A Synchronous Pedagogy to Improve Online Student Success

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ABSTRACT

Despite continuous advances in the Internet and educational technology, the primary online pedagogy remains asynchronous chat, posted learning materials, and video clips. Blended learning was one approach universities have added to improve student success in online courses. The purpose of this 3-year pilot study was to evaluate the benefit of fusing weekly video classes within an online doctoral program as an alternative to on-campus classes. The sessions incorporated an interactive, student-centered pedagogy formulated to strengthen research and writing skills, increase student motivation, and reduce isolation. The level of student-student and student-teacher interaction was equivalent to face-to-face learning. Findings indicated that student satisfaction, motivation, skills, and scholarship increased. As personal bonds developed among students and faculty, student isolation decreased. The results of this preliminary study suggest that online video classes may be a cost-effective alternative to blended learning.

KEYWORDS

Attrition, Blended Learning, E-Mentoring, Fusion Learning, Isolation

INTRODUCTION

For decades doctoral programs have struggled with high attrition rates at the dissertation stage. According to the Council of Graduate Schools (2010), only 57% of doctoral students in science, engineering, and mathematics completed the degree within ten years – The completion in the social sciences and humanities was only 49%. Figure 1 shows that the mean time to complete the doctorate in education has decreased, but was still 11.9 year in 2016, which was twice as long as the time to complete a doctorate in engineering (National Science Foundation, 2018). Attrition was also higher for part-time students (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011) and students enrolled in online doctoral programs. Those students had attritions rates 10 to 15 percent higher than students in on-campus programs (Kennedy, Terrell, & Lohle, 2015).

As the student market ages, working adults present additional attrition challenges. Working students with families must balance career and home obligations with their academic responsibilities. Staying in contact with their doctoral advisor (chair) is more difficult for students at a distance. Another common problem for older students that have been away from school is the need to strengthen their academic-writing and research skills. Weak writing skills result in more drafts, and poor research skills increase the time to complete the proposal and the data analysis. Students also find the transition from taking structured courses to writing the dissertation or doctoral study challenging because of the need to work independently (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The doctoral study process is unlike what students encountered previously in courses and even in writing a masters’ thesis. The
dissertation requires untested research, writing, and time management skills that can be overwhelming. The problem is further compounded for students writing at a distance because they have less access to their doctoral advisor and doctoral peers, and therefore require even greater time management skills (Bawa, 2016; Tucker, 2012).

Universities have responded to the attrition problem and needs of older students with a variety of innovative practices that include earlier opportunities to engage in research before beginning the doctoral study, peer tutoring, mentoring, and writing assistance. Mentoring has been partially successful, but its effectiveness depends upon the nature of the mentoring. Frequently there is a disconnect between the role of a mentor (Martin, Gourwitz, & Hall, 2016; Mullen & Tuten, 2010), and the mentor’s responsibilities Gaffney (1995). Berry (2017) found students frequently had to rely on peers for information and support because faculty advisors were often unavailable. Part-time working students and students enrolled in online degrees, have even less access to their advisors.

There is a need not only increase completion rates but also to reduce the time to graduate. A student that takes eight years to graduate in a private or for-profit doctoral program can owe more than a hundred thousand dollars in tuition. For a middle-aged student, it is uncertain whether the anticipated salary increase will offset the added expense of the doctorate. Therefore, by helping students to develop the required dissertation skills in less time, the students can stay motivated and hopefully completing the dissertation in less time, which will reduce the cost of the doctorate.

In this study, the researcher created a weekly video conference for doctoral students enrolled full time in an online doctoral program. The class, which was delivered on Skype, was designed to strengthen writing and research skills, enable students to interact within peer groups, and build student-advisor bonds through ongoing face-to-face interaction. The video sessions were purposefully personal, interactive, and relaxed to motivate students to attend, become actively involved, and engage with other students, advisors, and doctoral specialists. The goal was for the video session to equal or surpass the level of synchronous interaction experienced in the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom. In fact, the virtual class became so engaging that non-driving students were motivated to participate on the way home from work, students participated during dinner, and some just before going to sleep. The pedagogy did not involve lecture and passive webinar approaches. Instead, the video classes used a student-centered method of instruction that was highly interactive and formulated to strengthen dissertation skills. Skill development was an essential ingredient because, as doctoral advisors know, knowledge of the APA rules does not equate with being able to write correct citations and references. That takes practice.

Figure 1. Time to complete a doctorate [Adapted from National Science Foundation, (2018)]
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