

Graduate Student Perceptions of a Televised Master's Degree Program

David Austin
Indiana University

David Perry
Indiana University

Mary Harnishfeger
Indiana University

Bryan McCormick
Indiana University

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to solicit reactions to a variety of distance learning components by those who had participated in a graduate-level distance learning program. Participants were individuals who had completed their Master of Science degrees, partly or entirely, through interactive television classes. A survey instrument was constructed for the study. Of those responding, 16 were females and 3 were males. Results indicated that major factors in choosing the program dealt with having it at convenient locations and times. Respondents were extremely pleased to have had the opportunity to take classes via interactive television. When asked how much interaction they had with their instructors during class, as compared with conventional courses, results were mixed. When asked how their distance learning courses compared to traditional courses in terms of the amount of time invested outside of class, respondents indicated they spent the same or more time on their televised courses. Respondents comments on their experiences with distance learning were generally very positive. Four primary themes emerged. These were: (a) the importance of access to a convenient program; (b) the high value assigned to interactions with faculty and fellow students; (c) satisfaction with the quality of instruction; and (d) satisfaction with completing the degree and personal enhancement as a result.

Keywords: distance learning, interactive video, graduate students, student perceptions

Biographical Profile

David Austin is a Professor, and Bryan McCormick is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Recreation and Park Administration, HPER Building, Room 133, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405. David Perry is the Director of Campus Assessment and Testing and Mary Harnishfeger is an Instructional Development Specialist at Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405.

Introduction

Distance learning uses media to connect the teacher and students who are interacting from separate locations. Such mediated learning involves employing technologies (e.g., television, computers) to connect students with learning resources. Many institutions of higher education plan to use distance learning as a means of expanding their reach to those they have not been able to serve through traditional means. A recent survey found that 95.3% of universities now conducting distance learning programs plan to expand their programs (Primary Research Group, Inc., 1997). Price (1996) has indicated that due to the high costs of traditional education and the educational needs of professionals in the field, most universities will have to offer distance learning programs to remain viable. The president of Indiana University, Myles Brand, has stated that major institutions of higher learning will have to assume leadership roles in distance learning in order to maintain their positions as great universities (Wright, 1996). Another expert in higher education (Zenor, 1996) has projected distance learning to become a "dominant instructional strategy in education and training." It is apparent that the employment of instructional technologies in distance learning is becoming a part of the landscape of higher education.

As distance learning becomes more and more a part of higher education, a natural question arises as to the quality of programs delivered through technology. Quality may be examined through a variety of frames of reference. For example, one can assess the design of a curriculum, the delivery system or implementation, and/or the results of a course in order to evaluate quality (Smith, 1990). Program evaluation "helps us answer critical questions about human service programs. Is the program effective? Does it seem to be having the desired effect? Is the program on the right track? Are people benefiting? Are they accepting the service?" (Smith, 1990, p. 5). One means of evaluating the effectiveness of distance learning is to assess how students perceive their experiences as recipients of distance learning programs. Although the ultimate goals of instruction are typically those concerned with the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities related to specific content areas, one must also consider proximate goals as well. Proximate goals are akin to short-term or formative goals. These may be objectives that have to be met in order for longer-term goals to be achieved. Smith noted that we must consider both proximate and ultimate goals in evaluating programs. Although proximate goals may not be particularly valued of themselves, they may be preconditions for ultimate goals. For example, a proximate goal may be that students are satisfied with a course or attend regularly. Without achievement of proximate goals, attainment of ultimate goals may be very difficult. Students who are habitually absent or very dissatisfied with the course or instructor (proximate goals) may be less likely to achieve an ultimate goal of knowledge development. Thus, one approach to evaluating the quality of a program delivered through technology is to examine students' satisfaction with the experience. This was the nature of the current study.

This investigation centered on gaining the views of students who had spent several years taking courses at remote sites through interactive video. These students received their courses over a state-wide telecommunications system that delivered a one-way video and two-way audio television signal to remote sites located throughout the State. The distance learning program had been initiated during the 1984-85 academic year at the request of therapeutic recreation practitioners from a community a two and one-half hour drive from the University's campus. These practitioners wished to take graduate work in therapeutic recreation on a part-time basis but none was available in their geographic area. From this beginning, an entire master's program delivered via distance learning eventually evolved. Faculty who initiated the program insisted on an interactive component so that they could hold class discussions to include both students at remote sites and full-time residential students in the studio/classroom on campus. Faculty also insisted that both admissions and curriculum requirements be the same for distance learning students and residential students studying on campus. Thus, the broad goal of the distance learning master's degree program has been to provide the University's graduate program in therapeutic recreation to students who otherwise would not have access to it, while assuring that faculty could interact with the students and that the integrity of the degree be maintained.

Specifically, this study examined a population of individuals who had completed their masters' degrees in therapeutic recreation, partly or entirely, through a distance learning program provided by a large Midwestern university. The authors believed these alumni were a particularly good source of evaluative data because they had been through the entire program and could assess how the program had influenced their professional lives. The purpose of the study was then to solicit reactions to a variety of issues related to learning at a distance by those who had participated in a graduate program delivered by means of interactive television.

Method

Participants

Participants were individuals who had completed their Master of Science degrees in therapeutic recreation, partly or entirely, by means of the interactive video distance learning program. All participants had completed their degrees during the span of 1986 through 1996.

Procedure

Participants were mailed a letter explaining the study and requesting their participation, along with a questionnaire to gain their responses. Follow-up telephone calls two weeks after the initial mailing were made to those who had not responded.

Instrument

A survey instrument was constructed for the study by members of an instructional design and evaluation resource unit within the university who were familiar with distance learning and interactive video courses. A distance learning administrator and members of the therapeutic recreation faculty reviewed drafts of the instrument during its development to assure clarity and that issues of particular concern to them were included. The instrument itself was composed of four types of items. The initial cluster of items requested basic information about participants as individuals (e.g., their gender, year completed degree) and asked them to indicate why they chose this particular degree program. In the second set of items, respondents indicated their levels of satisfaction relative to nine program dimensions. The survey used a three point scale ranging from "very satisfied" to "satisfied" to "not very satisfied." A third set of seven items asked respondents to compare their distance learning courses with conventional courses they had taken using a scale with the responses: "more," "same," "less," "depended on the course," and "don't remember." The final series of 14 questions were open-ended items to which participants could provide written responses.

Results

Participant Characteristics

A total of 28 individuals were requested to take part in the study. Of these, 19 responded, for a return rate of 67.9%. Of the respondents, 16 were females and 3 were males. A total of 16 of the 19 (84.2%) were working in therapeutic recreation or a related field. A large majority (n=17) had completed their degrees since 1990. The other two degrees were completed in 1986 and 1988. Most (n=14) had taken 75% or more of their graduate courses via interactive television. None had previous experience with distance learning.

Participant Responses

Choice of the Program. Although it might be speculated that the reputation of the university's therapeutic recreation program would be the major reason for choosing it, it was not. Even though reputation impacted on the choices of 8 of the 19 respondents, the major factors in choosing the program dealt with having the program at convenient locations (n=19) and convenient times (n=15). The fact that the program was financially affordable was mentioned by 7 of the respondents. From these results, it is clear that convenience played a major role in motivating students to choose the distance learning graduate program.

Extent of Satisfaction. Participants were extremely pleased to have the opportunity to take classes via interactive television. As can be seen in Figure 1, a total of 12

(63.2%) indicated they were “very satisfied” with having the opportunity, while 7 (36.8%) indicated they were “satisfied.” Typical of participant comments were: “This opportunity allowed me to get an advanced degree without driving long distances and spending time on the road,” and “This is the only way I could have pursued a master’s degree.” Participants were also satisfied with the quality of instruction and the overall quality of the learning experience. Comments on the overall quality of the classes included: A(The quality of the classes were good and I use this experience in my current job” and A(The quality was) just as good as in regular classes.”

Participants were also generally pleased by the amount and quality of interaction they had with other students at their sites and with the helpfulness of the site coordinator in facilitating their learning experiences. Finally, participants indicated they were happy with the amount and quality of advising while they were in the program. Comments on advisement included: “Contact (was) made when necessary. Phone calls were always returned....” and “I could talk to my advisor at any time.”

Extent of Participant Satisfaction

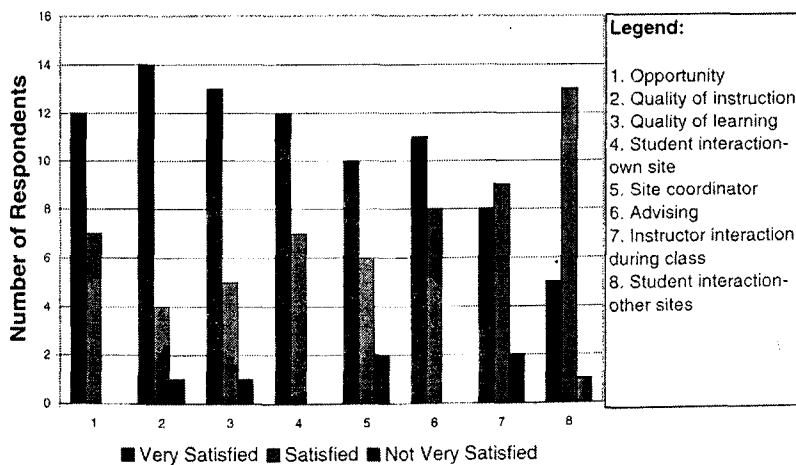


Figure 1. Participant satisfaction ratings (n = 19) for eight aspects of a distance learning course.

Participants were least satisfied with the amount of interaction they had with the instructors during class and the helpfulness of their site coordinators in facilitating their learning experiences.” Even with these items, however, it was clear that students were generally positive about their opportunities to interact with their teachers and the facilitation of learning experiences by site coordinators.

Comparisons with Conventional, Face-to-Face Courses

As may be seen in Figure 2, when asked how much interaction they had with their instructors during class, as compared with conventional courses, results were mixed. Those who were satisfied made comments such as: "Time was always given to us to interact" and "2-way communication was always available." Participants were generally more comfortable, or had the same degree of comfort in asking questions or making comments as compared to conventional classes they had taken. Only four felt less comfortable and one did not remember. Participants generally felt that they were able to interact with other students during class, as compared with traditional classes. Interestingly, outside of class time, participants generally indicated that they communicated as much or more frequently with their professors as they did while taking traditional courses.

When asked how their distance learning courses compared to traditional courses they had taken in terms of the amount of time invested outside of class, a large proportion (42.1%) indicated they spent more time on their televised classes, while the majority (57.9%) stated they spent the same amount of time. Participant comments included: "The degree meant more to me and I wanted to do well, so I studied almost daily" and "Since I was not on the road commuting, I had more time to devote to studying." Participants were also generally positive about the amount they learned from their televised courses as compared to their conventional courses. It was interesting that more than 40% of the respondents actually stated they learned more from their televised courses. Approximately one-half indicated they learned the same amount as they had in traditionally taught courses. Typical of written comments by those that indicated they learned more was, "However, I was older and more invested."

Comparison with Conventional Courses

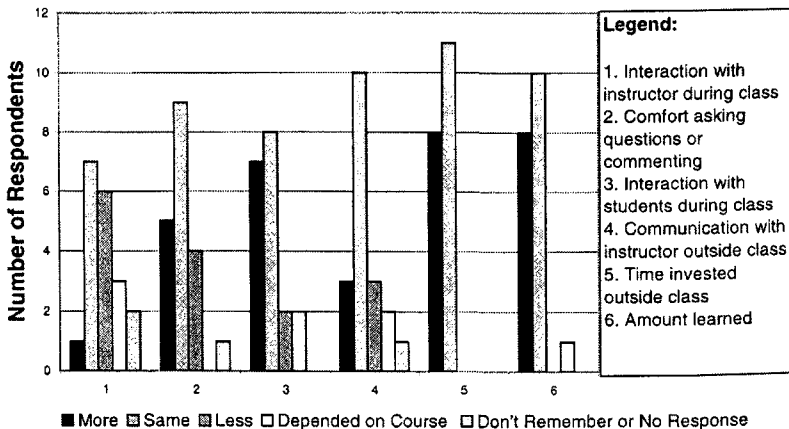


Figure 2. Participant comparisons (n = 19) of a distance learning course with conventional courses on six factors.

Open-Ended Items: Student Comments About Their Experiences

The alumni comments on their experience with distance learning via interactive television were generally very positive. The relatively few negative comments centered around a lack of opportunity for face-to-face contact with faculty and students away from their remote site, having to travel to use a university library, and technical difficulties occasionally experienced during classes. Respondents missed the opportunity to be in the classroom with their instructors, as well as not being able to have face-to-face meetings with faculty outside of class. They also stated that they would have liked to have had the occasion to socialize with students from other sites before and after class, as they might have in conventional courses. Because their graduate courses often required library work, some students complained about having to travel long distances in order to use university libraries. While not expressed as a major frustration, there were concerns about technical difficulties that sometimes occurred during classes. Mentioned specifically was the interactive telephone system that occasionally failed.

Positive comments far outweighed negative comments. When asked about the main advantage of completing their degrees via distance learning, participants focused on convenience. Both convenient class times and locations were seen to have allowed them to continue full-time employment and not have to relocate in the city where the university was located.

When queried about the most satisfying aspect of their degree program, most individuals replied that completion of their degrees brought them the greatest satisfaction. However, having access to a high quality educational program was also very satisfying to all who responded. Many mentioned their satisfaction with faculty who they viewed as excellent instructors, and who demonstrated a willingness to work individually with students. They also remarked that instructors regularly employed teaching strategies that involved students in interactive class exercises. One respondent gave the example of an instructor assigning discussion questions to dyads (of distance learning students) who, following their discussion, each provided an answer to their question and led the discussion on the topic of concern.

It was interesting that respondents mentioned that to a large extent interaction with other students at their sites contributed to their learning. With the exception of two alumni who viewed the in-class talk as an interruption, alumni appreciated learning from the experiences of their colleagues. Likewise, they felt those at the site provided a supportive community of learners. Reflective of this sentiment was the statement of one respondent who wrote, "We were all professionals working in the TR field and we learned from each other."

Graduates also expressed that they were very pleased they had completed what they considered to be a rigorous degree program. One responded, "I feel like I earned the degree. It was just as much work as if we were on campus. I did not feel cheated. Assignments had to be thoroughly done, tests had to be studied for. It was no 'gimmie'."

These graduates indicated that completing the degree was personally very meaningful to them. One wrote, "I was able to land the job I have always dreamed of within five months of graduating." Another commented, "(The) masters' has enabled me to be promoted twice. Also, (I) could apply what was learned immediately to (my) current job assignment." A third stated, "Personally, I feel accomplished and proud. Professionally, I received a promotion when a position became open." Another remarked, "The achievement of the degree allowed me to be promoted to a higher management position. Personally, earning the degree gave me more of a sense of accomplishment." Finally, one graduate said, "Not only have I become a more reflective professional, but I have also learned to be a more effective communicator via interactive television." Comments such as these are representative of all who responded to the survey.

Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to gain insights into distance learning through a student perspective. A review of the results from the survey of former distance learning students, who had completed their degree programs, revealed the emergence of four primary themes. These were: (a) the importance of access to a convenient program; (b) the high value assigned to interactions with faculty and fellow students; (c) satisfaction with the quality of instruction; and (d) satisfaction with completing the degree and personal enhancement as a result.

Access: A major aspect

Those surveyed were very appreciative of having access to what they perceived to be a highly regarded university master's program. Respondents were particularly pleased by the convenience of the program. Convenience was defined by the former students in terms of having courses taught at times at which they could take them (i.e., at night or late in the afternoon) and at locations that were close to their homes or places of employment. This finding is consistent with other recent studies of distance learning students (e.g., McHenry & Bozik, 1997; Tiene, 1997). It seems clear that those who have gained access to educational opportunities that would not otherwise be available to them are highly pleased by this accessibility.

Interaction: A prized component of distance learning

The opportunity for interactions with other students and faculty was greatly valued by the respondents. They made numerous references to the critical nature of various types of interactions during the time they were in their distance learning courses. That students would place such an emphasis on interaction is not surprising in light of authors who have previously stated the potential for distance learning students to become passive television viewers (Cennamo, 1994), as well as the necessity to employ teaching strategies that decrease isolation and the sense of passivity that is often reported by students learning at a distance (Wolcott, 1996).

What was surprising was that our respondents generally were very positive about the opportunities that they had to interact with others. This was most evident in comments related to the interactions students had with other students at their site. They believed that these interactions resulted in learning by sharing knowledge, as well as creating a supportive learning environment. To a lesser extent, students also believed that the mediated interactions with students from other sites were valuable to them. They did, however, lament the inability to meet face-to-face in informal settings to exchange views with students at other sites.

Similarly, respondents noted that they were satisfied or very satisfied with interactions with instructors both during and outside of class. They commented on the effective strategies employed by faculty to enhance classroom interaction. Generally, respondents were also pleased with the quality of the academic advisement they had received from faculty. The view of faculty that teach in the program is that the interactive component of distance learning is an essential element in their department's televised teaching (E. Hamilton, personal communication, November, 1997). This faculty commitment to interactive learning may help to explain the positive response of the former students to the interactive components of their distance learning experiences.

Faculty teaching in the program realized that computer access was very limited for those who participated in the study. It is anticipated, however, that future students will more than likely enjoy greatly expanded opportunities to use computers to interact with both faculty and fellow students. As computers become more available, it is projected that students will use e-mail and the World Wide Web to interact with increasing frequency. Two of the authors who are currently teaching in the program have noticed increased use of the Internet by students within the past year.

Quality of Instruction

While areas of dissatisfaction were identified, students generally portrayed these as minor concerns relative to the overall quality of instruction. One area of dissatisfaction expressed was with technological difficulties. Most frequently noted were problems with the telephone system that sometimes did not function properly. Difficulties with technology can loom large in distance learning programs so it was heartening that respondents had few complaints in this area. Perhaps this had to do with students often being tolerant with technology used in a new program (McHenry & Bozik, 1997). It will be interesting to see whether students remain as tolerant as time goes on. Another area of dissatisfaction related to the necessity of driving long distances to visit university libraries. As electronic access to libraries becomes more available, this issue should diminish. The lack of opportunities for face-to-face interactions between faculty and students and among students was another area of expressed dissatisfaction. They missed the opportunities that students normally have before and after class for informal interactions. Yet, as already discussed, those in the classes were still generally very pleased with their level of interaction with faculty and fellow students. It may be that increasing

access to electronic mail, teleconferencing, and other technological means of communicating can, in the future, reduce students' concerns about face-to-face communication.

Generally, respondents were pleased by the overall quality of their learning experience. They felt that the level of instruction by faculty was excellent and expressed that faculty extended themselves to students. Faculty apparently gained rapport with their students by expressing concern for students through their teaching and advising. Faculty were also evidently aware of the necessity to structure class sessions that would facilitate interaction among students and between themselves and students so that students did not experience feelings of being neglected or isolated. In short, faculty seemed to create a caring atmosphere that was positively perceived by students.

Results from Completing the Degree: Satisfaction and personal enhancement

Respondents expressed feelings of satisfaction with completing a graduate degree and from the personal enhancement that resulted from attaining their degrees. These individuals unanimously agreed that the most satisfying aspect of their program was completion of the degree. They took great pride in the reputation of the therapeutic recreation masters' program and in having earned their degrees through what they considered to be a rigorous academic curriculum. Most stated, unequivocally, that the completion of their degree had been very meaningful in terms of meeting personal and professional objectives. They noted such outcomes as practicing with a new level of confidence, the ability to be a reflective practitioner, obtaining advanced practice positions, and gaining advancements within their organizations.

It could be speculated that the respondents' apparent feelings of high levels of satisfaction and personal enhancement, resulting from obtaining their degrees, could have influenced them to exhibit a positive bias when completing the survey. Nevertheless, our investigation suggests that it is extremely important to critically examine distance learning from the student perspective. Findings from this study indicate that there are challenges that must be overcome when using a medium such as interactive television as a means to learning at a distance. Results also display, however, that despite problems inherent in this form of distance learning, it can be successfully used to prepare students at the graduate level.

As we move toward the technological advances that are surely to accompany the new Millennium and experience the changing world of higher education, it will be imperative for researchers to increasingly examine students' perceptions of distance learning. Researchers may wish to examine the perceptions of those who choose to take only one or two distance learning courses, rather than enter a degree program. Now that recreation and leisure studies distance learning courses are being delivered to more diverse types of students, such as undergraduates in therapeutic recreation and high school students studying tourism (P. Rae, personal communication, February, 1999), it would be instructive to determine the perceptions of distance learning students at levels other

than the graduate level, as well as for different subject areas. Additionally, as students gain increasing access to the use of computers, researchers will be able to study the effect of various technologies on distance learning as, for example, students more frequently communicate with faculty and each other via e-mail and the World Wide Web and access library materials electronically. Finally, as Web-based courses and other mediums for distance learning emerge, it will be important to understand student responses to them.

References

- Cennamo, K.S. (1994). Learning from video: Factors influencing learners' pre-conceptions and invested mental effort. Educational Technology Research and Development, 41(3), 33-45.
- McHenry, L., & Bozik, M. (1997). From a distance: Student voices from the interactive video classroom. Tech Trends, 42(6), 20-24.
- Price, R.V. (1996). A model for the on-line college-level guided study course. Tech Trends, 41(6), 39-43.
- Primary Research Group, Inc. (1997). The survey of distance learning programs in higher education. New York: Primary Research Group, Inc.
- Smith, M. J. (1990). Program evaluation in the human services. New York: Springer.
- Tiene, D. (1997). Student perspectives on distance learning with interactive television. Tech Trends, 42(1), 41-47.
- Wolcott, L.L. (1996). Distant, but not distanced: A learner-centered approach to distance education. Tech Trends, 41(4), 23-27.
- Wright, M. (1996). IU to base future on charter document. The Herald-Times, 120(193), A1, A7 (December 28, 1996).
- Zenor, S.O. (1996). Distance learning: Beneath the surface. Tech Trends, 41(6), 2.