

Assessment of an On-Line Educational Administration Course

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Abstract: An on-line education administration course was evaluated using Seven Lessons Learned by Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy (2001) as the framework. The framework was found to be useful in revealing areas of strengths and weaknesses in offering virtual education administration courses. The evaluation provided information that clear guidelines for online interaction need to be established, well-designed discussion assignments need to be provided, and that flexibility is important in the success of on-line courses.

Introduction

This paper provides the findings of an evaluation of an on-line educational administration course that was piloted at a state university in California in 2002. Bothel (2002) cautioned educators to realistically appraise the potential of education because all too often it is believed *anything is possible* with technology. That courses can be used across all types and sizes of institutions may be an erroneous assumption (Hawkins, 1999).

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The piloted on-line course being evaluated in this study was designed to explore the potential of *virtualizing* educational administration courses to better serve student needs without sacrificing the quality of the course. At the university in this study, more than 90% of the students enrolled in the Educational Leadership Program have full-time jobs, are parents, and have family responsibilities (Kim, 2002). In a study by Kim (2003), flexibility to take a class at any time and anywhere was found to be the most attractive feature of the on-line classes for students.

The on-line course that was the focus of this study was developed and piloted as a required course for the Preliminary Administrative Services Credential and the Master of Art in Education in Educational Administration. The course content was designed to meet Standard 13 (Human Resource Administration) of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) for the Preliminary Administrative Services Credential Program. The course was offered through WebCT, one of the most common on-line course management systems.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an on-line course offered for aspiring administrators in the Educational Leadership Program. This article first outlines the conceptual framework used to evaluate on-line courses. The design and format of the on-line course is then briefly described, followed by a discussion of the findings of the on-line course evaluation. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are offered related to developing and offering on-line courses.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to evaluate this pilot on-line course was the *Seven Lessons Learned* for on-line instruction (Graham et al., 2001). The evaluators from Indiana University's Center for Research on Learning and Technology applied seven principles to evaluate their on-line courses and developed a list of *lessons learned* for on-line instruction. The framework, consisting of seven principles for evaluating teaching in traditional, face-to-face courses was developed based on 50 years of higher education research (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; 1993). These seven principles are:

1. Good practice encourages student-faculty contact;
2. Good practice encourages cooperation among students;
3. Good practice encourages active learning;
4. Good practice gives prompt feedback;
5. Good practice emphasizes time on task;

6. Good practice communicates high expectations; and
7. Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Graham et al. (2001) developed a list of *lessons learned* for on-line instruction that corresponds to these original seven principles that can be used as a basis for evaluating on-line courses as follows:

1. Instructors should provide clear guidelines for interaction with students;
2. Assignments should facilitate meaningful cooperation among students;
3. Students should present course projects;
4. Instructors need to provide two types of feedback: information feedback and acknowledgment feedback;
5. On-line courses need to have established deadlines;
6. Instructors need to provide challenging tasks, sample cases, and praise for quality work as well as to communicate high expectations; and
7. Instructors need to allow students to choose project topics that incorporate diverse views into on-line courses.

How these lessons learned were used in the evaluation process will be discussed in detail later in the article.

Background of the Study

The on-line course piloted for this study was entitled Leadership in Human Resources Development. This 4-quarter-unit course would have been scheduled for 4-hour weekly seminars in a traditional setting. Since there was no seat time required for this on-line course, students were instructed to spend as much time as needed for individual study and completion of the assignments. The lack of face-to-face contacts was substituted by fieldwork activities where students would learn the skills needed for the course. Students were required to spend 15 hours in the field, either completing fieldwork assignments, collecting data for their research, or carrying out other fieldwork activities suggested by their fieldwork supervisors. The goal of this course was for the students to develop an understanding of human resource administration that enhanced learning and professional development in positive and productive school settings. There were two content standards included in the course syllabus as follows:

- ◆ Content Standard #1: To demonstrate an understanding of the importance and dimensions of human resource administration,

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such as recruitment, selection, induction, staff development, evaluation, and collective bargaining.

◆ Content Standard #2: To demonstrate the abilities in the dimensions of human resource administration.

Prior to registration for the on-line class, students were required to complete a student WebCT training session provided by the Academic Technology Support (ATS) office staff. The instructor worked very closely with the ATS staff on essential technical skills for the WebCT course management system. Students were required to learn how to send individual and group emails, participate in a threaded discussion, post their assignments, take quizzes, and complete surveys. At the training session, each student was given an ID and a password. Students were also required to upload a brief self-description as a self-introduction to the other class members.

The design of the on-line course included chapter summary reflections, field assignments, discussions, quizzes, and a final research paper. Each week students were required to fax/email assigned chapter summary reflections and to participate in threaded chapter discussion and case studies. Each chapter discussion had three prompts for the whole-class discussions. Students were encouraged to participate in threaded chapter discussions by taking turns starting the discussion, by responding to a discussion prompt, by participating in the middle of a discussion, by responding to peers' responses, or by closing the discussion through summarizing responses.

Four case studies were designed for small group discussions. In order to facilitate more interactions among students, different group memberships were posted for each case study. Each case study ended with questions for students to consider. Students were given the option to use bulletin board or group emails for small group discussions. At the end of the discussion, each group posted the conclusion of the discussion for the whole class to review.

Students were required to spend at least 15 hours doing fieldwork, performing five field assignments and collecting data for the final research paper. Students had the option to carry out field assignments alone, with a partner, or in a small group. The field assignments were carefully designed to provide students with opportunities to link practice with theory, to make face-to-face contacts that on-line classes did not have, and to gain and demonstrate the knowledge and skills stated in the course goals and objectives. The five field assignments, covering topics such as recruitment interviews, induction plans for new hires, staff development, employee compensation, and collective bargaining, were

designed to provide each student with a wide range of experiences. A report for each of the field assignments had five activities that included investigating five different aspects of, or approaches to the topic. Each student uploaded an activity report for each field assignment enabling the entire class to get a broader understanding on the topic. (See Appendix A for a description of topics for the field assignments.)

Chapter quizzes were also used as a measurement of students' knowledge. Each chapter quiz had about 10 multiple-choice questions that assessed the content of the chapter. The purpose of the quizzes was to ensure that students read the textbook. These quizzes, however, were eliminated for the second half of the course for two reasons. At about the middle of the quarter, the university had a technical problem with the WebCT course management system and lost all of the students' data for the week. It was impossible to retrieve the quiz results. In addition, mid-term feedback from the students indicated that the purpose of the quizzes was being served by another assignment, specifically, the chapter summary reflection.

The course syllabus was different from that of the traditional course. In anticipation of frequently asked questions, the syllabus became longer because of detailed instructions on assignments. The syllabus also contained other elements, such as netiquettes, (i.e., etiquettes for on-line users). Because the syllabus was on-line, hyperlinks and bookmarks embedded in the syllabus were useful in that students did not have to scroll down the pages to find the information needed. For example, when students click *assignments*, they were quickly taken to the page in the syllabus where the directions on assignments were found.

Methodology

The effectiveness of the on-line course was evaluated in two tiers; assessment of on-line instruction, and assessment of student learning outcomes. The first tier of evaluation assessed the teaching offered by the instructor whereas the second tier of evaluation assessed the learning of the students. The data for the first-tier evaluation was collected from student surveys conducted at the end of the quarter. The questions encompassed various aspects of the on-line course experiences. The open-ended responses for the survey questions were content-analyzed.

The data for the second-tier evaluation was collected from student scores on the final exam that assessed the content knowledge of the course. While student-learning outcomes were also assessed by other means, such as quizzes, chapter summary reflections, field assignments, and research projects, the second tier of on-line course evaluation only

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used the quantitative data from the final exams where students did not have coaching or feedback before submitting the final outcomes. The final exam had 11 short-essay questions. Each student received numeric scores, based on a grading scale where *A*=90-100, *B*=80-89, *C*=70-79, *D*=60-69, and *F*=below 60. Average scores were calculated for each chapter to measure student knowledge by chapter.

Discussion

The results of the evaluation of the on-line instruction (as measured by student surveys) are first presented in the section entitled *Seven Lessons Learned*, followed by other issues to be considered for on-line instruction. The results of the evaluation of student learning (as measured by final examinations) are described under the section entitled *Results of the Final Exam*.

Evaluation of On-line Instruction — Seven Lessons Learned

Principle #1: Good practice encourages student-faculty contact.

Lesson Learned #1: Instructors should provide clear guidelines for interaction with students.

Rather than being apprehensive about bombardment of emails from students, Graham et al. (2001) recommended that student expectations and faculty concerns be mediated by developing guidelines for student-instructor interactions, such as setting clear standards for timelines or establishing policies on communication. More than 90% of the student respondents felt that the detailed syllabus provided guidelines for interaction between faculty and students. The students were aware of the multiple ways to communicate with the instructor, through personal emails, WebCT emails, threaded discussion, feedback emails on assignments, phone, and faxes. They also knew the instructor's timelines for responding to messages. Personal emails and phone messages were responded to within one weekday and other communications were responded to on Mondays and Thursdays.

On the other hand, the student survey results indicated that clear guidelines for interaction among students were needed as well, as indicated by one frustrated student's comment, "the time delay was frustrating in waiting for group member message responses."

Principle #2: Good practice encourages cooperation among students.

Lesson Learned #2: Well-designed discussion assignments facilitate meaningful cooperation among students.

Participation accounted for 20% of the course grade. Even though

this on-line class was to be taken any time and anywhere, students were required to keep up with weekly schedules. Rather than *any time* within a quarter, it was *any time* within a week. The timeline was established because many of the class activities were dependent on collaboration and feedback from each other. The participation grade included weekly participation in chapter threaded discussions, case studies, and attendance in the final week session on campus (to fill out the course evaluation mandated by the University).

As recommended by Graham et al. (2001), chapter discussions started with prompts to help students engage in the content discussions, which was part of course requirement. While Graham et al. recommended that evaluation of discussions should be based on the quality of postings and not the length or number, the instructor realized that monitoring on-line class activities was very time consuming, especially for a graduate-level class. The requirement for chapter discussion participation (a minimum of one response to each prompt) was modified to a minimum of one response for each chapter based on the midterm feedback of the students as well as to reduce the resulting enormous workload for the teacher.

Each chapter discussion had three prompts. Initially students were required to participate at least once for each prompt, which meant the instructor had to read and provide feedback to a minimum of 45 discussion comments for each chapter. It turned out that threaded discussions allowed even the shy students to get into the discussion more freely and the instructor had to read and provide feedback to more than a hundred discussion comments for each week. Several students indicated the reason for the high level of discussion as follows: "I really enjoyed the fact that I could answer and discuss topics without facing the class. Sometimes in class I hold back, and on-line I don't have to. You have everything in writing and you can refer back to it." "Interaction is not as intimidating because people are not actually there. Making comments/remarks requires more thought before you post them."

The on-line course provided more opportunities for student collaboration than participation in discussion. Students had an option to choose to do field assignments alone, with a partner or in a small group. For all five-field assignments, not one student opted to do a field assignment alone. Each field assignment was done by more than two students, with an average of three students per activity, probably because there were five activities under each field assignments for the class of 15 students. These group projects mimicked social exchanges similar to those that might emerge in traditional classroom environments when individuals are compelled to work together to achieve a common outcome (Nicolay, 2002).

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Although this particular design of the model of field assignments was a good idea, an improvement can be made in this area, as indicated by a student's comment, "I enjoyed doing field assignments and learned a lot from them. I valued the information my classmates provided as well. However, I really didn't get to read other groups' reports carefully because I didn't have enough time. I printed them out so that I can read them over in the future."

Principle #3: Good practice encourages active learning.

Lesson Learned #3: Students should present course projects.

Students learn valuable skills from presenting their projects and are often motivated to perform at a higher level while learning a great deal from seeing and discussing their peer's work (Graham et al., 2001). Comments from the course evaluation student surveys indicated that students enjoyed the option to choose the fieldwork assignment activities they preferred most and the research project in an area that interested them.

Principle #4: Good practice gives prompt feedback.

Lesson Learned #4: Instructors need to provide two types of feedback: information feedback and acknowledgment feedback.

Information feedback provides information or evaluation, such as an answer to a question, or an assignment grade and comments. Acknowledgement feedback confirms that some event has occurred as in the case where the instructor sends an email acknowledging that he or she has received a question or assignment and will respond soon (Graham et al., 2001). Graham et al. found that instructors gave prompt information feedback at the beginning of the semester, but as the semester progressed and instructors became busier, the frequency of responses decreased, and the response time increased.

The instructor for this on-line course resolved the problem by reducing the number of required participation in chapter discussions. The results of student surveys seem to indicate that students also missed receiving feedback from their peers and human interactions as well, as reflected in a student's comment to a question about the least favorable feature of the on-line class, "the lack of human interaction, tactile (the pat on the back, the handshake), visual (making eye contact), auditory (related a fact to a voice), auditory (detecting mood by tonal differences), and mental (no springboard from someone else's thought)." It should also be mentioned that students liked the immediate grading feature of the quizzes when they were part of the class assignments. The WebCT grades the students' answers and informed the students how well they did as soon as they completed the quizzes.

For acknowledgement feedback, the instructor established a policy that “no response is good news” for submission of assignments. The instructor would notify students only when assignments were not received, or when they needed to be resubmitted.

Principle #5: Good practice emphasizes time on task.

Lesson Learned #5: On-line courses need deadlines.

It is essential for the instructor to complete the development of the course before it is implemented so that appropriate timelines can be structured. Pre-course organization by the professor is essential to the success of the assessment component (Puckett & Anderson, 2002). The course offered on the Website must be structured and operational before the first class session, so that students are aware of course expectations and can be shown how to post to the Website.

The survey results indicated that students really enjoyed the time flexibility the on-line class offered, even with the weekly timelines set for chapter discussions. Thirteen out of fifteen students mentioned the convenience provided through time flexibility as the most favorable feature about the on-line class. Comments from students included: “Flexibility to work at my own pace and at my hours.” “Convenient times to log on because you have a full week to work at your own pace.” “A student is able to ‘attend’ class any time.”

Principle #6: Good practice communicates high expectations.

Lesson Learned #6: Challenging tasks, sample cases, and praise for quality work communicate high expectations.

Graham et al. (2001) recommended that instructors communicate high expectations for student performance by giving challenging assignments, by providing examples for students to follow, along with comments explaining why the examples are good, and by publicly praising exemplary work. The survey results indicated that more than 80% of the students agreed that required assignments were purposefully designed to help them learn the content of the course independently, as reflected in several students’ comments: “The field assignment was a great learning experience and was very necessary in adding a different learning style to the course.” “I did a lot more reading and writing than any other course I’ve ever taken.” “You are forced to read and study the material.”

Posting students work provided an avenue to present sample cases for the students who needed to see quality work. Students received praises publicly and privately by the instructor. The instructor sent private emails when praising efforts and public praises for high quality work.

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Principle #7: Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Lesson Learned #7: Allowing students to choose project topics incorporates diverse views into on-line courses.

In the seemingly tightly structured class, students found many flexible learning opportunities. Students were able to choose the specific field assignment activities they preferred. They had complete freedom on the topic of the final research project. Many students chose the topic of their interest or based on their school's needs. Several students were able to expand the field assignments and conducted deeper investigations to complete research projects, such as staff development and induction plans for new hires.

Other Issues Related to On-line Instruction

In an open-ended question, 90% of the students mentioned flexibility as one of the advantages of taking the on-line course. Flexibility, where students can progress at their own pace at their convenient time, seemed to be the most attractive feature of the on-line course. The results indicated that the on-line class did indeed serve the needs of the commuting graduate students. Students also mentioned "no driving to campus" as saving time and a benefit of the on-line class.

The majority of students surveyed expressed their frustration about the number of assignments and course work as one of the disadvantages of taking the on-line course. The instructor noted a disadvantage in that emails had to be sent out when students submitted their work whereas no response was needed when students turned in their work in traditional classes.

When asked for improvement of the future on-line classes, the majority of the students suggested meeting on campus during the first week to make social connections and to help them understand what was involved in completing the on-line class, as represented by the following student remarks: "Leave the first week for the purpose of having students chat with one another and the professor or to clarify course expectations."

Evaluation of Student Learning: Results of Final Exam

During the last week of the quarter, students were assessed on their knowledge in leadership in human resource development. The final exam contained 11 questions requiring short essay responses on each chapter topic. The results of the examination are shown in Table 1, which includes the results of average chapter scores of the on-line

Table 1
Average Chapter Scores (On-line vs. Traditional Classes)

Chapter	Topic	On-line Score (%)	Traditional Score (%)	Difference
1	Planning	89	91	-2
2	Preparing for Selection	89	87	2
3	Selection	95	94	1
4	Motivation	87	90	-3
5	Induction	93	96	-3
6	Staff Development	92	95	-3
7	Evaluation	92	97	-5
8	Compensation	84	87	-3
9	Work Environment	94	91	3
10	Collective Bargaining	82	86	-4
11	Reduction in Force/ termination	89	88	1

class and those of the traditional class the instructor has taught in the past.

The range of average scores of students' performance on the final exam in the on-line class was between 82 and 95. These scores ranged from 86 to 96 in the traditional class. Scores equal to or above 80% indicate satisfactory completion of the chapter knowledge. The average of the overall students' performance in the on-line class was 90, indicating that students acquired, on average, 90% of the course knowledge. The results showed that students learned as much knowledge as did those in traditional classes that the instructor had taught in the past where the average of the overall students' performance was 91.

A careful examination of the chapter scores indicated that different instructional strategies might have contributed to higher chapter scores such as *evaluation* and *collective bargaining* in the traditional class. In the traditional class, the instructor would conduct in-class simulations on teacher-administrator evaluation conferences or district-teachers union collective bargaining where students role-played and coached on the skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The *Seven Lessons Learned* offered by Graham et al. (2001) provided a tool to evaluate effectiveness of an on-line class in terms of teaching. The evaluation of an education administration on-line class confirmed

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the usefulness of the conceptual framework and revealed areas for improvement as well.

First, clear guidelines for interaction with students (Lesson Learned #1) should be expanded to include interaction among students. Throughout the quarter, the instructor had to send out frequent group emails to direct students to keep up with the timelines or to urge the quiet students to speak up. Second, well-designed discussion assignments are not the only way to facilitate meaningful cooperation among students (Lesson Learned #2). Field assignments also provided meaningful opportunities for collaboration. Third, the conceptual framework should evaluate if the on-line course meets the needs of students. Flexibility was the most frequently mentioned advantage by the students for taking the on-line class. Being able to take the class any time, anywhere, and at their own pace was considered by the students to be a convenience. This flexible feature also encouraged students to be self-disciplined to learn more actively and to stay on task.

The overall evaluation of this on-line course revealed that educational administration courses with field assignments could use the medium of the Internet for effective delivery of instruction. Further research and study of using on-line courses for education administration courses is needed, particularly given the perceived benefits by the participating students. It is also recommended that an evaluation study be conducted after modifying fieldwork activities to maximize the students' involvement in real activities, such as teacher evaluation conferences or collective bargaining.

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Appendix A

Special Field Assignments

Special Field Assignment 1—Interviews

- Group 1: Design interview questions for a counselor/school psychologist.
- Group 2: Design interview questions for a custodian.
- Group 3: Design interview questions for an instructional aide.
- Group 4: Design interview questions for an assistant principal.
- Group 5: Design interview questions for the principal's secretary.

Special Field Assignment 2—Induction

Group 6: Select one school from your group members. Prepare a short five (5)-minute talk to welcome new teachers to the school and to give them a brief history of the school and the community.

Group 7: Interview at least four different teachers who have recently completed the first year of teaching with mentors. Ask each individual what he/she perceives as the advantages and disadvantages of mentoring for themselves and for the person with whom they worked.

Group 8: Interview at least four different teachers who have recently served (or are serving) as mentors for the beginning teachers. Ask each individual what he/she perceives as the advantages and disadvantages of mentoring for themselves and for the person with whom they worked.

Group 9: Interview at least four different teachers who have completed the first year of teaching without mentors. Ask each individual about the struggles/challenges they had to overcome and how they survived through them.

Group 10: Prepare a plan for a semester-long induction program for new teachers. Specify instructional objectives for each session and identify a possible presenter. If there are on-going activities, specify the goals and implementation plan of each activity.

Special Field Assignment 3—Staff Development

Group 11-15: Provide a staff development at your school. Choose any topic you want. Report to the class how you planned and prepared for the staff development; what activities/materials were included; and what evaluation you received from the participants. Also include in your report the group members' reflection about the experience.

* NOTE 1: A representative of each group must contact the instructor during the planning stage for the approval of the plan, prior to implementing the staff development.

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* NOTE 2: In order to give you sufficient time to plan and implement staff development, the report will not be due until the 9th week.

Special Field Assignment 4—Compensation

Group 16: Compare teachers' salary schedules and benefits from at least three different school districts.

Group 17: Compare administrators' salary schedules and benefits from at least three different school districts.

Group 18: Compare classified staff' salary schedules and benefits from at least three different school districts.

Group 19: Compare differential compensations (such as merit pay) for teachers from at least three different school districts.

Group 20: Compare teachers' salary schedules and benefits from at least three different private schools.

*NOTE: Select different school districts based on the size, location, student populations, etc.

Special Field Assignment 5—Collective Bargaining

Group 21: From each of three different school districts, interview the head of the teachers' association/union to identify the organization's top five priorities for action in the present school year.

Group 22: From each of three different school districts, interview the district representative for collective bargaining to identify the district's top five priorities for action in the present school year.

Group 23: From each of three different school districts, interview board members to identify the district's top five priorities for action in the present school year.

Group 24: From each of three different school districts, interview the district representative for collective bargaining to identify successful negotiation strategies.

Group 25: From each of three different school districts, interview the district representative for collective bargaining to identify successful negotiation strategies.

*NOTE: Select different school districts based on the size, location, student populations, etc.