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Distance Education: Teaching Practice Methods Using Interactive Television

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Introduction

Distance education literature suggests that social work educators have been reluctant to teach practice methods using distance technology, indicating that practice courses are the least often taught as compared to HBSE, policy, and research, and that MSW programs were less likely to engage in this practice than were BSW programs (Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, & Napoletano Flynn, 1998). "Although there is no hard data, social work educators seem to have a strong bias that the content of these courses can only be introduced, conveyed, and reinforced through face-to-face learning" (Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, & Napoletano Flynn, 1998, p. 75).

Some authors (Mc Henry & Bozik, 1995) have indicated that distance classrooms lack adequate interaction, both between sites and within each site. Gehlauf, Shatz, and Frye (1991) noted that "participants reported a reduction in a variety of classroom interaction activities (e.g., small group and simulation activities)" (p.23). Smith and Wingerson (2000) found that interactive television results in a decrease in reception of nonverbal communication, especially facial and fine motor, across the screen. The authors suggested that the loss of nonverbal communication can lead to significant misunderstandings between the sites in a distance education classroom.

Thyer, Polk, and Gaudin (1997) and Thyer, Artelt, Markward, and Dozier (1998) found that students favored live instruction over distance learning when compared using the same instructor in both classrooms in practice methods courses. Kreuger and Stretch (2000) recommended that social work educators maintain in-person-based instruction, cautioning that faculty are at risk of becoming isolated from their students and the community. The authors endorse "on-site instruction in live practice settings such as hospices, hospitals and neighborhood locales, jails, or homeless shelters to illustrate real-time, real-situation intervention" (p. 111).

However, other authors disagree on this issue. Conklin (1993) stated that "using interactive television as a medium, the integration and enhancement of classroom theory and field education practice can be facilitated" (p.43). Moore and Kearsley (1996) compared distance learners with face-to-face students and concluded that "there are no significant differences between learning in the two different environments, regardless of the nature of the content, the educational level of the students, or the media involved" (p. 62). Several studies have demonstrated that students in distance education programs attain comparable knowledge and skills when compared with students in traditional classrooms (Barker & Platten, 1988; Kabat & Friedel, 1990; Ritchie & Newby, 1989).

Blakely (1994) reported that there has been success in the delivery of foundation courses but called for research in the area of teaching mental and emotional assessment. He contended, "The technology is available; what remains to be done is to develop the policy and plan necessary to use the technology effectively in delivering the curricula" (Blakely, 1994, p. 6).

This study describes the outcomes of two first-year practice method courses taught through interactive television in a three-year, part-time MSW program. Comparisons were made between distance students and on-campus students (taught in a traditional classroom) on grades, faculty evaluations, and field instructors' evaluations.

Literature Review

Conklin (1993) reviewed over 200 articles and concluded that "distance education can be used to

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teach social work students in colleges and universities as well as to train social work practitioners in the workplace" (p. 51). Conklin reported that no articles were found that indicated that social work teachers should not use distance education. The advantages noted were overcoming geographic barriers, financial savings as a result of decreased travel expenses, and exemplary teaching being presented to a larger audience or videotaped and used an infinite number of times.

Blakely (1992) proposed a model for distance education delivery in social work education. He advocated for objectives in distance social work education as follows: (1) the program should not vary from the objectives of the face-to-face program; (2) the mission of the program would be the same as the on-campus program; (3) the admissions process, course content, course requirements, and faculty would be identical to the on-campus program; (4) the course assignments and grading would be identical at on-campus and off-campus sites; and (5) the field work requirements would be identical at on-campus and off-campus sites (Blakely, 1992). However, Blakely (1992) indicated that the educators would need to deliver the content in a different format in the distance education program, including the use of discussion leaders in the classroom and field instructors to monitor the development of practice skills.

Blakely and Schoenherr (1995) explored telecommunication technologies in social work distance education. These authors concluded that "probably the most appropriate configuration of a distance education program for social work would be compressed video...This technology is highly interactive, allowing students and the instructor at the originating site to see and talk to students at the remote sites in real time" (p. 9). In addition, the authors recommended the use of on-site instructors, who would be responsible for distribution of handouts, collecting written assignments, monitoring exams, acting as discussion leaders, and facilitating experiential activities. These authors concluded that "this method of education, particularly the use of compressed video, can provide a learning experience that is equal to that of a program presented in the traditional face-to-face classroom" (p. 10).

The University of North Dakota has offered both graduate and undergraduate courses in social work through the use of compressed video technology since 1990. Heitkamp (1995) stated of the distance education program, "evaluation results have been very positive, and students are generally grateful for the opportunity to enroll in graduate courses closer to their home" (p. 10). The distance students were found to perform as well academically as the on-campus students, and there were no differences found in student satisfaction between the two groups.

Kelly (1993) used an on-site coordinator to facilitate discussion groups held at each site in an Iowa distance education MSW program. She stated that a lecture was held for one hour, followed by a question-and-answer period over the technology, and an off-camera discussion of the content at each site. Blakely and Schoenherr (1995) supported the use of on-site instructors for facilitating experiential activities in social work distance education. Rooney and Bibnus (1995) used facilitators to lead discussions at local sites in a distance education program in child welfare. Michigan State University offers an MSW distance program using compressed video technology and faculty coordinators for all courses taught in the curriculum, including practice methods (Freddolino, 1996). Freddolino and Sutherland (2000) concluded that there were no statistically significant differences in students' overall perceptions of the classroom environments between distance and on-campus sites.

Coe and Elliott (1999) evaluated a graduate-level direct practice course taught through satellite television instruction. Results were compared with an on-campus direct practice course. Findings indicated that distance students were equivalent to on-campus students in terms of grade outcomes, interaction with the instructor and classmates, and perceptions of the instructor. The authors concluded

that "the format [satellite television] for teaching a practice course via distance learning appears to be just as effective as the on-campus program format in terms of student learning"(p. 363).

Hollister and McGee (2000) evaluated a graduate-level course on child welfare and substance abuse taught over interactive television. Authors reported that distance students' performance and course grades were similar to those of on-campus students. The results indicated that "interactive television compromised neither instructor-student communication, nor the amount that students learned" (p. 417).

Ouellette, Sells, and Rittner (1999) described a model of teaching an advanced practice methods course using a combination of interactive television and web-based instruction. The authors found that most students involved in this technology-supported course reported a positive learning experience. Authors noted that students seemed to adapt more quickly to interactive television, which was similar to the traditional classroom (i.e., teacher-driven), and had more difficulty adapting to the web-based instruction, which was a self-directed (i.e., student-driven) mode of learning.

Several authors have suggested that the fundamental issues in distance education are teaching methods and the new faculty roles (Purdy & Wright, 1992; Whitaker, 1995; Gaskin, 1994). Purdy and Wright (1992) stated that "it is not that the technology underpinning distance education drives the system but rather that fundamental changes in teaching style, technique, and motivation must take place to make the new 'classrooms' of the present and future function effectively" (p. 4). Guskin (1994) described the new faculty role as a manager of a learning environment, rather than simply a presenter of information. Beaudoin (1990) cautioned that if faculty do not adapt to new roles "... the technology probably will not be used effectively and learning goals will be compromised" (p. 22). Olcott, Jr. and Wright (1995) presented an institutional framework to increase faculty participation in distance education by addressing policy on tenure and promotion, compensation models, training, and release time that support distance teaching.

The present study utilized a model of distance education, which included compressed video technology and on-site coordinators as assistant instructors in the classroom. Additionally, the course instructors traveled to the distance learning sites every other week, in order to monitor the development of practice skills.

Methods

This study describes the outcomes of two first-year practice methods courses taught through interactive television in a three-year, part-time MSW program. The courses were offered in a summer block field placement model, wherein students attended field work four days each week and attended practice methods and seminar class one day each week. Class days were scheduled with two four-hour practice methods sessions, with a two-hour field seminar held between practice methods sessions. Each practice methods course met for eight hours each day, for six weekly meetings. Students were located in two rural communities and were linked through compressed video (CODEC) technology. The instructor traveled between the two sites, having face-to-face contact with students on alternating weeks. All lectures took place over interactive television, while experimental exercises were carried out off-camera at each site, monitored by the site coordinators. Several practice methods videotapes were utilized; the tapes were shown off-camera at each site, and the discussions regarding practice methods were lead by the course instructor over interactive television. Case vignette materials were utilized in small groups, which were monitored by the site coordinators, and discussions regarding the vignettes were lead over interactive television by the course instructor.

The comparison group was taught in a traditional face-to-face classroom at an urban university site, utilizing the same academic model (three-year, part-time summer-block field placement), and the

same course descriptions and learning objectives. Both professors had experience teaching with each of the courses previously. The distance professor adapted the teaching methods to include the use of overhead transparencies for all lecture materials and weekly consultations with site coordinators to prepare for the experimental exercises. Due to technical failures, last-minute changes in the course schedule sometimes had to be made, such as showing a videotape prior to a lecture, or perhaps having an off-camera discussion of a videotape with site coordinators, rather than with the instructor over interactive television. Telephone contact and fax were available at all times in each distance classroom, despite the occasional failure of the interactive television; therefore, alternative lesson plans could be developed and monitored by the course instructor. In addition to leading experiential exercises, site coordinators were responsible for proctoring exams, handing out written materials, assisting students in clarifying and integrating the concepts presented, and acting as intermediaries between the course instructor and the students regarding students' needs and progress.

The courses taught using interactive television were the first two in a three-course practice sequence. The third practice course included a focus on group work, which had an experiential component involving student group participation. Therefore, at each site, the third practice course was taught by a local faculty member of the participating universities. The first course was entitled "Foundations of Generic Social Work Practice: A Cross-Cultural Perspective." This course included an introduction of the assumptions, concepts, principles, and values of social work practice. Models for practice and professional relationships were discussed. Interviewing skills were taught and practiced in experiential exercises. Effective practice models with people of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds were presented. The course included an exploration of racism, sexism, ageism, and heterosexual bias. The second course was entitled "Direct Intervention: Focus on Children, Youth, and Families." This course examined the various practice strategies in depth: behavioral, systems, cognitive, and psychodynamic. Interventions were presented, including cross-cultural perspectives.

In this study, subjects were 41 distance education students, who were located at two rural universities linked through interactive television. The on-campus comparison group consisted of 35 students located at an urban university in a traditional classroom. Distance education students were slightly older [(DE) M=41.15, (OC) M=36.70], more likely to be female [(DE) M=85.45, (OC) M=66.70], and more likely to be non-Hispanic white [(DE) M=84.95, (OC) M=66.70] than on-campus students. In addition, they were more likely to have majored in social

Table 1: Student Characteristics by Group*

Characteristic	DE (n=41)	OC (n=35)
Gender		
Female	85.45	66.70
Age, Mean	41.15	36.70
Ethnicity		
African American	0.00	11.10
Asian American	1.85	5.60
Hispanic/Latino	3.70	11.10
Native American	2.40	0.00
Non-Hispanic White	84.95	66.70
Other	7.15	5.60
Undergraduate Major		
Social Work	20.20	11.10
Years Social Work		
Experience, Mean	7.05	7.40
Undergraduate GPA	3.15	3.10
GRE Verbal, Mean	471.50	448.00
GRE Quantitative, Mean	426.50	457.00
GRE Analytic, Mean	491.50	486.00

**DE = Distance education rural students*
**OC = On-campus urban comparison group*

work as undergraduates [(DE) M=20.20, (OC) M=11.10]. No differences were apparent in years of social work experience, undergraduate GPAs, or GRE scores (**Table 1**).

Three measures were used for comparison in this study: grades, course evaluations, and field instructors' evaluations. Mean grades were compiled for each course for each instructor. Grades were computed on a 0-4 scale. Faculty course evaluations were used, which measure eight criteria, including an overall teaching effectiveness score. Mean teaching effectiveness scores were compared for each course for each instructor. Field instructor evaluations were compared in each of the sixteen content areas, in addition to comparison of the overall evaluation scores provided by the field instructors (**Table 2**). Content areas were rated on a 1-5 scale (1=lowest, 5=highest).

Table 2: Field Instructor Evaluations by Group*

Item	DE (n=41)	OC (n=35)
Integrates Ethics and Values of Profession	3.99	3.96
Distinguishes Personal and Professional Roles	3.74	3.97
Demonstrates Motivation as Learner	3.90	4.02
Demonstrates Self-awareness	3.68	3.85
Uses Field Instruction Effectively	3.90	4.05
Knows Agency Goals, Mission and Structure	3.70	3.89
Knows Community Served by Agency	3.62	3.71
Identifies with Agency	3.73	3.65
Demonstrates Ability in Written Communication	3.75	3.72
Demonstrates Ability in Oral Communication	3.84	3.97
Plans and Organizes Work	4.15	4.18
Demonstrates Professional Use of Self	3.70	3.84
Understands and Applies Theory	3.71	3.81
Shows Skill in Interviewing Techniques	3.54	3.73
Shows Skill in Assessment and Diagnosis	3.54	3.68
Shows Skill in Intervention Process	3.81	3.81
Total Evaluation Score	3.69	3.69

**DE = Distance education rural students*
**OC = On-campus urban comparison group*

Results

The comparison between the distance education students and the same-model, on-campus students showed no differences in student grades in either of the practice methods courses. In the first practice course, distance students' mean grade was 3.85 and the on-campus students showed a mean grade of 3.71. In the second practice course, the distance students' mean grade was 3.77 and the on-campus students showed a mean grade of 3.69.

For the course evaluations, significance testing was not possible since the data were aggregated by course, rather than by individual student. Course evaluations by distance students appear equivalent to those of on-campus students. In the first practice course, distance education students showed an overall mean of 4.92, as compared to on-campus students' mean of 4.67. In the second practice course, the distance students had a mean score of 4.95 and the on-campus students had a mean of 4.70.

No significant differences were noted in the sixteen content areas assessed for field work performance provided by the field instructors (**Table 2**). No differences were found in the total evaluation scores when distance students were compared to the on-campus cohort [(DE) M=3.69, (OC) M=3.69].

Discussion

The subjects in this study were similar demographically to those in other distance education programs in social work, in that most MSW students are female (both distance and on-campus cohorts), and distance learners tend to be older than

on-campus students (Haga & Heitkamp, 1995; Freddolino, 1996). The ethnic differences noted in this study reflect the demographics of each community; that is, the urban community has a higher percentage of ethnic minorities as reflected in the MSW students in the on-campus cohort, and the rural communities have a lower percentage of ethnic minorities as reflected in the distance cohort.

These results suggest that this distance education model provides learning outcomes that are equivalent to those provided in a traditional classroom. Even in the case of practice methods courses, it appears that teaching style can be adapted to meet the demands of this new technology. Our findings are consistent with those of Coe and Elliott (1999) and Hollister and McGee (2000). The key elements of this model of distance education include interactive television as the method of delivery, which allows for two-way communication, and the use of on-site coordinators functioning as assistant instructors to facilitate experiential learning. It is also important that the instructor travel to distant sites, which is necessary to monitor the development of practice skills. This model supports the recommendations of Smith and Wingerson (2000) by including faculty visits and in-room assistant instructors. This study supports the findings of Blakely and Schoenherr (1995) in that the combination of compressed video technology with on-site instructors can provide a learning experience that is equal to that provided in a traditional classroom. Therefore, the largest barrier to be overcome in teaching practice methods over distance technology may be the bias of many social work educators noted by Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, and Napoletano Flynn (1998) that these courses can only be taught using face-to-face learning.

Although the results of this pioneering effort were positive, they can not be generalized to other distance education models or student cohorts. Many distance education definitions stress the separation of instructor and student (Moore, 1972; Verduin, Jr. & Clark, 1991). Verduin, Jr., and Clark (1991) suggested that the separation between instructor and students should be during the majority of the instructional process, and that the educational media would be used to carry course content. In the present study, the media were used each week of the course; however, the instructor was present in the room for half of the class sessions. All discussions and lecture materials were presented over interactive television; yet, the instructor's presence may have added to the positive outcome in this study, in that monitoring of practice skills by the course instructor took place 50% of the time during experiential learning exercises. This was done primarily due to the bias for teaching practice skills using face-to-face methods; however, given these positive outcomes, less travel to distant sites by the instructors may be an option for the next cohort. Additionally, in this study, the site coordinators are highly educated and skilled, both holding graduate degrees in social work, having many years of practice experience, and having experience teaching social work courses. Finally, the students involved in this pioneering cohort had many years of social work experience, and many held professional social work jobs prior to admission to the MSW program, which may have made them exceptional practice methods students.

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