



**Distance Education: The Use of Blackboard Software in Practice Methods Courses Taught Over Ltv**

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# Distance Education: The Use Of Blackboard® Software In Practice Methods Courses Taught Over ITV

*Christine B. Kleinpeter, Agathi Glezakos, Marilyn K. Potts*

## Introduction

The Department of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) began a three-year, part-time MSW distance education (DE) program in 1995. CSULB is a large urban campus in Southern California and the Department of Social Work has accredited and well established undergraduate (BASW) and graduate (MSW) programs. The DE program was offered in five locations on state university campuses in Bakersfield, Ventura, Chico, Hayward and Humboldt. Courses were offered through a combination of 25 percent face-to-face delivery and 75 percent interactive television (ITV). The evaluation of this program was presented elsewhere (Potts & Hagan, 2000). This paper describes the results of the introduction of web-assisted teaching methods in the established DE program. It compares the use of Blackboard® by DE and on-campus students. Both groups of students were enrolled in their first practice methods course and in their first semester of internship.

In this model of DE, Site Coordinators were employed to assist with classroom experiential exercises and to lead discussion groups (Kleinpeter & Potts, 2000). DE students were linked by ITV in paired sites. In this pilot study, five clinical case vignettes, each with a set of three discussion questions, were introduced in the first practice methods course to both on-campus and DE sections of the course. Thirty-one DE students from two off-campus sites and 14 on-campus students participated. The purpose of this study was to compare DE and on-campus students regarding course evaluations and utilization of Blackboard materials. In addition, open-ended comments of students are presented.

## Literature Review

The idea of the Open University was introduced in England in 1971 and became a model for

DE programs around the world (Smith, 1988). The development of the world wide web (www) and the phenomenal technological advances in global communication since then, gave a great impetus to the proliferation of DE programs. Schools and departments of social work in the U.S. have been offering DE courses in continuing education and degree-based programs for more than 20 years. (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1995; Thyer & Polk, 1997).

When the Commission on Accreditation (COA) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) introduced standards of comparability in 1994 (Wilson, 1999), numerous evaluative studies were conducted comparing learners in DE social work programs with learners in OC programs from multiple perspectives (Glezakos & Lee, 2001; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2000, 2003; McFall & Freddolino, 2000; Patchner, Petracchi, & Wise, 1998; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000; Thyer, Polk, Artelt, Markwood, & Dosier, 1998; Thyer & Polk, 1997; Glezakos, A. 2000). The question of what social work courses fit into a DE program was addressed in several of these studies.

In the early 1990s, Blakely (1992) concluded that more didactic courses would be easier to teach in a DE program "whereas practice courses would be more complicated and demanding" (p. 218). Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, and Napoletano (1998), attributed the differences for program preferences among the participants in their study to a probable bias of social work educators who believed that practice courses "can only be introduced, conveyed, and reinforced through face-to-face learning" (p. 75). Coe and Elliott (1999) evaluated a graduate-level practice course taught through satellite television instruction. They concluded that "Practice courses combining face-to-face and television instruction can be included in these types of alternative programs" (p. 364). In a comparability study Kleinpeter and Potts (2000) concluded that DE

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“provides learning outcomes that are equivalent to those provided in traditional classrooms, even in the case of practice methods courses. It appears that teaching style can be adapted to meet the demands of this new technology” (p. 42). The analysis of responses from on-campus and DE graduating MSW students to a 25-item practice competence scale revealed no statistically significant differences in knowledge, skills, and values (Glezakos & Lee, 2001).

In the year 2000, 20 percent of social work programs utilized DE instruction (Siegel, Jennings, Conklin & Flynn, 2000). This represented an increase of 6 percent in a period of five years. Literature review findings indicate that student learning outcomes achieved in social work DE courses and programs are comparable to those achieved in traditional face-to-face programs (Macy, Rooney, Hollister, & Freddolino, 2001)

The findings from comparability studies have established both the efficacy of DE social work programs and the fit of practice courses for these programs. As we proceed into the new millennium, the challenge is to discover how to integrate the newest forms of technology into DE programs to support pedagogy and to maximize student learning outcomes. Ouellette, Sells, and Rittner (1999) described a model of teaching an advance practice methods course using a combination of ITV and Web-based instruction. The authors found that most students in this technology-supported course reported a positive learning experience. They noted, however, that students seemed to adapt more quickly to ITV that was similar to the traditional classroom (i.e., teacher-driven), and had more difficulty adapting to the Web-based instruction that was a self-directed (i.e., student-driven) mode of learning. Randolph and Krause (2002) developed and explored Internet-based exercises designed to promote interaction in a DE environment. Their findings suggest that “students in televised learning environments had more favorable attitudes toward the use of Website for class instruction, including involvement in mutual aid processes, compared to students in traditional classrooms. As the distinc-

tion between DE and on-campus courses is rapidly diminishing because the latter now utilize computer technology to some extent (Frey, Faul, & Yankelov, 2003), numerous studies have explored the use of technology in conventional classrooms. Their methods can be easily replicated in DE programs.

MacFadden, Maiter, and Dumbrill (2002) evaluated the course content and the experiences of both the learners and the instructors of a Web-based course. Sandell and Hayes (2002) noted that “The use of Web-based technology in social work education has grown dramatically in the past 10 years, and this expansion will continue” (p. 96). Scott Massimo (2003) incorporated threaded discussion, a simple and easily accessible WebCT tool, into four different social work courses and concluded that “If the medium of technology increasingly is the message, it becomes an ever more integral part of nearly all fields of study” (p. 63). The author placed course material on-line, provided links to multiple Websites and other Internet resources, and created small discussion groups. The diverse learning outcomes for students in each course created “more questions than it supplies answers” (p. 62). The author concluded with the recommendation that “If pedagogy is to lead technology, and be served by it, then more research is clearly needed” (P. 63).

## **Methods**

### **Student Characteristics**

The sample consisted of 31 DE students and 14 on-campus students in an equivalent program model (i.e., three-year, part-time). DE students were older than the on-campus comparison group ( $M=41.2$  and  $M=31.3$ , respectively). Ethnic differences were pronounced with a higher percentage of non-Hispanic whites in the DE group (64.8 percent and 36.1 percent, respectively). Both groups were similar in terms of the percentage of students who majored in social work as undergraduates (32.6 percent and 33.3 percent, respectively). DE students had more years of social work experience as compared to on-campus students ( $M=8.4$  and  $M=5.3$ , respectively).

**Data Collection and Instruments**

Data on demographic characteristics, educational background, and social work experience were derived from a self-administered questionnaire administered during the first week of the first semester of the first academic year. Course evaluations were based on a five-point scale used routinely by the university to evaluate all courses, with higher scores indicating more positive evaluations. The present analysis focused on a single item asking about overall teaching effectiveness. DE students were also asked at the end of the first semester if they would give their impressions of the use of the web-assisted technology in their ITV course. Blackboard® access, including number of hits, time and day of usage, and participation in discussion groups, is tabulated routinely by the software.

**Vignettes**

In this pilot study, five clinical case vignettes, with three discussion questions for each, were introduced through a web format in a generalist practice methods course in both on-campus and DE (i.e., ITV) sections (Table 1). The practice course was offered in a traditional academic field placement model, wherein students attended field work 16 hours each week and attended practice methods class three hours each week. DE students were located in two rural communities and were linked through compressed video (CODEC) technology. The instructor traveled between the two DE sites, having face-to-face contact with students two times during the semester. All lectures took place over ITV, while experiential exercises were carried out off-camera at each site monitored by the site coordinators. Several practice methods videotapes were

**Table 1: Vignettes**

CASE VIGNETTE SUMMARY	PRACTICE ISSUES	INSTRUCTOR QUESTIONS
<p><b>Vignette #1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hispanic, bilingual immigrant parents</li> <li>• Five minor children born in the USA</li> <li>• Relocation from rural to urban ethnically diverse community</li> <li>• Symptomatic family member: oldest child (11 years old) and only male – Jesus</li> <li>• Oldest child's enrollment in all boys catholic school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills for culturally sensitive &amp; competent practice</li> <li>• Language barrier</li> <li>• Effects of relocation</li> <li>• Effects of acculturation on family relationships</li> <li>• Dynamic relationship between person/family system and social environment</li> <li>• Skill in practice from a strengths perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess the family's strengths</li> <li>• Assess possible reasons for Jesus' manifest behavior</li> <li>• Social work interventions</li> <li>• Discuss the micro and macro levels</li> </ul>
<p><b>Vignette #2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three-generation immigrant Korean Family</li> <li>• Monolingual parents and grandparents</li> <li>• Adolescent children, male &amp; female in public high school</li> <li>• Daughter is the symptomatic family member</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills for culturally sensitive and competent practice</li> <li>• Language barrier</li> <li>• Effects of acculturation on inter-generational families</li> <li>• Knowledge of adolescent development and behavior skills in social work practice with intergenerational families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What problems do you identify with this case</li> <li>• What missing information would you like to know and how would you go about gathering it?</li> <li>• Whom would you want to see in session and what skills or techniques might you use with the family?</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Vignettes (continued)**

CASE VIGNETTE SUMMARY	PRACTICE ISSUES	INSTRUCTOR QUESTIONS
<p><b>Vignette #3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single African American mother of two minor children</li> <li>• Substance use</li> <li>• Low SES</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge about effects of poverty</li> <li>• Effects of substance use</li> <li>• Knowledge in multi-axial assessment and clinical diagnosis</li> <li>• Knowledge of community resources &amp; collaboration</li> <li>• Knowledge in risk and protective factors assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the risks that you can identify for the mother and her children</li> <li>• What steps would you take to assess the risks?</li> <li>• What referrals would you consider making</li> </ul>
<p><b>Vignette #4</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domestic violence</li> <li>• Child abuse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of state legal requirements for reporting</li> <li>• Ethical considerations and familiarity with the code of ethics, National Association of Social Workers</li> <li>• Skill in preserving the therapeutic relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the ethical issues in this case</li> <li>• What are the legal issues</li> <li>• How might the interventions used affect the worker-client relationship</li> </ul>
<p><b>Vignette #5</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group of adolescent females</li> <li>• Pressure on one member to disclose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of group process</li> <li>• Group work practice skills</li> <li>• Skill in negotiation group member conflict to protect client's right to self-determination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your assessment of the worker's intervention</li> <li>• Would you do anything different and if so, what or how would you respond to the situation and why</li> <li>• Discuss any ethical issues in client self-determination</li> </ul>

utilized, the tapes were shown over ITV, and the discussions regarding practice methods were lead by the course instructor over ITV.

The comparison group was taught in a traditional face-to-face classroom on the campus of CSULB, utilizing the same academic model (3-year, part-time), the same course descriptions, experiential exercises, and learning objectives. Both DE and on-campus sections of the course were taught by the same professor. The professor had eight years of experience teaching the generalist practice course to on-campus students only, and two prior years of experience teaching the course using ITV and face-to-face methods for DE stu-

dents. The professor utilized powerpoint presentations for all lecture materials, and had weekly consultations with site coordinators to prepare for the experiential exercises. In addition to leading experiential exercises, site coordinators were responsible for proctoring exams, assisting students in clarifying and integrating the concepts presented, and acting as an intermediary between the course instructor and the students regarding students' needs and progress.

The course was entitled "Foundations of Generalist Social Work Practice: A Multicultural 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. Multicultural and human diversity issues which included racism, sexism, ageism, and heterosexual bias.

The five clinical case vignettes and discussion questions, in addition to course materials, were a web-assisted component added to the course as an introduction to Blackboard®. The DE students were in their second year of a three-year cycle, and this was their first exposure to the course software. They were enrolled in their first practice course in addition to beginning their first fieldwork placement. Prior to the use of Blackboard® all course materials were sent to DE students by traditional mail. On-campus students had not had prior exposure to Blackboard® software at the time of this study.

They were also in the second year of their program, and were taking their first practice course in addition to beginning their first fieldwork placement. On-campus students had received their course materials in paper form handed out by the instructor prior to the introduction of the coursework software. Because this was the first experience for students with the web-assisted components of the course, students who chose to participate were given five points of extra credit for each vignette that they responded to, for a total of 25 possible bonus points (course total is 300 points possible). The case vignettes were not discussed in class. The students' only exposure to the case examples was on the web. The professor responded to each student's answer to each discussion question by email. The professor answered all questions raised by students regarding the vignettes over email rather than in classroom discussion. The method was employed to increase the use of web-based discussion board.

Students were able to see responses that had been posted by peers prior to posting their own answers to the discussion questions. The students could not see the responses the instructor had been

given to other students. Often, students would indicate in their answer agreement or disagreement with a prior student's response and would expand on an idea that was previously presented.

The five clinical case vignettes were designed by two faculty members who had many years of classroom experience teaching foundations and advance social work practice courses. The case vignettes were designed to include case examples that represented social work practice with individual, family, and group client systems. The case examples included client systems representing diverse cultural backgrounds. The discussion questions included assessment and treatment approaches, as well as ethical dilemmas and legal requirements.

## **Results**

### **Student Evaluations and Utilization of Blackboard**

Overall teaching effectiveness scores were slightly higher in the on-campus section (DE=4.77, OC=4.91). Students accessed Blackboard® all seven days of the week. The highest utilization period was on the day that the class met. Students accessed Blackboard® 20 hours in each 24-hour period, with no hits during the hours between midnight and 4:00 am. A lower proportion of DE students utilized the course materials section (e.g., power-point slides, study guides, and course outline) than did on-campus students (64.5 percent and 92.9 percent, respectively;  $X^2=2.64$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.10$ ). Forty-five percent of the DE students took advantage of the extra credit option, as opposed to 35.7 percent of the on-campus students ( $X^2=0.07$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.79$ ).

### **Open-ended Student Comments**

DE students were asked at the end of the first semester if they would give their impressions of the use of the web-assisted technology in their ITV course. Students commented on the use of the web for both distribution of course materials (i.e., powerpoint presentations, handouts, study guides, and course outline) in addition to the web-based vignettes and discussion questions. Most comments

were positive indicating that students appreciated the availability of the course materials and the discussion of case examples. Most students provided positive comments regarding their use of Blackboard®. Some examples follow:

- It was helpful to discuss the vignettes with fellow students.
- It was also helpful to get the teacher's viewpoint on the vignette to know how to study for exams that included vignettes.
- It was very helpful to have the slides for class ahead of time to cut down on note taking.
- It is very much needed for DE students who don't have easy access to instructors.
- It allowed me the opportunity to become familiar with the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment process and applying the theoretical concepts that we discussed in class.
- I found Blackboard® to be very user friendly.
- This made access to course materials convenient.
- It is my opinion that the use of Blackboard® did help to stimulate an increase in interactions between and among the students and instructors.
- I do not believe that Blackboard® can replace the classroom setting; however it enhances the learning experience and is us a useful tool for helping one understand complex concepts, for providing input without feeling self-conscious, and allowing one to see how others process situations.

A few students pointed out some negative experiences with Blackboard®. Some examples follow:

- I had a hard time finding the Blackboard® home page from other computers when I didn't have the address with me. It took me 45 minutes on morning from my office computer. I finally gave up and called the help desk at the university.
- The Blackboard® was a tool that although self explanatory took a lot more time to access than I would have liked.

- I appreciate email much more and if I had a choice to be involved in the process with Blackboard®, I would decline as I did not find it helpful.

### Discussion

The subjects in this study were similar demographically to other distance education programs in social work. 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; Glezakos & Lee, 2001). 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. The DE students have more years of experience in social work as compared to on-campus students, which is consistent with prior research (Potts & Kleinpeter, 2000; Glezakos & Lee, 2001).

The results of this pilot study are encouraging. They support the notion that students will utilize resources made available to them on a 24/7 schedule. This may be most important to DE students, who typically work full-time or part-time and have family responsibilities and less opportunity for face-to-face interaction (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Discussion questions in this pilot study were offered for voluntary extra credit, which may account for the low utilization. Additionally, DE students may have accessed the course materials on the web less often than on-campus cohorts as they often reported that one student would print materials for several students which is reflective of the collaboration often seen in DE cohorts. Students' comments reflected that they appreciated the interaction with the faculty member and with other students regarding clinical cases, as well as the access to course materials. Perhaps DE students utilized the case discussion more often than on-campus students due to a desire for increased interaction with both the

faculty member and other classmates. Some DE authors have indicated that the communication in DE classrooms is less than the communication in traditional classrooms (McHenry & Bozik, 1995; Kreuger & Stretch, 2000). Therefore, DE students may find the web-assessed discussions as a more valuable means for additional communication with and individualized feedback from the professor.

Student criticisms of the method seemed to focus on the time involved in the web-assisted discussions. Because no ITV time was eliminated, all web discussions were in addition to those provided over ITV. It might be more useful to engage students in a hybrid model of DE, where student participation in web-assignments would result in a decrease in class time. This might also increase the

number of professors who would participate in the web-based discussions as well. Another approach that might minimize student criticism would be to structure graded course assignments, such as term papers, as Web-based assignments.

This study is limited in that it only represents a small sample of DE students in one MSW program and is a preliminary introduction of Blackboard® uses in teaching practice methods courses. More research is needed in Web-based instructional strategies that are learner-centered, and provide more flexibility for both faculty and students. Future studies may include more rigorous examination of changes in values and practice skills, as this pilot study only measured student satisfaction and actual use of the posted materials.

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# Attitudes of Members in One NASW Chapter About Social Action: A 1972 and 2003 Comparison Study

Janet C. Dickinson, PhD

## Introduction

This article is based on surveys done in 1972 and 2003 on attitudes toward social action of NASW members in one southeastern state. The objectives of this research were to: 1) describe the demographic changes in NASW membership between 1972 and 2003; and 2) determine whether there were any significant changes in attitudes toward social action between these two points in time. A 2004 article looks at the relationships between the 2003 demographic characteristics and attitudes toward social action and provides recommendations for the education of social workers in academia and in continuing educations (Dickinson, 2004).

Important factors that should influence social action on the part of social workers are the political and economic climates in which the social worker practices and the extent of client needs that are not being met by federal and local governments. However, there is real concern that unmet needs do not always spur social workers to respond with an increase in social action. The economic and political climates of interest for this research are the climates in 1972 and 2003. In 1972, the country was emerging from the 1960s and involved in the Vietnam War when domestic issues lost their place on the national political agenda. In 2003, domestic issues again are taking a backseat to concerns about military defense and war.

## Organizational Efforts to Increase the Social Activism of Social Workers

There have been various efforts over the past 40 years to strengthen the social work role in influencing social policy. The first NASW Code of Ethics was adopted in 1960. That first Code was limited in addressing social action on the part of professional social workers. In 1968 the NASW Board of Directors, through their task force on urban crisis and public welfare problems, passed

the first policy statement regarding the professional responsibility to change social systems in order to better meet the needs of vulnerable populations (Grosser, 1973). The Code of Ethics approved in 1979 contained stronger guidelines for social action and the Code passed in 1996 was even stronger (Reamer, 1998; NASW, 1999)

In response to a lack of attention on the part of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) to social policy issues at its Annual Program Meetings (APM), a group of social policy educators started organizing in 1980 and in 1987 formed the Association on Community Organization and Social Administration (ACOSA). In the early 1980s, the Symposium on Community Organization and Social Administration (COSA) was held the day prior to the CSWE APM and gradually, and with a great deal of effort on the part of its members, became a recognized part of the APM. In 1991, ACOSA members attended a meeting at APM and had substantial input into CSWE's discussions on the inclusion of macro content in the proposed Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (Association of Community Organization and Social Administration, 2002).

Due in large part to this pressure from ACOSA, CSWE did strengthen standards for including curriculum content on social welfare policy (CSWE, 2001). According to the 1992/94 EPAS, M.S.W. and B.S.W. graduates should be able to "analyze current social policy within the context of historical and contemporary factors that shape policy. Content must be presented about the political and organizational processes used to influence policy, the process of policy formulation, and the frameworks for analyzing social policies in light of principles of social and economic justice." (CSWE, 1992/94)

Due to this increased emphasis by CSWE on teaching social action in BSW and MSW programs, and the increased emphasis in the NASW Code of

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