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A Study of Hybrid Instructional Delivery for Graduate Students in an Educational Leadership Course

Alejandro Garcia

Jesus Abrego

Meagan M. Calvillo

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A. Garcia, University of Texas-Brownsville
J. Abrego, University of Texas-Brownsville
M. Calvillo, University of Texas-Brownsville

Abstract

This paper describes a qualitative study in which ways to improve instructional delivery for graduate students in an Educational Leadership course in Master of Education program in a predominantly Hispanic university located in South Texas were examined. Questions explored perceptions, attitudes, and reasons for choosing a hybrid instructional delivery model. Five themes emerged from the data: flexibility, assumption of responsibility in learning, emphasis on active learning, building peer relationships, and deepened learning.

Cet article décrit une étude qualitative dans laquelle on a examiné de quelles manières on pourrait améliorer la livraison d'enseignement pour les étudiants des cycles supérieurs dans un cours de leadership éducatif au programme de maîtrise en éducation dans une université à prédominance hispanique située au sud du Texas. Les questions ont exploré les perceptions, les attitudes et les raisons pour choisir un modèle de livraison d'enseignement hybride. Cinq thèmes se sont dégagés des données : flexibilité, prise de responsabilité dans l'apprentissage, accent sur l'apprentissage actif, développement des relations entre les pairs, et apprentissage approfondi.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning as a form of distance education has flourished and been recognized as a viable alternate instructional delivery method in higher education. Colleges and universities are currently offering a myriad of online courses and degrees as well as online courses as enhancements to face-to-face instruction (Marder & de Bettencourt, 2012). This latter trend—a mixture of face-to-face and online learning—is commonly referred to as blended or hybrid learning (Oh & Park, 2009). The aim of hybrid learning is to leverage the best practices of face-to-face and online classroom experiences (Aytac, 2009). Hybrid courses hold appeal for graduate students with work and family commitments. The convenience of flexible scheduling, faculty involvement and feedback, and the combination of face-to-face and online interactions are often cited as reasons for graduate students' preferences for hybrid courses (Li & Irby, 2008; Morris & Finnegan, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

Students come to university with a diversity of home experiences and educational backgrounds. They also vary considerably in their learning styles. Studies have shown that students taking online or hybrid university courses are often independent and active learners while other students rely on data, theories, and concepts delivered in traditional lectures (Langley, 2007). In order to better serve the needs of the graduate student, the purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes, perceptions, and preferences for hybrid instruction by graduate students in an educational leadership course.

Statement of the Problem

To improve the delivery of courses and programs, universities around the world have moved towards alternate delivery models such as online learning. The number of American college students taking at least one online course has nearly doubled from 23% to 45% over the last five years (College Explorer, 2013). At the same time, online experiences are not necessarily 100% online. Instead, there has been growth in a combination involving face-to-face and online instruction, otherwise known as hybrid learning (Doering, 2006). Hybrid learning has been shown to be effective because it is an instructional method in which the benefits of face-to-face and online instruction coalesce (Oh & Park, 2007; Finn & Bucceri, 2004). When taking face-to-face university courses, students generally find comfort and a sense of community with their peers and instructor. By contrast, a lack of adequate personal interaction is often the reason why students are not attracted to fully online courses.

In contrast with online learning, hybrid learning is reported to be meeting the social learning needs of students (Langley, 2007). The opportunity for students to interact with each other and their instructors as well as to study online is attracting students to hybrid learning courses in higher education. This phenomenon as it involves graduate students is the focus of the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Instructional Delivery

Recently, many university instructors have placed increased responsibility on students through the prevalence of online tools in courses and course requirements involving online projects. Several studies in higher education have revealed that students are not entirely satisfied with an online education (Schmidt & Werner, 2007; Young & Ku, 2008). Other studies have revealed that a hybrid model which includes both face-to-face and online instruction is a more effective instructional model for university students (Oh & Park, 2009).

One of the most substantive changes in instructional methods in recent years has been the evolution from face-to-face (FTF) lectures to online learning experiences made possible via Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard™. Face-to-face classrooms typically include an instructor who

delivers content, answers questions, and assesses whether learning has taken place (Yang & Chang, 2012). Although some discussions occur in many face-to-face classes, communication of content is often one directional from instructor to students. In general, the opportunity for interaction is greater in online settings.

Online Learning

Online technology has enabled learning to become a more interactive process between instructors and students (Yang & Chang, 2012). Students can now carry out online discussions through discussion boards and wikis; in these settings unlike face-to face classrooms, students can go back to reread and reflect on their ideas and opinions. Based on the emergence of faster and mobile technologies such as tablets and laptops, studies have demonstrated the benefits of online learning and high levels of student satisfaction with online instruction than previously (Walker & Kelley, 2007). Rovai and Grooms (2004) have argued that asynchronous communication tools are valuable for communicating to a group and for facilitating cooperative learning and reflection among students. According to some researchers, these are components that can be lacking in the traditional face-to-face teacher-centric classrooms (Penny & Murphy, 2009). For instance, "[o]nline classes use websites that provide a user-friendly interface and easy access to text, graphics, audio, and video materials that may be used and managed in a consistent and convenient manner" (Zacharis, 2011, p.791). Online courses also include useful tools such as course announcements, places for posting syllabi and notes from instructors, web links, discussion boards, wikis and blogs for synchronous or asynchronous communication (Zacharis, 2011). According to Offenholley (2006), threaded discussion boards can aid in constructing a sense of belonging, thereby promoting higher level thinking skills and peers in working together.

Hybrid Learning

Another trend in contemporary higher education is the combination of face-to-face (FTF) instruction with the online instruction, known as hybrid learning (Doering, 2006). In hybrid instruction, the aim is to improve students' educational experiences by combining the personal interaction of meeting face-to-face with the independence, reflection, and reduced class time of online learning (Doering, 2006). In an early discussion of hybrid learning, Garnham and Kaleta (2002) asserted that many hybrid courses as opposed to face-to-face courses offer benefits such as convenience, interaction, flexibility, and increased learning and retention (as cited in Doering, 2006, p.198). In a hybrid learning environment, the instructor becomes a facilitator while learners engage in computer-mediated communication. The hybrid model supports students' unique learning needs and styles as well. For example, some students' prefer visualization of written material rather than spoken explanations (Mupinga, Nora & Yaw, 2006).

According to Zacharis (2011), many instructors have agreed differences in students' learning styles can be easily addressed with hybrid learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Garrison's (2007) Community of Inquiry framework is ideal in this study because of the collaborative nature of the hybrid graduate course under consideration. As stated by Garrison (2007), "higher education has consistently viewed community as essential to support collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning" (p.61). The Community of Inquiry includes the following three codependent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.

According to Garrison (2007), social presence is the "...ability to project one's self and establish personal and purposeful relationships" (p. 63). In an online environment, students recognize that they are not just there for social purposes, but to belong to a community based on a mutual purpose and inquiry. The purpose of social presence is to build environments for inquiry and reflective discussions so that students can cooperatively reach educational goals (Garrison, 2007). In order for these types of discussions to occur, risk free and openness in communication is required. Notably, such discussions are possible via online discussion boards and threads.

The second element, cognitive presence, is defined as "the exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry" (Garrison, 2007, p. 65). By creating a triggering event such as a discussion board question, the instructor can prompt students to begin their exploration of a topic of inquiry. Students then proceed to form connections and apply new ideas during their class discussions and discussion boards.

The third and final element of the Community of Inquiry model is teaching presence. It is defined as "the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 5). Teaching presence involves the three elements of the Community of Inquiry framework in a balanced relationship that enables achievement of planned outcomes based on student need (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). In a hybrid environment, teaching presence does not derive solely from the instructor; it also comes from the students themselves. In a study involving hybrid instruction, teaching presence was evident when students commented that, all of the students contributed by bringing their own insights and knowledge from their personal experiences to the broader learning experience. Further evidence of teaching presence was provided when students expressed appreciation for immediate feedback from the instructor who also provided clarification by correcting misunderstandings in order to make effective connections (Akyol, Garrison & Ozden, 2009).

The Community of Inquiry model has drawn much interest in relation to hybrid learning communities. In particular, institutions of higher education have embraced this construct as a viable theoretical framework for improving instruction. Researchers have proposed that a relationship between student satisfaction and having a sense of community is vital to learning (Rovai, 2002, Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007).

METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative approach was considered to be the most suitable design for conducting this research. A qualitative approach is used when an idea is not well understood in the research literature. Qualitative research is also appropriate when the researcher is unaware of the variables that need to be explored (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative studies provide researchers with a means to study and examine issues and people. This study utilized a qualitative approach that led to the emergence of themes based on responses to the research questions in addition to text analyses of transcribed focus group audio recordings.

Setting and Participants Selection

The setting for this study was a predominantly Hispanic institution in Texas. As part of a student satisfaction survey delivered at the end of the fall 2013 semester, graduate students in Educational Leadership courses were queried about their instructional preferences. Purposeful sampling methods were selected in order to study a phenomenon where participants' insights can lead to "information rich" findings (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission was granted for this study under an expedited review process. The specific sample of students was selected from the population of students in the Graduate Educational Leadership Program enrolled in the evening classes. Forty-eight graduate students enrolled in two educational leadership graduate hybrid evening courses were invited to participate in the study. Students from the courses who consented were then asked to participate in an hour-long focus group that was audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed for perceptions, attitudes and preferences of hybrid instruction.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in the focus group:

1.   What are the students' instructional preferences: face-to-face, hybrid, or 100% on-line learning?

2.   What attitudes and perceptions do the students have in relation to each instructional method?

3.   What factors influenced the students' preferences?

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

A qualitative approach to research utilizes a methodical approach to collecting, organizing and analyzing a large amount of data typically derived from transcribed text from audio recordings. According to Bowen (2010), this research approach involves examining phenomena in the natural setting. Bogdan and Biklin (1982) explain that particular words, phrases, patterns of behavior, ways of thinking, and events tend to repeat and stand out during a focus group interview. In this study, the audio recording of the focus group session was transcribed and then imported into the qualitative software, NVivo 10. Once data were organized into convenient units through coding, interpretation of the data commenced (Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005). According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), the key during data interpretation is that the researcher views all data through specific codes at the same time. Codes serve as markers for the researcher and assist in the illumination of themes after overall review and interpretive analysis of the text.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Research Question #1

Based on the student satisfaction survey completed in fall 2013, 95% of the 48 participants chose a hybrid delivery model over the other two models.

Research Questions #2 and 3

The following reports the students' attitudes and perceptions in relation to their preferences in learning. Analysis of the focus group data revealed the following themes: family, flexibility, and meeting the student's needs. As the 95% preference rate for hybrid instruction suggests, this discussion will focus almost exclusively on hybrid learning.

Family

According to the first theme, a hybrid experience allowed students to spend time with family while maintaining the traditional graduate school experience. Students explained that taking a hybrid class was a very positive experience and enabled "…extra time to focus on family and school." One student stated the following:

> *. . . having time to balance obligations, class and family is important for a person with a professional degree. Our jobs are very demanding and time becomes limited as we struggle to accomplish tasks. Hybrid classes allow professionals to work on assignments and achieve success.*

The students emphasized that hybrid instruction enabled them to attend their children's extracurricular activities. Opportunities for completing online assignments without negative impact on family schedules were welcomed and appreciated. One student explained this idea as follows:

> As a father of four children, ages 6 to 14, and no daily schedule is ever the same. Hybrid courses allow me to adapt to the constant time changes of my children and I am able to complete my assignments.

Flexibility

The second theme was flexibility. Students appreciated that hybrid courses provide flexibility within their personal time and careers. For example, one student commented that:

> . . . in my opinion, the flexibility of this course meets the needs of our group Nothing is set in stone and therefore we can work online and still accomplish our goals.

Another student reflected on flexibility this way:

> Face-to-face could be an asset to instruction for students are able to present feedback. However, online activities allow for the flexibility throughout the semester. So I think a hybrid course, in my opinion, is one that is flexible and meets needs of the group at the moment.

In particular, asynchronous courses provided students flexibility to work from home and around their work schedules. Students discussed how they could log into their course site during the day or evening and read materials, download presentations, view YouTube multimedia clips, or post on discussion boards. One student remarked, "I can log in anytime, it doesn't matter what time of the day it is. I could be there at two o'clock in the morning [sic]."

Participants also viewed the hybrid model as ideal because it allowed them additional times to interact with the instructor. When further explanation of a concept was needed, the student could ask for clarification in the face-to-face class time that was also part of the course. In addition, the hybrid model facilitated more time for reflection and comprehension of the material presented on Blackboard. Students could view materials on Blackboard, reflect on them, and bring areas of concern forward during the face-to-face portions of the classes. Students also found it convenient to have access to the presentations on Blackboard while they also participated in the face-to-face lectures or discussions. Access to Blackboard helped students in taking notes from the presentation slides in order to make purposeful connections to content during face-to-face interactions.

Meeting Students' Needs

The last theme was meeting the students' needs. Students expressed the opinion that the hybrid model was preferred since it enabled them to "tailor our time based to our needs." In particular, the balance between online instruction and face-to-face instruction helped the students meet their time needs. Most students reiterated that it was

> *. . . very precious to have that extra time where you can actually say okay now I'm going to focus on school, and now I'm going to focus on my work and on the family [sic]. So having that balance of when you can do certain things and not being obligated to be in class every certain day makes it a lot easier as a family person and of course as a professional as well.*

One participant discussed the effects of lack of time brought on by the typical demands of a professional career and going to school and how the hybrid model made a difference. She commented that

> . . . because many times as professionals uh [sic] we don't have the time to go to class because of certain things that are demanded by our jobs. Having these types of courses helps a lot, in particular the professionals in this particular career [sic].

By contrast, the students also thought that fully online course experiences were not as powerful as hybrid learning experiences. They pointed out that, even though fully online courses may have rigorous and rich content, they do not provide the same opportunities for verbal discussion as hybrid courses. The online component in the hybrid model assisted students in preparing and refining their comments so they could present their final thoughts in a very thorough manner complete with citations and references. This strategy, according to the students, enriched the whole experience. It was this balance made possible through face-to-face interaction and online enhancements that met some of their cognitive needs. The discussion boards enabled learning to continue and to be continuous. As one student stated:

> . . . even though you don't come to class physically, assignments are posted and we must keep up with the readings. We must also go into discussion boards to response to questions and other student's comments.

Discussion boards were also important to the students' social needs. Through discussion boards, students interacted with classmates in a direct manner that the face-to-face component would not ordinarily accommodate. The students also discussed their opportunities to reflect on and reply to each other's discussion board postings. Further, the hybrid model facilitated easier disagreement than face-to-face discussions.

Student's needs were also met academically since the hybrid model provided time for students to learn on their own. Students recalled how they felt motivated when they had time to reflect and read on their own. One student commented on this idea in the following way:

> The hybrid model facilitated my learning due to posting discussions online. I took responsibility for my own learning. So, the way it helped me is it made me take responsibility because I knew there was going to come a time when there was going to be an activity online and I had to know my material [sic].

Learning styles came into play as well. In particular, hybrid instruction generally meets students' various learning styles by presenting lessons through a wide variety of media and instructional strategies (Langley, 2007):

> I'm a visual learner, so I get to go back and refer to it, or download and print it myself . . . with the face-to-face I feel like a lot of the resources they're kind of given hard copies… I try and stay organized but let's be honest, sometimes I lose them. So I like the hybrid because it makes the resources . . . readily available to you because they're always there and you know where to find them [sic].

DISCUSSION

Based upon the analysis of the focus group sessions, several areas are recommended for further exploration. The first message derived from the study is that hybrid learning courses are appealing due to their flexibility. Hybrid learning affords older students flexibility and accommodates their unique family, life, and work requirements. They offer greater flexibility for the scheduling of learning activities than other models. As noted during the focus group interview, students stated that the need for flexibility in scheduling is not just about work but the student's personal life, including health and personal issues. The flexibility of accessing materials online facilitates a learning experience that is unbound by time or distance. In hybrid situations, students have the ability to learn seven days a week or at any time during the day. Thus, learning can take place independent of time and space. The flexibility of hybrid learning brings together the best of face-to-face and fully online courses.

The graduate students in this study agreed that a hybrid course demands greater responsibility on the part of the student compared to the traditional face-to-face courses in which the instructor delivers content. Hybrid learning includes opportunities for instructors to change this pattern by becoming learning facilitators who engage with students via online communication. Instead of the instructor providing the majority of course content, students assume an interactive role by working on assignments using tools such as discussion boards, blogs and wikis. Hybrid learning is a means for students to become active as opposed to passive learners. Students are required to be more responsible

in monitoring and gauging their progress given an element of freedom with their assignments and online activities. Active learning nurtures students by engaging them in the learning process and occurs when students reflect and participate in learning activities that provide collaboration and interaction opportunities.

Although traditional face-to-face classrooms offer occasions for peer interaction and building relationships, hybrid instruction also benefits students in building relationships and deepening their learning. Social interactions and relationship building are important outcomes in the hybrid setting. In many face-to-face classes, the instructor is the only one with access to student assignments. Students do not get to view peers' assignments and provide valuable feedback to others. Conversely, peer learning is a cooperative learning strategy that may improve the quality of student-to-student interactions.

Analytical thinking is heightened when students engage in rich and meaningful discussions. Through blogs and discussion boards, students are afforded opportunities to interact with each other. Discussion boards prompt students to read, reflect, and respond to classmates on course content issues. With wikis, students post information or opinions and then collaborate to build a group-constructed body of knowledge. Discussions can be augmented through chat rooms and other tools, thus facilitating greater social interaction and collaboration compared to face-to-face or online courses. Once comments are posted online, other occurrences of dialogue can continue in the face-to-face component of a hybrid course.

The hybrid instructional delivery experience also deepens understanding of course content through the interactions experienced online and face-to-face. One way this can be accomplished is through dialogues and discussion threads posted online. In a fully online course, collaborations between peers may be arduous, curbing the social aspect of learning. However, the combination of hybrid and face-to-face instruction allows for opportunities to provide learning resources and activities for effective collaboration for all students in a social context. When the instructor poses a question in the classroom, students in a hybrid class can be given a time and a virtual place for reflection which deepens their understanding. These conditions would not ordinarily be available in a fully face-to-face or fully online setting. This critical reflection fosters retrospective thinking on previous learning

A challenge in hybrid delivery is the task of blending effective face-to-face and online learning strategies without taking away from either approach. The instructional design for the hybrid course calls for a deliberate and ongoing discussion between not only the instructor and the class but also between just the other members of the class. Students need to continue their discussion and projects online beyond the confines of the classroom.   Collaborative group work needs to occur in a broader social context in which students are given time to share and apply their collective learning online and via face-to-face. Student interactions via discussion board, blogs, and wikis can be used to encourage students to take advantage of additional time to review, plan, write and discuss key concepts in depth with their classmates and their instructor. The hybrid model ensures that a diverse set of knowledge and skills are

experienced by a group. While face-to-face instruction enables students to meet weekly, the interaction and discussion between students and students and between students and the instructor is limited only to the classroom and in-class activities. Outside activities and learning are generally not as effective without a medium, such as Blackboard, to document the breadth and depth of inquiry for deep learning described by Garrison (2007) as the cognitive aspect of the Community of Inquiry framework.

The hybrid model allows for greater flexibility, social interaction and engagement among students, and deeper learning experiences that otherwise might not occur in other instructional delivery methods. The design of a hybrid model, ideally, includes the three elements of the Community of Inquiry in an integrated way. For example, social presence is evidenced as graduate students interact with their colleagues from class to respond to a topic or issue and develop solutions within the context of their real-world personal experiences. It is sustained by their interactions in online groups. Thus, the hybrid model, via tools such as Blackboard, provides a format to collaboratively and collectively build environments for further inquiry and reflective discussions.

Cognitive presence is also a key element in the hybrid model. In the course considered in this paper, students are encouraged to explore and collaboratively construct a common language with which to solve and address issues in educational leadership. Given the hybrid course model, students explore, probe, make connections and collectively apply new ideas over an extended period of time, not just in one class period. Learning is dynamic and inclusive of diverse views developed over time.

Finally, the hybrid model involves teaching presence since students are required to purposefully design their discussions and recommendations based on their readings, interactions and informed discussions with each other. Achievement of learning outcomes is based on meaningful interactions and purposeful participation of all members of the community. The question of whether this kind of learning as it can occur in graduate courses would work as well in undergraduate courses with the heavy emphasis on content covered in undergraduate courses is an important one for colleges and universities to consider. The hybrid model has great potential; a larger class size, such as in an undergraduate course, might affect the level of effectiveness. Logistically, it would be challenging for a professor to follow a discussion board of 75 participants in an undergraduate class and provide immediate and purposeful feedback. Thus, the hybrid learning described here is more likely to be effective with a smaller class size; when the number of students in the class is smaller, the class and discussion is more manageable. By comparison, the lecture approach commonly used in undergraduate courses would not allow graduate students to develop the deep understanding and application of specific content, knowledge and skills they require.

Undergraduate students, however, would benefit greatly from the use of a hybrid model as long as the class size is manageable. The creation of student-specific learning communities through a hybrid model could be of particular value to freshman students. Regarding whether older and younger students learn

differently, best practices in adult education repeatedly stress the importance of interactive learning. Adults learn best when they are involved in their own learning; this applies to undergraduate and graduate students. Hence, more work on the benefits of hybrid learning as it supports interaction is recommended at the undergraduate as well as the graduate level.

Implications for Practice

Although the sample size of this study was a limitation and the study focused on students in graduate courses in one university, some implications can be derived related to meeting the needs of the graduate students. For the university and students who participated in the study, insights into the attitudes, perceptions and preferences of the graduate students for hybrid instruction have been realized. Given the success of hybrid learning models in graduate education, attention is being drawn to today's diverse educational landscape and the needs of adult learners. As the study has shown, hybrid instruction can be valuable in meeting the needs of graduate students in relation to family life, flexibility, and work responsibilities. Further work is needed to ensure that the design and instructional methods used in hybrid models support deep understanding of course content through social interactions both in class and online. Finally, exploration of hybrid instruction in undergraduate courses based on the Community of Practice model (Garrison, 2007) is also recommended.

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Authors

Alejandro Garcia is an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership at The University of Texas-Brownsville. E-mail: alejandro.garcia@utb.edu

Jesus Abrego is an Associate Professor in Educational Leadership at The University of Texas-Brownsville. E-mail: chuey.abrego@utb.edu

Megan M. Calvillo is a graduate student at The University of Texas-Brownsville. E-mail: mgn5725@yahoo.com