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Evaluation of Nontraditional Age Learners' Experiences in Internet-Based Clinical Social Work Courses

By Jayme Swanke and Laura Dreuth Zeman

Abstract

This study involves an evaluation of online learners' experiences with two Internet-based clinical social work courses. The evaluation sought to discover whether there were differences in learning between traditional (under 25 years old) and nontraditional age learners (25 years and over) who completed the asynchronous online course. The study examined differences between the competency and reaction to the course across learner groups following an online-based clinical social work class. Researchers used quiz scores and survey responses to create a picture of learning patterns. There were minimal differences in learning outcomes between the cohorts of students (traditional v non-traditional). Traditional age learners' data showed relationships between the number of minutes they accessed the online class and their scores on quizzes. The nontraditional aged learners' data showed a relationship between quiz scores and prior social work experience.

Introduction

This study helps fill the gap between research and practice in online instruction of clinical social work courses. Specifically, the study involves an evaluation of online learners' experiences with an Internet-based clinical social work course across traditional (under 25 years old) and nontraditional age learner (25 and over) cohorts. Clinical course content examines behaviors and competencies in client-level prevention and treatment (NASW, 2005). These behaviors and competencies include interviewing, conducting assessments, writing care plans, and evaluating care. The advanced clinical topics include therapeutic alliances, counseling skills, and theory (Cooper & Lesser, 2012). So far, there are few studies that compare traditional and nontraditional students' learning patterns and reactions to online clinical social work courses.

Literature Review

Social work education's early adaptation of Internet-based learning occurred in research and policy courses (Coe & Elliot, 1999). Clinical practice was the last area of social work education to use Internet-based technology as the delivery method. Social work education relied on face-to-face instruction methods to teach counseling and interpersonal skills (Anastas, 2010).

The literature discussed concerns about whether to teach clinical courses online or face-to-face. Findings suggested there are no differences between face-to-face and distance education students in clinical competencies. Specifically, Cummings, Foels and Chaffin (2013) compared students in face-to-face courses with students in hybrid courses, taught mostly online. They compared students' clinical competencies across the

two delivery methods. Cummings et al. (2013) found no differences in student performance between the face-to-face and hybrid courses.

Coe and Elliot (1999) were among the first to publish results of an evaluation of a clinical practice course. Students watched lectures on television. The teacher and students also connected in real-time using interactive media. The real-time televised lectures represented one of the early methods social work educators used to link instructors to nontraditional students who lived off-campus. They found no differences between the nontraditional off-campus students and all on-campus learners in course competencies. Differences that existed were attributed to nontraditional off-campus learners' reported technology barriers to accessing campus support and decreased loyalty or identification with the university and social work program.

Freddolino and Sutherland (2000) contributed evaluative findings to the limited but growing field of interactive television delivery of social work practice courses that explored clinical topics. Their study examined the learning experiences of students enrolled in distance education courses across social work content areas (research, policy, theory, and practice). Their study examined classroom environment using multiple measures. Freddolino and Sutherland (2000) found that on-campus practice content learners were more comfortable with their learning environment than the nontraditional students enrolled in one of the distance learning sites. They suggest that practice courses are sensitive to classroom setting.

In an evaluation of online interviewing, Oullette, Westhuis, Marshall and Chang (2006) measured interviewing skills at the end of the semester. Like Coe and Elliot (1999), Oullette et al. (2006) compared face-to-face learners with learners enrolled in a similar course that used only Internet-based methods of course delivery. They found the students in both classes appeared similar in interviewing skills at the end of the semester. Unlike Freddolino and Sutherland (2000), Oullette et al. (2006) found almost identical learning patterns between the two groups of students.

The research changed with the changing attitudes toward teaching clinical practice courses using interactive television or Internet-based methods. Moore (2006) argued the focus on evaluations should shift attention from comparing face-to-face instruction with web or television based courses toward understanding the human reaction among students in online courses. This study built on Moore's recommendation and also compared traditional and nontraditional age learners. Nontraditional age learners in social work programs often struggle with work-school balance and specifically juggling work, field placement, classes, school, family, stress, time management, and social isolation (Casstevens, Waites, & Outlaw, 2012). This study seeks to understand whether there is a difference between the competency and reaction to the course across learner groups following an online-based clinical social work class.

Context

This evaluation examined learning in two Internet-only social work clinical practice classes offered by a state research university during the first year offering the online courses. The classes included a graduate course and an undergraduate course that examined similar practice

behaviors. This is a second year course for graduate students and a junior year course for undergraduates. The evaluation phase included the first year the school offered these courses online. The agency preparation topics covered conducting assessments, case planning, and practice standards knowledge. Themes identified as practice skills included conducting counseling sessions and forming alliances with clients. Themes considered applied knowledge and applied theory to solve client-level problems.

This online social work course was taught asynchronously. To attend the classes, students used the online learning management system supported by the university. The course organization consisted of multiple units. Each unit contained selected reading materials, links to websites, quizzes, written individual or group assignments, and recorded instructor lectures using an online video platform. Learners had virtual and email access to the instructor to ask questions, to read instructor or peer comments, and to engage in individualized learning related to course themes.

The research team consisted of the course instructor who also designed the course, and an outside researcher who taught social work at a different school. Both institutions shared a university governing body. The human subjects ethics review committee at the campus that offered the courses approved the evaluation.

Research Question

What differences, if any, exist in gaining core social work competencies and reaction to online learning between traditional and nontraditional age learners?

Method

Researchers used multiple sources of data. First, raw quiz scores measured learning results. Researchers downloaded course data for all participants at the end of the semester. Researchers developed a survey to capture students' reactions to online learning. They used the survey to measure amount of Internet use, method of Internet use, and comfort with online tools. The survey included an open-ended question. This question asked students to share their experience learning in the evaluation online class. Students also provided information about their age and years of experience in social work.

In spring 2013, each member of the online course sections received a personalized email seeking his or her participation in the study. Researchers sent surveys to 55 students. Thirty students agreed to take part in the evaluation. This resulted in a 60% participation rate.

Researchers used a correlation analysis to determine if patterns existed across the groups of traditional and nontraditional learners. Researchers coded unit quizzes from each course as testing knowledge, agency, or practice competency. The agency preparation topics covered conducting assessments, case planning, and practice standards knowledge. Themes identified as practice skills included conducting counseling sessions and forming alliances with clients. Themes considered

applied knowledge and applied theory to solve client-level problems.

Knowledge competency. This category included understanding the theories behind practice methods such as behavioral, family, client-centered, and strength-based approaches in the undergraduate. The graduate course covered similar ideas with understanding applied counseling theories.

Agency competency. This category included demonstrations of practice standards, assessments, problem statements, and developing care plans.

Practice competency. This category included quizzes that tested interventions and creating professional alliances.

The first stage compared MSW and BSW findings to test the soundness of combining the two sections into one data file. The researchers standardized quiz values across graduate and undergraduate courses, creating an adjusted total point value for each student to assure equality among the quiz values. Researchers compared frequencies and correlations across Master of Social Work (MSW) and Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students groups. They sought information about whether there were significant differences across classes that influenced findings. The analysis found similar results across the MSW and BSW groups. Since the analysis produced similar findings, researchers combined the data for the two courses into one analysis file. The data were then divided to represent the two learner age groups, traditional (under 25 years old) and nontraditional (25 years and over). Researchers calculated correlations to identify statistical relationships. Correlations compared agency, knowledge, and practice competencies. Researchers also examined possible relationships between competency and student responses to the survey. Researchers conducted this analysis across groups of learners, traditional and nontraditional.

Finally, researchers coded the qualitative data. Researchers grouped student responses to the request to describe their experience in the online class. The first grouping sorted comments into traditional and nontraditional groups. Researchers identified two types of responses. One response group identified whether the student took prior online classes. These responses included the statement "this is my first online class." The second group reported the participants' reaction to the current online section. The results included responses by traditional and nontraditional learner groups.

Results

Quantitative

Overall, correlations existed between quiz scores within the content areas. This finding suggests that learners who understood one area were likely to show a practice competency in another area. For instance, students who understood agency were likely to also display competency in practice and knowledge.

Correlation analysis showed different patterns across learner age groups. These pattern differences appeared between quiz scores, Internet use, and social work experience. For traditional learners, significant correlations were found between quiz scores and the time they accessed

the class. On the other hand, for nontraditional learners the data did not show relationships in this area. Nontraditional age learners showed relationships between quiz scores and their experience in social work.

For traditional learners, correlations were found between the number of minutes they accessed the online class and several measures. As shown in Table 1, there was a statistically significant relationship between minutes accessing the class and agency skills ($r=-0.656$; $p<0.05$ level two-tailed), knowledge ($r=-0.738$; $p<0.01$ level two-tailed), and application ($r=-0.731$; $p<0.05$ level two-tailed). These correlations showed connections between the time accessing the class and grades for traditional learners.

The following correlations showed negative relationships. A negative relationship between minutes spent on the class and quizzes signals traditional learners with lower quiz scores spent more time accessing the class. Conversely the opposite would be true that traditional learners with higher quiz scores spent fewer minutes accessing the course materials than learners with low quiz scores. This finding shows that traditional learners who struggled with course ideas spent more time in the class and learners who performed well on quizzes spent fewer minutes online. This might suggest that high performing and low scoring learners individualized their approach to the course to meet their learning needs.

The group of nontraditional age learners' data did not mirror the time engaging with class materials to quiz score relationships. Rather, a unique pattern for nontraditional learners emerged. The data showed a relationship between the agency skills quiz scores ($r=-0.673$; $p<0.01$ level two-tailed), knowledge ($r=-0.614$; $p<0.01$ level two-tailed), practice application ($r= -.65$ $p<0.01$ level two-tailed) and their professional social work experience as depicted in Table 1. This group's data showed a significant negative relationship between quiz scores and work experience. This suggests that as work experience increased, quiz scores dropped. This interesting pattern may suggest that learners with experience working in social work may have experienced more challenges selecting the correct answer on a practice quiz.

Table 1 - Pearson Correlations

	Years of experience	Total access	Total mins.	Total use	Comfort online	Comfort with tools	Agency pts.	know pts.	Practice pts.
Traditional Age									
Agency Points	.227	-174	-.656*	-475	-235	-.368	---	.965**	.954**
Knowledge Points	.349	-140	-.738**	-.510	-214	-.214	---	---	.983**
Practice Points	.378	-214	-.731*	-418	-253	-.286	---	---	---
Nontraditional Age									
Agency Points	-.673**	-188	-.058	-.075	-270	-.072	---	.954**	.983**

Knowledge Points	-614**	-.200	-.010	-.016	-.279	-.113	---	---	.978**
Practice Points	-648**	-.193	-.062	-.074	-.326	-.123	---	---	---

** p<0.01 level two-tailed. *p<0.05 level two-tailed.

Qualitative

Thirty students responded to the open-ended prompt to describe their learning experience in the online class. Nineteen comments discussed prior online learning experiences rather than address the evaluation class. Eleven of the students provided reactions to the current class. Three of the five responses from traditional learners reflected satisfaction with organization. These include the statement “This online course was extremely well put together.” On open discussions a student responded “I love being able to see different views.” Two of the BSW, traditional students shared that they struggled with the material. One student responded the quizzes did not always reflect the readings and lectures. Another student shared “there were times when I did not understand the material by myself.”

Six nontraditional learners shared their reactions to the evaluation course. Three learners enjoyed the class and did not report challenges. One student shared “Loved it.” Another student shared “the different methods and material presented has been great in helping to learn the material.”

The remaining four comments suggested challenges among these nontraditional learners. One student expressed a preference for face-to-face instruction by stating “I would rather have a classroom setting.” Another clarified the challenges and shared learning concerns and resolutions. “My online experience was negative at first because I allowed the fact that I was not going to see my instructor face-to-face to scare me but now it is going great.”

Three of the nontraditional learners who responded to this question discussed the need to be self-disciplined. One student stated “It was ok. It takes a lot of self-discipline.” Another student shared their resolution of the self-discipline challenge by stating “I try to complete at least 1 assignment a week as if I am in a weekly class.” One student clarified the benefit of a self-paced class. She stated, “I like this method of instruction because I can move at my own pace, do the work at a time convenient for me, and avoid having to travel and arrange child care.” That student provided insight into how a nontraditional student balanced personal responsibilities with an online college class.

Discussion

This study sought to find out whether differences exist between traditional and nontraditional age learners who engage in online clinical social work classes. The findings suggest that both groups of students achieved similar results. Yet, the learners differed in their patterns. Findings suggest traditional age learners with lower quiz scores spent more time accessing the class. Among nontraditional age learners, as work experience increased, quiz scores dropped.

There are many possibilities for the results suggesting that work experience may be negatively related to quiz scores. Perhaps some nontraditional age students learned patterns that were not consistent with best practices or they substituted their work habits with best practices, which was the material covered on the quizzes. Another possibility is the learners with professional experience might be familiar with practice ambiguities. When faced with case specific circumstances that might digress from standard practices on quizzes, students with work experience may replace their experience for the standards based answer. This could lead to identifying an incorrect answer. Finally, these results may reflect the program's preference, and perhaps social work education's preference, to weight professional experience in admission decisions. It is possible that professional experience compensated for lower grades, however this cannot be confirmed.

An additional factor that influenced student learning included faculty-student engagement. Instructor-student engagement existed in the form of technology support, answering questions about the subject, providing general feedback, and during individual tutorials. In addition, the instructor reviewed skills based written assignments. Yet, students with prior work experience were less likely to ask for support. Confidence may have also contributed to the finding that traditional age students with higher scores spent less time online.

Further research should explore new questions about the possible impact online courses play in long-term retention of clinical knowledge. Follow-up studies with graduates who completed online clinical courses would be helpful. Additional research should focus on whether professional social work experience compensates for lower grades, and whether professional experience should have weight in making admissions decisions. Future studies could examine whether online students pass licensure tests, maintain employment, and whether they feel competent in clinical skills. Future studies could explore how asynchronous course instruction may allow for students to manage their stressors while mastering course materials.

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Jayne Swanke, is an Assistant Professor, Social Work at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She can be reached at jswanke@siue.edu

Laura Dreuth Zeman, is a Professor, Social Work, Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. She can be reached at dreuth@siu.edu.

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