos were administered DELES-Preferred at the beginning of the project start (January 2005). More specifically, students were enrolled in Social Work Practice III: Interviewing and Counseling. The content of the course lends to students developing interpersonal and communication skills with clients and other professionals. The topics of discussion focus on interviewing, assessment, and planning skills. Those students enrolled in traditional, distance and hybrid instruction courses were included in the sample. All three cohorts were receiving instruction by the same professor. However, the content was presented in three different modes: traditional, distance and hybrid.

The DELES-Preferred measures perceptions of the ideal learning environment by students. The web-based, 34 statement, survey about student perceptions of distance learning using Likert format selections (1-never, 2-seldom, 3-sometimes, 4-often & 5-always) was collected by INSIGHT, the South Central RTC instrument Library and Data Repository. After completion of the course (May 2005), students were administered the DELES-Actual. The DELES-Actual measures students' perception of the learning environment, as they perceive it is. Raw data of the DELES-Actual was collected by INSIGHT and is housed in the Instrument Library. The researcher requested a summary report and scoring of the DELES that was provided through electronic copies of spreadsheets. The researcher, to measure the means of each instructional setting, then conducted statistical analysis.

STUDY FINDINGS

Data was collected and analyzed on the 34 web- based statements in which students responded. Results of a comparison of the three groups using the posttest only (DELES-Actual) indicated that *Instructor Support* was rated highest by the students enrolled in the course taught in the traditional manner (4.68 mean) closely followed by the hybrid course (4.66 mean) while the course taught totally at a distance averaged a 3.62 mean. *Instructor Support* is defined as "the extent to which the instructor is approachable and responds quickly with feedback" (Walker, 2001, pg. 2). Items measured in this scale, as well as the comparisons are as follows:

- **The instructor provides me positive and negative feedback on my work. (Traditional=5.00, Hybrid=4.66, Distance=3.71)**
- **The instructor adequately addresses my questions. (Traditional=5.00, Hybrid=4.83, Distance=3.57)**
- **The instructor encourages my participation. (Traditional=5.00, Hybrid=4.66, Distance=4.14)**
- **If I have an inquiry, the instructor finds time to respond. (Traditional=4.80, Hybrid=4.66, Distance=3.71)**
- **The instructor helps me identify problem areas in my study. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=4.66, Distance=3.29)**
- **The instructor responds promptly to my questions. (Traditional=4.40, Hybrid=4.66, Distance=3.71)**
- **The instructor gives me valuable feedback on my assignments. (Traditional=4.80, Hybrid=4.83, Distance=3.57)**
- **It is easy to contact the instructor. (Traditional=4.40, Hybrid=4.33, Distance=3.29)**

Student Interaction and Collaboration

Averaged higher scores in the course taught in the hybrid manner (Hybrid=4.23) followed by the traditional course (Traditional=3.97) and the distance course (Distance=3.12). *Student Interaction and Collaboration* is defined as the opportunity to interact with each other, exchange information, and engage in collaboration (Walker, 2001). Items measured and comparisons in this scale included:

- **Group work is part of my activities. (Hybrid=4.40, Traditional=3.40, Distance=2.57)**
- **I relate my work to other's work. (Hybrid=4.50, Traditional=4.00, Distance=3.00)**
- **I share information with other students. (Hybrid=4.00, Traditional=3.60, Distance=3.43)**
- **I work with others. (Traditional=4.60, Hybrid=3.29, Distance=4.50)**
- **I discuss my ideas with other students. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.29)**
- **I collaborate with other students in the class. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.14)**

Personal Relevance

In measuring *Personal Relevance,* results indicated that *Personal Relevance* had equal means in both the traditional and hybrid course (Traditional=4.03, Hybrid=4.03, Distance=3.84). Personal relevance is the "connection between students' out-of-school experiences" (Walker, 2001, pg. 2). Statements measured in this scale included:

- **I can relate what I learn to my life outside of university. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=3.71, Distance=4.20)**
- **I link class work to my life outside of university. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=3.86, Distance=4.00)**
- **I learn things about the world outside of university. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=3.86, Distance=4.20)**
- **I am able to pursue topics that interest me. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=4.20, Distance=3.71)**
- **I can connect my studies to my activities outside of class. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=3.60, Distance=3.86)**
- **I apply my everyday experiences in class. (Traditional=3.80, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=4.14)**
- **I apply my out-of-class experience. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.86)**

Authentic Learning

Authentic Learning was highest in the course taught in the traditional manner followed by the hybrid course and then the distance course. (Traditional=4.24, Hybrid=3.60, Distance=4.12).

Authentic learning is the "extent to which students have the opportunity to solve real-world problems that are authentic" (Walker, 2001, pg. 2). Statements found in the *Authentic Learning* scales included:

- **I work on assignments that deal with real-world information. (Traditional=4.40, Hybrid=4.20, Distance=3.57)**
- **I work with real examples. (Traditional=4.40, Hybrid=4.20, Distance=3.57)**
- **I enter the real world of the topic of study. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.71)**
- **I study real cases related to the class. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.75)**
- **I use real facts in class activities. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=4.20, Distance=3.57)**

Active Learning

The scale Active Learning was also measured. Results are as follows: *Active Learning* was rated highest in the traditional course followed by the distance course. (Traditional=4.33, Hybrid=3.73, Distance=3.76). Active Learning is the "extent to which students have the opportunity to take an active role in their learning" (Walker, 2001, pg.2). Specific examples found within this scale are as follows:

- **I explore my own strategies for learning. (Traditional=4.40, Hybrid=3.40, Distance=3.86)**
- **I seek my own answers. (Traditional=4.40, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.80)**
- **I solve my own problems. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=3.43, Distance=4.00)**

Overall averages in, *Student Autonomy* the traditional course was highest followed by the hybrid course. (Traditional=4.48, Hybrid=4.16, Distance=3.97).

Student Autonomy

Student Autonomy is defined as "students have opportunities to initiate ideas, make their own learning decisions, and the locus of control is student oriented" (Walker, 2001, pg. 2). Items measured include:

- **I make decisions about my learning. (Traditional=4.40, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.71)**
- **I play an important role in my learning. (Traditional=4.60, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=4.29)**
- **I approach learning in my own way. (Traditional=4.80, Hybrid=4.66, Distance=3.57)**
- **I work during times I find convenient. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=4.66, Distance=4.43)**
- **5. I am in control of my learning. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=3.50, Distance=3.86)**

Satisfaction

In addition, a scale of *Satisfaction* was added as an affect scale of enjoyment of distance learning. Overall, the hybrid course scored highest means, followed by the traditional course. (Traditional=3.95, Hybrid=4.21, Distance=3.59). The scale of *Satisfaction* included items such as:

- **I prefer Distance Education. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=4.33, Distance=3.57)**
- **Distance Education is exciting. (Traditional=3.20, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.29)**
- **Distance Education is worth my time. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=4.33, Distance=4.00)**
- **I enjoy studying by distance. (Traditional=4.20, Hybrid=4.33, Distance=3.71)**
- **I would enjoy my education is all my classes were by distance. (Traditional=4.00, Hybrid=4.00, Distance=3.43)**

In utilizing the instrument, it is hoped that the students' preferred form of a class is met and the actual form should represent that their preferences were met or exceeded. The instructor should have an awareness of what students prefer and actually meet their preferences (Walker, 2001). When examining the data from the course taught in the traditional fashion, students indicated that they received more instructor support than they perceived themselves requiring (Preferred=4.66, Actual=4.68). Additional information obtained from the traditional course is as follows:

Student Interaction and Collaboration **(Preferred=3.73, Actual=3.97) Students actually received more student interaction and collaboration than they had perceived as needing.**

Personal Relevance **(Preferred=4.22, Actual=4.03) Students did not receive as much opportunity to interact with one another, exchange information and engage in collaboration as they would have preferred.**

Authentic Learning **(Preferred=4.25, Actual=4.24) Students had the opportunity to solve real -world problems that were authentic as the scores for the preferred and actual were similar.**

Active Learning **(Preferred=4.21, Actual=4.33) Students received more opportunity for active learning then they perceived themselves as needing.**

Student Autonomy **(Preferred=4.38, Actual=4.48) Students had more opportunity to initiate ideas and make their own learning decisions than they had perceived as needing.**

Satisfaction **(Preferred=3.57, Actual=3.95) Students seemed to enjoy learning in a distance education learning environment.**

Analyzed data obtained from those surveys completed by students enrolled in the hybrid course indicated the following:

Instructor Support **(Preferred=4.52, Actual=4.66) Students received more instructor support than they had indicated as a preference.**

Student Interaction and Collaboration **(Preferred=3.71, Actual=4.23) Students received more student interaction and collaboration than they had indicated as a preference.**

Personal Relevance **(Preferred=4.21, Actual=4.03) Students did not receive as much opportunity to connect between their out-of-school experiences as they would have preferred.**

Authentic Learning **(Preferred=4.29, Actual=4.12) Students did not receive as much opportunity to solve real-world problems as they would have preferred.**

Active Learning **(Preferred=3.81, Actual=3.73) Students did not receive as much opportunity to take an active role in their learning as they would have preferred.**

Student Autonomy **(Preferred=4.01, Actual=4.16) Students received more opportunity to initiate ideas and make their own learning decisions than they had indicated as a preference.**

Satisfaction **(Preferred=3.72, Actual=4.21) Students actually enjoyed learning in a distance education environment more than they had originally perceived.**

Lastly, those students participating in the survey enrolled in the Distance Learning class indicated the following responses:

Instructor Support **(Preferred=3.94, Actual=3.62). In this cohort students indicated a higher preference for instructor support then they actually received. The instructor often did not meet student preferences and students appear to have understood was expected of them.**

Student Interaction and Collaboration **(Preferred=3.27, Actual=3.12) Students actually received less student interaction and collaboration than they had perceived as needing.**

Personal Relevance **(Preferred=3.81, Actual=3.84) Students received slightly more opportunities to connect between their out-of-school experiences as they would have preferred.**

Authentic Learning **(Preferred=3.63, Actual=3.60) Students actually received less student opportunity to solve real world problems that are authentic than they had perceived as needing.**

Active Learning **(Preferred=3.82, Actual=3.76) Students would have preferred to receive more opportunity to take an active role in their learning.**
Student Autonomy **(Preferred=3.89, Actual=3.97) Students had more opportunity to initiate ideas and make their own learning decisions than they had indicated as a preference early in the semester.**

Satisfaction **(Preferred=3.89, Actual=3.59) Students did not enjoy learning in a distance education environment as much as they had perceived it would be in the beginning of the semester.**

Results of the study will contribute to the knowledge base of social work by providing valuable information on the role that psychosocial influences play in distance education environments. The study will also contribute to the knowledge base of distance education research and higher education by explaining how distance education is effective in training social workers, especially in isolated rural communities. For the DELES survey to offer additional benefits to instructors, administration can be given at mid semester and data analyzed. Collected data can then be used by the instructor as a self-evaluation tool and provide opportunities to restructure the course to better meet student needs (Walker, 2005b). This invaluable information can assist instructors in being proactive in ensuring higher faculty evaluations at the end of the semester as well as providing optimal instruction for students.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of AUTHOR

Mary Jo Garcia BIGGS is an Assistant Professor in the department of Social Work at Texas State University-San Marcos. Her course load primarily consists of policy practice, human behavior in the social environment and graduate level field practicum.
Her research interests include distance education, adult education, and gerontology. Dr. Garcia Biggs received her a B.S.W. at Texas State University-San Marcos, M.S.W. from Our Lady of the Lake University, San Antonio, Texas and her Ph.D. from Texas A&M University, College Station.

Mary Jo Garcia Biggs
Texas State University 601 University Drive, San Marcos, Texas 78666, USA
Phone: 512-245-2586 Fax 512-245-8097
Email: mb56@txstate.edu

AUTHOR's Note: Financial Support; A University Research Enhancement Grant provided funds to conduct the project aforementioned, as well as a continued project involving focus groups and instructor perceptions of the MSW Distance Education Program.

Acknowledgements: The researcher would like to acknowledge Dr. Scott Walker (Texas State University-San Marcos) for his contribution of the development of the DELES scales, and Dr. Cynthia Simpson (Sam Houston State University) for her continued support of the project.

REFERENCES

***INSIGHT*, The south central RTEC instrument library and data repository. Retrieved December 1, 2005, from http://insight.southcentralrtec.org/instruments/**

Murphy, L. L., & Cifuentes, L. (2001). Using web tools, collaboration, and learning online. *Distance Education*, 22, 285-305.

Walker, S. L. (2001). Online learning environments research. Sixth annual teaching in the community colleges online conference, Kapi'olani Community College & University of Hawaii, from http://education.ollusa.edu/tcc2001 Retrieved December 1, 2005.

Walker, S. L. (2005). Development of the Distance Education Learning Environments Survey(DELES) for Higher Education. *The Texas Journal of Distance Learning*, 2(1), 1-6.

Walker, S. L. (2005b). Modifying formative evaluation techniques for distance education class evaluation. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*-TOJDE, 6 (4), 1-4.