International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

Authors' Response to Reviewer Commentary by Eastmond

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Cite this document

August – 2004

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We endorse the reviewer's comments regarding blended learning and the recommendations for follow-on research. Our intent, therefore, is to use the opportunity of this response to elaborate the answer to a rhetorical question presented by the reviewer and to suggest additional research.

Fully Online versus Blended Programs

The reviewer asks: "Why would an institution run a strictly online distance program if the hybrid format is superior for both community and learning?" and then answers with the observation that "access" is key, as well as "rapid self-paced movement through modularized learning resources to refresh and develop just the needed competencies." We agree that the diverse locations of some students and/ or the purposes of some programs may not make blended learning feasible or desirable for all programs. However, a brief survey conducted by the authors of Internet promotional materials for online programs revealed that many institutions publicize convenience as the centerpiece of online distance programs, to include the use of the "no campus residency" claim as a marketing tool to attract more students. This promotional theme raises a significant criticism about distance education – some schools appear to emphasize convenience over quality. For example, one university's webpage included the following: "What makes [institution's name deleted] unique is that there are absolutely no campus residency or onsite requirements. All course work is done completely through the Internet with the guidance of faculty mentors, from the comfort and convenience of home or office. [Name deleted] is the first regionally accredited university in the country to make this type of learning environment available, particularly to those seeking doctoral degrees." That's it! No claims of a quality learning experience are made. Such language is seen as a reflection of the market-driven nature of distance education programs, in which schools are engaged in intense competition with each other. At issue is the extent to which marketing considerations are driving distance education course design.

We believe that the major criterion for designing distance education programs should be related to learning, not marketing. We also feel distance education programs should include an appropriate face-to-face component, if feasible and educationally relevant, even if this component only entails an initial campus residency at the beginning of a relatively lengthy and academically challenging program. Most regionally accredited doctorates in the U.S. of which the authors are aware, require campus residencies. If a centralized residency at the school's campus is not feasible, use of multiple decentralized residencies at diverse locations conducted by school faculty should be considered.

Follow-on Research

The reviewer makes a good point regarding the need for further research on the area of "weekly class session versus weekend programs (with or without a distance component)." This issue was addressed when designing the components for the blended model described in our study. The needs of this specific group of students were considered when choosing the weekend format, as most of the students were full-time working teachers and some lived as far as 50 miles away from the meeting site. Consequently, this community of students felt that the Friday night/ Saturday sessions were their preference. However, in an effort to be flexible and meet the needs of various diverse groups of students, further research is appropriate regarding various options for in-person meeting days and times.

We recommend that gaps in learning and sense of classroom community by race in fully online and blended learning environments also be added to this list of follow-on research. Our research provides evidence of the relationship between sense of classroom community and learning, and highlights the importance of community building. A recently completed study by one of the authors provides evidence to suggest that the racial achievement gap that has been widely reported in many traditional educational programs also exists in fully online university courses, and that this gap covaries with the classroom community gap (i.e., as the gap in classroom community gets smaller, so does the gap in achievement). Although the course sampled in the study included graded weekly group discussion topics, course assignments involved only independent work, which may have contributed to Black students possessing weaker sense of community and achieving lower grades than their White peers in the predominately White online environment (59 percent White; 37 percent Black; 4 percent other). Perhaps more collaborative group work and less independent work would have produced better results for minority students.

John Ogbu (1995), a noted University of California anthropologist, attempted to explain the academic underperformance of many minority students in traditional classrooms based on cultural and communication factors. He suggested that students enter the classroom with modes of interaction that reflect their home culture, and that often conflicts with the culture of the school. Since communication is central to educational processes, effective communication is essential to the reduction of potential problems associated with the clash of cultures in the classroom and to ensure the establishment of an appropriate teaching/ learning environment. This is particularly important in online programs, where communication is mostly limited to the written word and often represents the only contact between members of the classroom community. Ogbu theorized that the academic environment must be facilitated by cultural connections identifying and linking communication as a significant element in the teaching and learning process. As such, cultural contexts are essential to communication effectiveness.

Differences in cultural backgrounds and associated social values may be barriers to forming a strong sense of community and to academic success in online multicultural classroom environments. Consequently, racial issues that influence community in the traditional classroom environment can also affect the virtual classroom, despite the often heard assertion that the Internet erases racial differences and that people are more often judged on their ideas rather than their skin color. Some racial and ethnic groups, such as African Americans, place higher emphasis on communal values, which include knowledge that is valued, how learning occurs, and communication patterns of working together for the good of community (Flannery, 1995). While these values are not to be viewed as monolithic for an entire race of people, they have been proven valuable to note when educators are looking for pedagogical markers that differentiate the learning processes of African American groups who have little to no significant cultural contact

with the learning patterns of other cultures (Hale, 2001). The major implication for professors of African American students is to use a pedagogy that encourages them to explain their understanding of subject matter within a collaborative and cohesive group context.

The concept of schools as communities, each with its own school ethos and student support system, is particularly important in distance education where student persistence and learning are issues, and where mixed groups of students will have expectations arising from their own local communities that may differ with the accepted norms of schools from other communities. Perhaps the achievement gap can be closed by designing and presenting online and blended courses that respond to the culturally-diverse backgrounds of all students. Future research should be directed at identifying collaborative and facilitative online instructional strategies that foster a sense of community and increase academic achievement among culturally diverse students. If we can determine how to increase sense of community among minority students in predominately White online learning environments, perhaps we can concentrate on forming strong classroom communities and rely on these communities to promote high achievement among all students.

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