Graduate Students’ Perceptions of the Effectiveness of an Online Secondary Teaching Strategies Course

Abstract. In an effort to meet the increasing needs of the graduate student population at a large southwestern state university, several online courses have been developed and implemented to assist students in meeting the academic requirements for a Master’s degree in Education and/or post baccalaureate teacher certification. The purpose of this exploratory study was to gather information on graduate students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of an online course designed to teach instructional strategies used in face-to-face (FTF) secondary classrooms, estimate the perceived ease of transfer of the strategies to a FTF classroom, and gain insight into the online graduate student population. Students were administered a web-based survey after they had completed the course. The instrument explored their perceptions on the effectiveness of the various online and fieldwork activities. Findings showed that the respondents rated the field experience activities within the 25-hour practicum among the highest and the routine weekly readings and summaries among the lowest. Implications of these results are discussed.

Introduction

With the increasing demands to offer quality distance education courses to meet the needs of our expanding graduate student population, this investigator conducted survey research to explore the effectiveness of the learning activities of an online course she routinely facilitates. The results would inform her online teaching practices as well as provide information on ways to improve the quality of the course and the online learning experience for future students (Calloway, 2008; Cuthrell & Lyon, 2007). Another impetus for the study was the Curriculum & Instruction Department’s desire to expand its current online graduate course offerings as well as revise existing online courses to improve their overall quality and student satisfaction with the online learning experience. The investigator considered a web-based survey as the most practical approach to efficiently gather data from her students who had previously completed the course. Creating an online survey allowed for a low cost, fast and efficient method of gathering data (Sue & Ritter, 2007). A variety of survey question formats allowed for efficient data gathering. The purpose of this exploratory study was to gather information on graduate students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of an online course designed to teach instructional strategies used in face-to-face secondary classrooms, estimate the ease of transfer of the learned strategies to a face-to-face classroom, and gain useful information about the online graduate student population enrolled in the course. The survey was designed to address the following research questions: Question #1: How effective were the online instructional activities in learning secondary teaching strategies? Question #2: What were the graduate students’ perceptions of their ability to transfer the learned instructional strategies to a face-to-face classroom setting? Question #3: What were the characteristics of the graduate students enrolled in this online course?

With the commercialization of higher education, increasing competition, and expanding online enrollment is the growing need for quality assurance (Wang, 2006). Various organizations and accreditation agencies have outlined “best practices” and/or developed frameworks for quality in distance education. These include the Sloan Consortium Quality Framework (Moore, 2002); Best Practices by The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (2000); Guidelines for Good

Practice by The American Federation of Teachers (2000); and Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Education by The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2002). Their common emphases include (a) strong institutional commitment, (b) adequate curriculum and instruction that fit the new deliver medium and match the rigor and breadth of equivalent on-campus programs, (c) sufficient faculty support, (d) ample student support, and (e) consistent learning outcome assessment (Wang, 2006, p. 270)

Studies such as this one are needed to investigate and ensure that individual distance education courses support rigorous learning outcomes, effectively use available technology to improve pedagogy, and provide student satisfaction and support.

Method

Context and Participants
The investigator recruited students who had been enrolled in the online course, using class rosters with university e-mail addresses from three previous long semesters (Fall 2006, Fall 2007, Spring 2008) spanning a two-year period. The investigator invited 66 individuals to participate through an e-mail invitation (see Appendix A); seventeen responded. The invitation included the purpose of the research survey, the estimated time to complete it, explanations related to informed consent and confidentiality, and a two-week deadline for completion. Follow-up e-mails were sent twice to non-respondents, each time in two-week time increments. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=17)

Measures
SPSS mrInterview (4.0), a browser-based authoring tool, was used to create the online survey. The tool allowed respondent data to be exported directly into SPSS, a data analysis software program.

Results
SPSS mrInterview (4.0) automatically calculated the percentages of the survey responses. In addition, frequency counts were conducted on the various survey items. The results are presented in relation to the research questions.

Question #1: How effective were the online instructional activities in learning secondary teaching strategies?
Participants rated each of the weekly activities in response to “How effective were these learning activities in facilitating your learning of instructional strategies?” Point values for the responses were assigned as follows: excellent (4), good (3), fair (2), poor (1), and don’t recall was treated as missing information. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each activity. Table 2 presents the effectiveness of the online activities from most effective to least effective as demonstrated by the mean and standard deviation scores.

Table 2: Rating of Online Activities by Number, Mean and Standard Deviation

Question #2: What were the graduate students’ perceptions of their ability to transfer the learned instructional strategies to a face-to-face classroom setting?

Table 3: Responses to Survey Question “Please Rate How Well You Think You Will Be Able To Use The Instructional Strategies That You’ve Learned In This Online Course In A Face-To-Face Classroom.”

Question #3: What were the characteristics of the graduate students enrolled in this online course? Table 4 provides participant characteristics.

Table 4
Participant Characteristics (N = 17)

Discussion
Effectiveness of online instructional activities
The overall high ratings of the course activities speak to the quality of the original design of this student-centered course, jointly created by a subject matter expert and an instructional designer. Among the active and authentic learning strategies (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1988) used throughout the course, was the use of a field experience model which allowed these graduate students the opportunity to bridge theory with practice (Brandsford, Pellegrino, & Donovan, 1999). The activities rated as most effective were those related to the field experience. When given the opportunity on the survey to provide comments about the field experience, one participant said:

For me the field experience was one of the strongest and most effective learning tools I experienced in this class. I have next to no classroom experience so this exercise really helped to educate me and lower some anxiety on getting involved in classroom interactions. Real world experience can’t be learned in a textbook or an on-line video in almost anything (in my opinion). The experience was also valuable in forming real world contacts for me that I have been able to use since.

Even though the field experience activities were rated among the highest, some participants reported dissatisfaction with the time consuming procedures involved in gaining access to a campus. For example, students had to complete a district permission request form and a criminal background check prior to making a request for placement in a district. In addition there was often a long wait for communication among the university liaison, cooperating districts, the individual campuses, and their cooperating teachers, before students were actually notified that they could begin their placement. Students were then required to initiate contact with their cooperating teacher and campus to begin the 25-hour fieldwork.

The routine weekly reading activities were scored among the lowest in the course. This may be due to the time and labor intensity of these activities. The weekly routine included (a) summarizing the weekly readings via a textual summary or outline of the content, (b) visually representing the most salient ideas in the reading by constructing a concept map, (c) inserting an

image from the Web that represented the overall theme, (d) describing how the image related to the theme, (e) and concluding the summary with a reflective paragraph discussing what impacted them the most from the reading.

**Transfer of instructional strategies to a face-to-face classroom**

A clear majority of the students (94%) reported that transferring the instructional strategies they learned online into a face-to-face classroom would be moderately easy or easy. This finding could be explained by the students’ opportunity to practice many of the instructional strategies in the online setting, as they were actually learning about them in the course. In addition, the opportunity to observe the use of the strategies by several classroom teachers in their field experience and practice some of the strategies within their internship may also explain their perception of their ease of transfer.

**Characteristics of online graduate students**

These graduate students were mostly working adults with heavy demands on their time. They had previously earned bachelor degrees in different program areas, ranging in variety from the arts and humanities to business administration. The majority was working full-time or part-time jobs and was full-time graduate students. In this single course alone, 71% reported spending 4 to 12 hours per week in this course, excluding the 25-hour field experience practicum. 65% were working on their Masters in Education and 35% were pursuing post-baccalaureate certification.

**Conclusions**

This study proved to be informative in identifying those activities that the online graduate students rated as most and least effective in learning research-based instructional practices in secondary education. Further asking the students to identify the most effective and meaningful activities *within* each of the weekly thematic learning modules might help to balance the number of interactions in this web-based course, so that the students and instructor are not overwhelmed with too many interactions that may actually hinder learning (Hirumi, 2003). A future survey that queries the amount of time required to complete each activity would inform effective design of course activities in determining an appropriate amount of time spent weekly on the course activities, as compared to completing similar activities within a face-to-face environment. Time management is an ongoing concern for both students and instructors in distance education (Hirumi, 2003).

This study provided useful information on the perceived ease of transfer of the learned strategies to a face-to-face classroom, as well as insight into the population of students taking the course. The study also provided information regarding areas needing improvement, such as the time required for field internship placement. Delays in placement were frustrating to the students and made some feel rushed in an experience designed to enhance their learning, observation, and practice of effective secondary instructional strategies. In addition to improving the facilitation of student placements in their field experience, exploring the most effective ways to integrate the theoretical concepts and course activities with the students’ field internship is worthy of investigation. The comparative lower ratings on the weekly readings warrant further investigation of the texts from which the readings were assigned, as well as the value of the structured activities that culminated from the readings.