

Chapter 21

Using Qualitative Methods to Evaluate Distance Education: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative methods can be useful tools to evaluate the effectiveness of distance education programs. This analysis examines an interpretive case study conducted using a hermeneutic phenomenology approach to investigate how nontraditional undergraduate students in a bachelor's degree completion program perceived their lives, work, and education as members of a Human Resource Development (HRD) cohort. The technology-intensive, distance-learning program served students in rural communities, as well as a small group of students on the main University campus. The blended technology 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. The significance of the case study is in the relationship between a distance education program and the transfer of HRD knowledge to lives, work, and community roles.

INTRODUCTION

Using the web to enhance traditional classroom instruction is a trend that is growing rapidly in higher education (Ko & Rossen, 2004). The popularity of degrees now offered online by a number of major universities as well as exclusively online programs, such as those offered by Capella and Phoenix Universities, might be attributable in part

to technological advances that overcome previous limitations in program delivery. As Swartz and Biggs (1999) noted, "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" (p. 83). According to Verduin and Clark (1991), distance learning is "any formal approach to learning in which a majority of the instruction occurs while educator and learner are at a distance from one another" (p. 8). Tallent-

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Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, and Shaw et al. (2006), in their metastudy of research about distance education, defined online classes as “courses that are delivered completely on the internet. Hybrid or blended courses are those that combine online components with traditional, face-to-face components” (p. 94).

Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006), however, point out a limitation of traditional approaches to evaluating distance education that centers about “empirical research [that] reports about online course instruction rather than on program descriptions or conceptual articles” (p. 94). Describing students in distance education courses, they also found that “the majority of students using online services were older than the typical undergraduate student. These students were adults who had significant roles in the community and who were highly motivated and focused on achieving specific learning outcomes” (p. 112).

Qualitative Program Evaluation

This chapter explores how program evaluation that employs qualitative methodology may help bridge the gap between the empirical focus on course instruction and the programmatic and conceptual elements that have been largely missing from the distance education literature. For the purpose of this study, evaluation is defined as “the identification, clarification, and application of defensible criteria to determine an evaluation object’s value (worth or merit), quality, utility, effectiveness, or significance in relation to those criteria” (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997, p. 5). Patton (2002) makes a clear distinction between evaluative research and fundamental research by suggesting that they serve different purposes. Evaluative research, “conducted systematically and empirically through careful data collection and thoughtful analysis,” examines program effectiveness and accomplishments to inform decision making and enhance human effectiveness whereas the purpose of basic research

is “to generate or test theory and to contribute to knowledge for the sake of knowledge” (p. 10).

The evaluative research presented in this chapter used an interpretive case to examine the effectiveness of a blended technology program that delivered instruction through a combination of interactive television (Compressed Interactive Video, or “CIV”), an online class management system (Blackboard), and a gathering of current students by cohort each semester at a physical location selected by the educational institution. The analysis will be buttressed by additional description of qualitative methods that a program evaluator might find useful for determining the effectiveness of program elements in this as well as other distance education programs or settings.

BACKGROUND

Since 1996, the CIV program at the University of Arkansas has provided nontraditional students an opportunity to join a two-year, undergraduate degree completion program in Human Resource Development (HRD). A mostly rural population has accessed a degree for students whose work, community, and family life precluded an opportunity to complete an undergraduate program. This case study addressed the question, What Is It Like to Be a Student in an HRD Cohort? We hoped to gain insight through qualitative research into how this blended technology, hybrid program enabled nontraditional students to pursue and complete a degree despite the pressures of full-time work and competing family and community obligations.

“Continuing education is an all encompassing term within a broad spectrum of post-secondary learning activities and programs.... recognized forms of post-secondary learning activities ... include: degree credit courses ... by non-traditional students.... enrolled part-time” (Farlex, n.d., para. 1-3). This interpretative case study investigated how nontraditional undergraduate students perceived their lives, work, and education as members

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