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Chapter IV

Using a Blended Model to Improve Delivery of Teacher Education Curriculum in Global Settings

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Abstract

This chapter describes how teacher educators have used a blended approach, online and traditional delivery, to structure course content for its international master's program. The authors discuss challenges they had to overcome, lessons learned, and students' reflections on the blended approach.

Introduction

The delivery of teacher education courses and/or total programs at overseas sites is often complicated and plagued with problems because of the distance between the home university and the location of the students. The Office of International Programs in the College of Education at The University of Alabama offers Master of Arts degree programs in elementary education and secondary education in five locations in Latin America: Asuncion, Paraguay; Bogota, Colombia; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; and Quito, Ecuador. The students in these degree programs are teachers in private, United States (U.S.)-type, pre-K-12 schools. The delivery method used in the past has involved sending a professor to the foreign location for about 2 weeks to teach a 3-semester-hour graduate course. The course schedule consists of approximately 3 hours of class Monday through Friday, and 3 to 6 hours of class on Saturday. Two weeks of this daily schedule creates a considerable amount of pressure and strain for the professor in attempting to deliver a quality course in a short period of time, and a large burden on the students who, while taking the course, are also engaged in full-time pre-K-12 classroom teaching. In addition, access to library research materials and other course materials has been complicated because of problems associated with transporting these materials to the country where the course was taught.

Educational technology allows organizations the ability to modify courses and curriculums and, at the same time, become more flexible in their delivery (Kvavik, 2002). Graves (2001) predicted that higher education is moving toward a more student-centric approach and away from the traditional instructor-focused environment. Electronic access to information allows students the opportunity to explore, discover, create and communicate more efficiently than in the past. Virtual classrooms can allow for more creative ways to collaborate and communicate without "the constraint of a physical classroom" (Lao & Gonzales, 2005, p. 471). With these new opportunities come new challenges to serve students at all levels and from locations around the world. The challenges include how to create a system that both works and is user-friendly. Creating an online component through a Web-enabled course has the potential to give instructors and students a greater opportunity for interaction and learning (Dabbagh & Schmitt, 1998) and can possibly provide opportunities for the students to become acquainted with the course assignments/materials and their peers in advance of the beginning of the course. In this chapter, we will describe how we have used computer-based instruction via the Internet and a course management system (WebCT) to create a blended model of course delivery for students that provides a good mixture of technology-based instruction and traditional professor-led classes.