Achievement in Online vs. Traditional Classes

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INTRODUCTION

Universities and colleges constantly attempt to address student needs by offering courses in various time frames. Because it is difficult for teachers to enroll and attend classes during the “normal” two- or three-day format for 15 weeks, graduate classes in education are typically offered as a one evening per week class. In summer, when teachers usually are not working, classes may be offered in an alternative format meeting for longer periods of time in each class session but for fewer weeks. There are, however, questions concerning the changes in class scheduling. Although the seat time in an eight-week extended period class is equivalent to a 15-week class, are the learning outcomes equivalent? According to Rayburn and Rayburn (1999), if only responses on multiple choice Accounting exams were considered, there was no effect of class length. If, however, problem solving was also considered, there was a statistically significant effect based on length of the class.

In addition, in recent years, there has been widespread interest in using technology to solve some of education’s critical problems—increasing student learning, providing flexible formats, making classes more accessible for diverse students (e.g., older, working)—to improve the current and projected shortage of teachers and school administrators. Many methods (e.g., online courses, interactive video) have been utilized to provide a more flexible format and to reduce travel time for commuting students. With the use of Web-based technology or online courses, seat time is not known. If a student accesses the particular lesson online for an hour, the instructor does not know if the distant student was really reading the lesson—or simply left the computer on. Consequently, seat time cannot be a criterion for these classes. This suggests a further question, if online methods are used, are learning outcomes equivalent?

The current study was an attempt to answer these questions when dealing with a master’s-level educational research class. Specifically, the purpose of the current study was to determine if there were differences in the mid-term and final examination results of the class between a traditional 15-week class, two eight-week intensive summer classes, and an eight-week online summer class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The amount of time spent in a classroom (commonly called seat time) has been a standard for judging the value of a class for years. Schools have established policies that if a student is absent for a specified number of classes, the student cannot pass the class—regardless of knowledge. Higher education institutions have used the number of minutes of classroom meetings to determine the hours of credit for a class. Yet, many professionals have argued that performance—that is, attaining objectives—should be the focus of evaluation. Carnevale (2001) suggested assessing outcomes rather than mode of instruction or time in study. Seemingly in response to this, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (Performance, not seat time, 2000) has shifted from assessment of seat time to performance-based evaluation. Consequently, the new NCATE standards emphasize results that show the student’s competence rather than seat time (Equity and high standards, 2000). This situation has encouraged the development of Web-based classes.

Distance Education

The basic criterion for distance education is distance between the teacher and the student. Distance education is not new. This technique was begun in the 19th century with correspondence education (Klesius, Homan, & Thompson, 1997). It has, however, changed from the correspondence delivery method, through radio methods, to today’s computer and interactive video techniques.

Although more classes are being offered via distance education (Tucker, 2000), the findings regarding the effectiveness of the courses are mixed. For example,
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