Chapter LII
Serving Rural Communities Using Blended Technology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study that illustrates how blended technology can provide an opportunity to complete an undergraduate degree through distance education for students living in rural communities. The research examines the educational, life, and work experiences of students who joined Cohort Ten in a Human Resource Development (HRD) curriculum. Some common perceptions related to their experience in the program emerged from qualitative interviews as students considered accessibility, achievement, and other issues important to achieving their goals. The blended technology approach used in the program included compressed interactive video (CIV); Blackboard, a Web-based classroom management system; and a face-to-face weekend gathering each semester of students and faculty from current cohorts.

INTRODUCTION

Growth in the availability and use of technology has enabled higher education to reach potential students who otherwise would be unable to complete a bachelor's degree program due to the lack of local bricks-and-mortar institutions as well as mediating life circumstances that would prevent them from joining a traditional academic community. Since 1996, the Compressed Interactive Video (CIV) program at the University of Arkansas has been providing nontraditional

students an opportunity to join a two-year degree completion program in Human Resource Development (HRD). Drawing largely from a rural population, the program has provided access to a degree for students whose work, community, and family life precluded an opportunity to complete a bachelor's degree. This case study addressed the research question: "What Is It Like to Be a Student in Cohort Ten?" The researchers hoped to gain insight from this qualitative research into how this blended technology program enabled nontraditional students to pursue and complete a degree despite the pressures of full-time work and competing family and community obligations.

BACKGROUND

Between 1996 and 2004, the HRD program enrolled 470 students and graduated 279, which is a graduation rate of 59.4%. The 2005 and 2006 cohorts consisting of 154 students are progressing toward graduation. Cohorts have ranged in size from 36 students in the early years to a high of 83 students in later years.

This interpretative study investigates how students perceived their life, work, and education as members of HRD Cohort Ten, a technology-intensive, distance-learning program that serves both undergraduate students in rural communities in the state of Arkansas, as well as a small group of non-traditional students on the main University campus. The off-site classrooms are in community or technical college locations, which provide reasonable access for most residents of the state. Hence, students enter a cohort in either an odd or even-numbered year, according to their home residence. Should students move during the two-year cohort period to an area not having a current program site, they might have to postpone their second year of study unless another cohort is established in their new location.

Using the Web to enhance traditional classroom instruction is a trend that is growing rapidly in higher education (Ko & Rossen, 2004). The researchers' interest was not in distance education as a whole, but in the interactions between students and a particular program. Since qualitative research is time and context bound, it is difficult to make inferences that apply across time and context to all distance education classrooms. This HRD program occurred in a specific context, with a specific group of people, in specific places, in specific situations, and at specific times within the strictures of distance education technology. The significance of this research lies in the notion of transfer (Swartz & Biggs, 1999). Cohort Ten has experienced distance learning with blended technology in their HRD program. What can Cohort Ten students tell us that provides feedback for programmatic change as well as insight into the blended technology environment? This study follows the protocol approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board that examines proposed research involving human subjects. A copy of the protocol is attached as an Appendix.

Demographics

Eleven students who volunteered were interviewed in the spring of 2006, in the fall of 2006, and again after completing the program in 2007. These students had joined the HRD program in fall 2005, having fulfilled enrollment requirements that included two years of undergraduate work, so their remaining studies corresponded to junior and senior year classes. In addition, they needed at least five years full-time employment as well as current full-time employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Distance education is one example of separation through the imposition of technological time and space. Separation in time and space is an artifact of many emerging technologies" (Swartz