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EVALUATING THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF HYBRID COURSES FOR ADULTS

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Resumo

Este trabalho apresenta uma pesquisa em andamento que se caracteriza como estudo de caso e que utilizará um conjunto de instrumentos desenvolvidos para avaliar cursos híbridos, ou semi-presenciais, para adultos. Os instrumentos de avaliação estão sendo desenvolvidos com base nas teorias construtivistas, integradas à teoria de aprendizagem contextualizada e princípios de experiências diretas de aprendizagem. O estudo também utiliza instrumentos de avaliação disponíveis para educação presencial e educação a distância, dedicando atenção especial ao processo de planejamento, desenvolvimento e revisão dos mesmos para serem utilizados em cursos híbridos para adultos. O processo de avaliação da fundamentação teórica dos cursos híbridos para adultos será realizada durante a fase de análise do estudo de caso. O curso que comporá o estudo de caso utiliza uma variedade de oportunidades de interação instrucional face a face e a distância.

Palavras-chave: educação a distância, educação de adultos, educação universitária.

1- Introduction

There are many urgent challenges in adult higher education. These challenges have taken place in an ever-growing and more mobile society and alongside today's constant and rapidly changing technology and resources. In response to these challenges, community colleges and smaller universities are often at the forefront of innovative methods of expanding learning opportunities, increasing interaction between students and between students and faculty as well as meeting ever-present challenges (Berg, 2001). Despite these various innovations, many community colleges and smaller universities, especially within the most traditional social science disciplines, offer limited amounts of technology-enhanced educational opportunity. Growing importance and immense pressure exists to increase use of technology in classrooms and to offer expanded online options. The importance of distance education will continue to grow. Despite this, this does not necessarily represent the only possible alternative for higher education. A newer practice is evolving. Young (2002) states that what is new to the idea of technology-enhanced education is a systematic growth in hybrid, blended, or mixed-mode, instruction.

A systematic action in higher education toward distance education was developed by 1970 with the establishment of the Open University in the United Kingdom and this practice is well established (Keegan, 1999). Keegan points out, there were many preceding projects, such as correspondence courses, long before that date. Evidence of this growth is the unprecedented expansion of the now single largest private university, the University of Phoenix, arguably the trendsetter for fully online degrees (Stahl, 2001). The movement toward the hybrid course is very recent in both documented practice and available research. Literature on this mode of education begins in 1996, with the majority after 2002. Despite this recent research base, some semblance of the hybrid course is visible as far back as the early 1990s. Early adopters of technology incorporated basic email capabilities and from there added class listservs and distribution lists by the mid to late-90s. Although frequently only offering the basics for a course, such as the syllabi and lecture notes, websites offered by some faculty grew and developed. Just as faculty become comfortable with technology, students push for more technology-integrated solutions (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003). Few pay attention to adult learners' very different nature. Evaluation instruments should transcend disciplines and address this area of concern (Sands, 2002).

CUNY, the largest urban university in the United States, made the conscious decision, in 1999, to create hybrid classes before the development of fully online courses to accommodate their faculty (CUNY Online, 2003). Other colleges are also adding these mixed-mode learning experiences for their students, including the University of Central Florida and the University of Milwaukee. Major conferences related to technology

and education more frequently are beginning to address the ideas, issues and experiences of the hybrid classroom (Granham & Kaleta, 2002). As well, professional groups are also paying attention to what many intuitively knew offered a unique educational experience for students and faculty.

Research and practice are beginning to determine that there does not need to be a division so heartily drawn between the face-to-face classroom and the distance education experience, nor must it always be an either or proposition. As this growing trend toward the hybrid classroom reveals, the future of education should not focus simply on only distance education or on only the traditional face-to-face classroom. The hybrid alternative can represent a best of both worlds situation for the institution, the instructor and the student. This is especially true when considering interaction between students and between students and faculty (Soules, 2000).

It is critical that educators have a broad understanding of the opportunities afforded the student in traditional, distance education, and in hybrid courses. As Soules (2000) explains, it is equally important, and yet perhaps given less attention that, as faculty move into the realm of education that utilizes technology, research-based models for effective evaluation need to be developed as do abundant opportunities for students to interact with one another, with the professor, with the content and with the technology. These entirely different set of issues and challenges begin when stepping out of the four walls of a classroom and into the world of computer mediated instruction and necessitate a new set of approaches. Investigation and application of learning theories, evaluation, and interactive techniques help assure that courses meet goals established for students.

This evaluative study will result in a set of tools that will be available for educators and administrators who are interested in effective evaluation of hybrid courses. Effectively evaluating hybrid, or mixed-mode, courses that encourage interaction will lead to more positive learning experiences for the adult students and also add to the research currently available for hybrid courses.

2- Literature Review

This study is based upon theories that include those of adult learning, or andragogy, especially as related to constructivism, situated cognition, and experiential learning and to interaction and collaborative strategies that are grounded in research and theory (Fenwick, 2000; Johnson, 2002; Kilgore, 2001; Sands, 2002). A large body of knowledge is available on the topics of adult learning and distance education individually, but incorporation of the two fields remains at an early stage. Further, research on the hybrid classroom is in its infancy, empirical studies are somewhat limited, and research-based models for this type of instruction or course evaluation are just emerging. Future research and applied educational practice will greatly benefit from expansion in this knowledge base. A recent volume of the *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* confirms growing interest through a special issue on blended learning environments (Fall, 2003).

The first known use of the term andragogy dates to German educator, Alexander Kapp in 1833 (Reischmann, 2000). According to Bullen (1995) the term andragogy would not reach common usage or the status it holds today until after Malcolm Knowles used the term in his pioneering work, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*. Knowles' work opened up the field of adult education to analysis and scrutiny and legitimized the research of those interested in adult learning theory. Knowles wanted to develop a theory that specifically helped explain the very different world of the adult learner. According to Knowles' theory, adults are much more self-directed than younger learners and they expect to take responsibility for their own decisions (Baumgartner, 2001). Further, Knowles' ideas on andragogy make assumptions about how learning, or curriculum, should be designed to accommodate the adult learner. This means that to teach adults the instructional approach must focus on process and less on the content.

Not everyone agrees that all adult learners follow the patterns described by Knowles. In 1995, Bullen argued that empirical evidence does not exist to support the notion that all adult learners are self-directed, nor that present approaches in education are harming adult learners in any way. He does concede that adults should be offered choice in their educational experiences and calls for more empirical evidence to support the claims of andragogy supporters. Several studies on adult learning since 1995 (Baumgartner, 2001; Fenwick, 2000; Kilgore, 2001; Rose & Leahy, 1997) have expanded earlier work and discussed various aspects of what does apparently still hold true. Their collective research also helps to answer Bullen's (1995) call for more empirical evidence to support andragogical methods.

In regard to hybrid classes, according to Garnham & Kaleta (2002), data that has been analyzed from the University of Central Florida substantiates the contention that students that participate in hybrid courses actually achieve better grades than their counterparts within the face-to-face or fully online courses. Retention data has also been analyzed that indicates that hybrid courses do better in this area than do the fully online or traditional courses as well. Since 1996, Soules (2000) has taught many courses that blend both face-to-face instruction and online components and has written extensively on the potential for collaboration within this format. Spilka (2002) agrees and offers the caveat that when instructors utilize the hybrid model their students are better able to become more independent and interact in a more mature manner with fellow students.

Adult learners experiences within any class should afford self-directed opportunities. Educators should try to find ways for adults to explore meaning through problem solving and experiential learning and should allow for application of content in ways that allows adult learners to discover the context (Spilka, 2002; Jonassen, 2002). Reflective exercises, online discussions, simulations and participation in negotiation of course goals are all proven techniques that lend themselves to the hybrid class. Self-evaluation and reflection are critical in this process and can be done while tying assessment to the instructional strategy. Rose and Leahy (1997) point out that, especially with adult learners, assessment must go beyond testing. This approach can be accomplished through a variety of techniques, not limited to student and instructor checklists and rubrics.

Facione & Facione (1994) created a Holistic Critical Thinking Scoring Rubric that could easily be adapted for use in the hybrid classroom.

Research abounds on the positive relationship between interaction and collaboration within adult education (Andres, 2000). Positive interaction and collaboration can take place whether in a face-to-face classroom or at a distance. Chickering and Gamson (1987) state, that the first two of seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education are, 1) encourage contacts between students and faculty and, 2) develop reciprocity and cooperation among students. In support of this idea, Angelo (1993) discussed another list, based upon educational research, that states, “interaction between teachers and learners is one of the most powerful factors in promoting learning; interaction among learners is another.”

Constructivist theorists state that knowledge is constructed by the learner and that this can occur under a variety of instructional conditions and that collaborative learning and interaction are two established methods of instruction (Dewey & Honebein, 1933, 1996). Bruner (1986), Vygotsky (1987) and others argue that all learning is a social event that inevitably results in some form of social negotiation and collaboration. Experiential learning and situated cognition theorists, argue for interactive and problem-based learning that establishes learning communities (Fenwick, 2000). A proliferation of research-based articles are now available that offer strong evidence of emerging models for interactive online courses (Fulford, & Zhang, 1993; Jonassen, 1995). Graham (2002) confronted the notion that group work within the online environment can effectively be established when the instructor establishes clear structure and uses facilitation techniques. With interaction in hybrid classrooms, both face-to-face techniques and dynamics in the classroom and online must be considered (Johnson, 2002). Also, consideration should be made for students who do not feel at ease with online portions of a hybrid classroom. Soules (1997) developed several strategies that can help to guide and encourage those students to feel they have a voice within the online collaboration. Spilka (2002) points out that in the face-to-face environment students often wait for guidance from the instructor and have difficulty collaborating freely. According to Spilka, blending the course to include online components enforces the notion of ownership for students and encourages them to interact and collaborate with the absence of the instructor. Interaction and collaboration are effective techniques for educating adult learners whether face-to-face or in the online environment.

Although Bullen (1995) is correct, that not all adult learners are the same and should not be pigeonholed, this does not mean that educators should not pay attention to the very different nature of the adult learner. Andragogy offers educators a reminder that those that come to college in online classes or traditional classrooms have unique needs and educators should remain cognizant of this fact. Education has moved away from teacher-focused models and searches for ways to be more student-focused and meaningful for all learners. Adult educators must consider how they are helping or hindering the process of meaning making for learners in which they come into contact. Knowles offered a challenge, to see education from a different lens, the students, instead of our own.

3- The Study

This study's research problem addresses whether adult blended courses take into consideration updated work on adult learning theory by researchers such as Baumgartner (2001) and Kilgore (2001), recent theories on distance education technique by Jonassen (2002), as well as collaborative and interactive learning opportunities suggested by Fulford & Zhang (1993) and Graham (2002). Research questions being addressed include whether adult hybrid courses are developed according to constructivist theories, blended with situated cognition and the principles of experiential learning and, if so, if those courses are developed in such a way that adult learning theory and distance education theory can inform one another. The final question will determine whether the adult hybrid course evaluation instruments can effectively evaluate the hybrid classroom, especially in aspects related to adult learning theory, distance education technique and collaborative and interactive learning opportunities (Honebein, 1996).

The particular courses chosen for this case study offer flexibility and close contact with data and students enrolled and thereby offer a focused opportunity for development of effective instruments based on recent development of evaluative instruments by Burgon & Williams (2003). The courses include various online activities that are designed to enhance the learning experience for students based upon adult learning theories and incorporate Hirumi's Eight Events for Student Centered Learning that are based upon constructivist theories (Hirumi, 2002). In doing so, in both the online and face-to-face components, the courses allow for inclusion of abundant interactive situations among adult students and among students and faculty.

The research methodology utilized for this exploratory study is that of an evaluative case study that utilizes a qualitative approach with the addition of some basic quantitative data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba 1981, 1985). The research study focuses on courses taught Spring semester 2004. Data is being gathered throughout the academic semester with analysis to take place after the course end dates of May, 2004.

This study is based on a qualitative research design, but also includes some support from descriptive quantitative data. The research design is one of an evaluative nature that involves an intensive case study that follows Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic approach. This structure involves defining the problem, then the context and, finally, the issues and the lessons learned. The interactions themselves, within the courses, are understudy through basic quantitative methods of counting the number of interactions that take place through the course sites. This includes a discussion board, emails, online components of group projects, and chats. The qualitative aspect involves the evaluation of interactions, both online and face-to-face, through collection of researcher notes, write-ups, reading and analysis of the transcriptions of these interactions and possible interviews with students to evaluate their perception of the interactive components of the course (Holmberg, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The accessible population for this study is college students enrolled in separate sections of social-science courses taught at a medium-sized

university. The target population consists of students working toward liberal arts undergraduate degrees, some of which are somewhat skilled, and have proven to be relatively successful in the traditional college classroom. This knowledgeable and successful undergraduate group, as well as those of lower skill level, will benefit from the utilization of applicable adult learning theory within the courses. However, these students have had little, to no, exposure to the hybrid classroom as the university itself is just beginning to expand technologically-enhanced opportunities and many of the students are first-generation college students with limited exposure to technology. These students are adult learners who vary greatly in several critical variables found throughout this and other universities of relatively equal size. There is a mix of gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age and academic ability and this is representative of the accessible population and thus allows for drawing conclusions and analysis for this particular case study. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that one of the key features of qualitative sampling is that in most of these types of research small samples of people nested within the embedded context understudy, in this instance the hybrid course, provides an ideal opportunity for in-depth study of a particular case.

4- Instrument Development

Evaluative instruments will begin to be developed as the courses progress with final tools being developed as a result of the analysis of data. This will include development of summary forms and checklist matrices as well as methods for measuring the various interactions. Whenever quantitative data appears helpful in the development of the instrument, such as frequency counts and percentages, they too will be used to develop the instrument. Also, rubrics will be a part of the development of the instrument through the help of available current evaluative rubrics such as developed by Facione and Facione (1994).

5- Conclusion

It is anticipated that, through the use of adult learning theories, especially that of constructivism, situated cognition, and experiential learning suggested by Hirumi (2002), Baumgarner (2001) and Merriam (2001), that hybrid courses rich in interaction will allow for a high sense of collaboration and ownership. It is also anticipated that these types of courses allow the unique adult learner to create their own meaning and develop a context for their learning. Through the development of evaluative tools, specifically designed for hybrid-adult learning courses, this case study provides an opportunity to effectively and meaningfully evaluate this new and growing type of course offering.

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