

PEDAGOGY

Physical Education Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Their Distance Education Courses

Renee E. Frimming and Thomas D. Bordelon

Abstract

Background: *Because of the increasing demand from students to have available to them distance education courses, it is vital to offer students health and physical education distance education courses that meet their need for a challenging and rewarding educational experience. In this pilot study, we explored the learning experiences of students enrolled in distance coursework in health and physical education methods. We interviewed 14 students participating in the Distance Education Focus Group, who answered 10 semistructured questions pertaining to their satisfaction and achievements in distance education courses. Using qualitative analysis, we identified factors contributing to these students' satisfaction and academic achievement in distance education.* **Results:** *This study provides students and instructors with a better understanding of what is effective distance education instruction from the students' perspective.* **Conclusion:** *This study may result in improved retention of students, increased academic performance, and satisfaction with coursework, from understanding students' perceptions of the methods used for distance education. Knowing what students believe to be important for their learning experience helps health and physical education instructors better prepare for teaching through distance education.*

Renee E. Frimming is associate professor, Kinesiology and Sport Department, University of Southern Indiana. Thomas D. Bordelon is assistant dean, College of Liberal Arts, University of Southern Indiana. Please send author correspondence to rffrimming@usi.edu

Advances in technology have many learning institutions offering online programs to help accommodate the needs of students (Lim, Kim, Chen, & Ryder, 2008). Approximately 63% of academic leaders report online learning is an important factor when looking at their long-range strategic goals (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The literature suggests that distance education delivery models, such as hybrid and online classes, are as effective as traditional face-to-face courses (Larson & Sung, 2011; McFarland & Hamilton, 2006; Utts, Sommer, Acedolo, Maher, & Mathhews, 2010). In terms of content mastered and students' perceptions of satisfaction with their learning, distance education compares favorably with traditional face-to-face classes (Bata-Jones & Avery, 2004; Crowell & McCarragher, 2007; Huckstadt & Hayes, 2005; McAlpine, Lockerbie, Ramsay, & Beaman, 2002; Tesone & Ricci, 2008; Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke, & Adkins, 2009). Students may even perform better in distance education courses (Campbell, Gibson, Hall, Richards, & Callery, 2008; Corral, Guevara, Luquin, Pena, & Otero, 2006; Lim et al., 2008; Reasons, Valadares, & Slavkin, 2005). O'Malley and McCraw (1999) found student perceptions of online courses have been positive with regard to saving time and taking more courses. Lim et al. (2008) found that participants in the hybrid group were more satisfied with their learning environment compared to the face-to-face course.

Educators must thoughtfully use the pedagogies of distance education to achieve the greatest effect (Hylton, 2007; Regan & Youn, 2008). The educator's role is to engage students in stimulating interactions with peers and in meaningful discussions and to encourage deep thinking (Ouellette, Westhuis, Marshall, & Chang, 2006). What constitutes good teaching is educators' ability to use the available tools effectively to support good learning, creating a context in which learning and evaluation of effective teaching and learning can occur.

Kittleson (2009) stated, "There is no question that the future of health education (or probably any profession) lies in its ability to survive in the technology world" (p. 311). Because of the increasing demand from students to have available to them distance education courses, it is vital to offer students health and physical education distance education courses that meet the students' need for a challenging and rewarding educational experience with the utilization of

technology. Understanding students' perspectives of distance education in the areas of health and physical education provides instructors with more information of students' learning experience when they are considering approaches that lead to student satisfaction and high levels of academic achievement.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore distance education learning as experienced by health and physical education students for their perceptions of satisfaction and academic achievement. Despite support from the literature suggesting the efficacy of distance education, there is a lack of knowledge about how health and physical education instructors use distance education teaching methods effectively from their students' perspective.

Method

Participants

Students enrolled in a physical education department course from a Midwestern university were recruited via e-mail and announcements in class for this study ($N = 14$). Of the 14 participants, 50% ($N = 7$) were male, 50% ($N = 7$) were female, 92.9% ($N = 13$) were seniors, and 7.1% ($N = 1$) were juniors. The majority of participants (71.4%, $N = 10$) were physical education teaching majors with a minor in health and safety education, and 28.6% ($N = 4$) were kinesiology majors with a concentration in health and safety education.

Researchers

Both researchers are trained in interview techniques and have conducted several studies using qualitative research methods. One of the researchers is responsible for supporting faculty members in developing distance education courses, and the other researcher's primary responsibility is to teach health education courses.

Procedures

Students were invited to attend the Distance Education Focus Group. Sixty students were invited to attend the Distance Education Focus Group. Fourteen students responded to the e-mail to participate in the focus group and qualified for the study because they

had taken distance education courses (Teaching Strategies in Health Education, Safety Education, Emotional Health of Children in Sport, and Managing Organizations for Sport and Physical Activity) within the past year that were taught by five different health and physical education instructors. The researchers sent an e-mail message to each student and made announcements in health and physical education instructors' classes. The university's institutional review board permitted the researchers to offer students sandwiches and beverages for their participation in this study. Students signed consent forms that assured them of confidentiality and the support for withdrawing from the study at any time without penalty. The students were informed of the purpose of the focus group in the invitations to participate and individually.

The researchers facilitated a discussion with the Distance Education Focus Group by asking the following semistructured questions, which were formulated by the researchers:

1. What do you expect to learn by taking a physical/health education class online?
2. What do you wish you could have learned by taking a physical education class online?
3. How did the class you took meet your expectations?
4. Compared to your face-to-face classes, how was your learning experience different?
5. How did you participate in your class?
6. What would you have wanted your instructor to know about you to help you learn?
7. What helped you or prevented you from communicating your needs and interests in this course?
8. How did the instructor facilitate activities while taking the course (clinical demonstrations)?
9. How would you contrast the time spent learning concepts with practicing skills?
10. How was your experience interacting with classmates and the instructor?

The researchers engaged one particularly insightful student in an hour-long discussion of her experiences with distance education to gather detailed information of her perceptions and as a means of

verifying the information recorded in the semistructured interviews with the focus group. The group and the key informant were asked probing questions to clarify and expand their responses.

We audio taped the group session using Livescribe pen devices while we were writing the group members' written responses on paper. Using the Livescribe pen devices, we were able to add field notes to the written recordings to capture nuanced statements and reflections of the group members' perceptions. This method of recording improved the trustworthiness of the data collection and improved our ability to capture the authentic voices of the group members. The focus group and the hour-long session with the key informant were also recorded on a transcriber device and were later transcribed by a student assistant. We compared all data collected for accuracy.

Data Analysis

We used the constant comparison method for analyzing data separately and then together. The constant comparison method is a means to compare new data with existing categories of data to reach a good fit with all of the units of meaning (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, & Morrison, 2007). We compared the themes and determined that two themes were represented in the data analysis. The process for breaking data into bits and reassembling them into meaningful units and themes was described by Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, and Coleman (2011) as a kaleidoscope. Categorizing, comparing, and refining data can form many images, when using the kaleidoscope as a metaphor, and can form numerous arrays in which to assemble meaning.

Results

The two themes that emerged from the data were (a) self-pacing of distance education courses contributes to student achievement and (b) the instructor's strong online presence supports students' achievement and satisfaction with the course.

Self-Pacing

Enrolling in a course taught primarily online appealed to most students because it permitted self-pacing, increased ownership, flexibility, expectation of high achievements, and convenience. Most students identified self-pacing as a means of exerting more control over their performance in the course: "I was able to put more effort

into it and be more thorough with it because I was on my own time.” Another aspect of controlling one’s own performance is the development of mastery for the subject matter: “In [a traditionally taught] class, some of the assignments you have to complete right then and if I rush through it, then I might not completely understand it and we move on to the next subject the next day.” Working at the pace acceptable to individual students seems to contribute to having a better understanding of the material without concerns for keeping up with the pace of classmates or the instructor. The flexibility to complete coursework when convenient to the student contributed to the overall satisfaction the students felt taking online and hybrid coursework.

Although most students acknowledged the advantages of self-pacing, a couple of students expressed concern for their classmates who were unable to set a reasonable pace for themselves: “Some students rushed ahead and other students would wait until the end of the course and have too much to do to complete the course.” Uneven progress through a course presented problems not only for individual students, but also for classmates when students were expected to work together on group projects and in class discussions. Whether some students advanced too far in the course schedule or were unable to keep up, classmates often felt frustrated by being “out of sync” with peers.

Students participating in the focus group identified themselves as being “good” students who felt they expended as much or more effort in academic performance than did other students. Therefore, the typical response of most of the students was, “Getting an A was pretty much my only expectation.”

Students reported that they are often unable to take classes offered in the summer as their work obligations prevent them from scheduling coursework during summer semesters. Many students work extra hours during the summer to pay for their education. In addition to being able to work longer hours during the summer, online coursework saves them from the time and expense of driving to and from campus to take courses.

Instructors’ Strong Online Presence

The students reported that their faculty member played a pivotal role in making the course worthwhile and satisfying. They identi-

fied several characteristics that contributed to their perceptions of a good learning experience including faculty exerting a prominent online presence, giving students reminders of assigned work, effectively communicating with students, and having a reasonable facility with online technology.

Students expressed a strong desire to engage with their instructors throughout the course. “Online presence,” for many, was explained in contrast with traditional coursework:

For face-to-face instruction we get structure and communication and we can build a better relationship with the professor and classmates. Also, you can ask a question better face-to-face. If you don’t understand the first time you can ask them to explain it a different way.

Students commented that instructors who participated in online discussions responded to students’ questions in a timely fashion, reminded students of assignment deadlines, and offered quick feedback on completed assignments provided the best learning experience. For example, a student replied, “Just make sure to notify when assignments are due. It’s really hard for students to forget when assignments are due, because it’s really easy to forget when a class is online and you don’t check it every day.” The students reported they felt most engaged in the class when the instructor had made it possible for them to get to know the other students enrolled in the class. These “getting-to-know-you” exercises occurred early in the course and may have been little more than sharing a brief autobiography and pictures with classmates.

Most students felt the assignments were reasonable and supported the course content: “The readings were lengthy and difficult to be reading on one’s own without the perspective of the instructor.” Instructors who offered their viewpoints enhanced their students’ perceptions of being a caring, engaged, and active participant in student learning:

It is really important especially when you’re online; you need that communication and need to know exactly what is going on and what the instructor is wanting from you. It goes both

ways too; the instructor needs to know what you understand and what you do not.

The instructors who were able to project the importance of developing a good working relationship with students contributed to students' feeling a sense of inclusion and belonging in the class. The "personal touch" seemed to make students feel they were part of a "live" learning experience rather than simply reading static materials and taking tests. Students perceived assignments and activities outside of the "online" environment as "busy work." Some of these assignments required students to evaluate the safety of playground equipment, for example. In general, students felt that some of these assignments were not closely associated with the course material.

Several students talked about having experienced hybrid and online courses in which little creativity and learning from one another occurred, and this was most evident on the asynchronous discussions:

One person puts down an idea and it's what everyone else thinks and writes too. So it has no use because what happens is they write that they agree with what the first person says, but they're required to write something else down so they post a very generic response.

This produced a situation in which no one took risks: "With the discussion boards, sometimes they got repetitive but when the teacher interjected, we were able to bring up new ideas and new discussion for the topic." This perception is congruent with the findings of O'Malley and McCraw (1999), who found that students had concerns regarding how they could contribute to class discussions in an online format.

The students identified characteristics of instructors perceived to be poor communicators. The most frustrating characteristic identified was failing to respond promptly to e-mail messages. Students reported that they felt "alone" and "delayed" when the faculty member was unavailable to answer their questions. Contributing to their frustration was that students were attempting to contact their instructor because their assignments were not clear, the course expect-

tations were confusing, and the way in which the course was organized made it difficult for students find the content they needed to complete the course. Any changes the instructor made to the syllabus were perceived by students as evidence that the instructor was disorganized.

The students did not express any concern about instructors' ability to use new technologies, but they did state that not all of the instructors used multiple methods and forms of technology. Students identified their Internet service at home as not being as good as at school (e.g., the Internet connection is frequently lost at home), and their home computers were not up to the capabilities of the university or what the instructor used. The students observed, however, that most instructors were effective with streaming lectures and using audio recordings for students to listen at their convenience. Using the distance education facilities at the university library, such as podcasts and online journals, were highly valued by students for their convenience and instructional value.

Limitations

The intent of this study was not for generalizability; it was rather a representation of the perceptions of students of this particular focus group enrolled in distance education for health and physical education coursework. This was a small convenience sample, and the group of 14 that responded may have had a more positive experience than those who chose not to participate in the study. Another limitation of the study was that the students were not asked to differentiate between the health and physical education distance education courses. Finally, the study was conducted in a nonlaboratory setting, and therefore, the researchers could not control for all variables.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that students perceive the source of their satisfaction and academic achievement is based on their ability to determine the pace at which they complete the distance education courses and the strong online presence of the instructor. Students in this study reported the need for communication between the instructor and student and the clarity of the instruction. This is consistent with the findings of Bata-Jones and Avery (2004). Song, Ernise, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) reported that students

felt a lack of community and had difficulty understanding the objectives of the course. Though consistent with the literature pertaining to students' perceptions of distance education, this study contributes to the literature that is focused on the perceptions of students enrolled in health and physical education distance education courses. The outcome of this study may influence health and physical education instructors to put greater emphasis on maintaining a sense of belonging and shared purpose that may be achieved through pertinent discussions with the cohort. Instructors should consider ways in which students can interact with one another and with the instructor (Huckstadt & Hayes, 2005.)

Future studies to explore the health and physical education students' perceptions may include an exploration of instructors' perceptions of what leads students to feel satisfied with online education and helps them reach their academic goals.

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