Distance Education: An Annotated Bibliography

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Buxton’s study compared the satisfaction of pharmacists’ experiences with an 8-lecture series of professional development webinars offered in asynchronous and synchronous formats. The 41 participants in both format samples were given 50-question post-course survey to assess their perceived satisfaction with the course content and learning environment. Survey results indicated that while both groups were satisfied with the learning outcomes, the asynchronous group responded significantly more positive than the synchronous group in a number of areas, suggesting that convenience may outweigh the benefits of social interaction in distance education. While research in the context of continuing professional education (CPE) has focused on comparing online education and education in a physical classroom, this study is valuable in that it presents a novel consideration of course timing rather than medium of delivery. However, the literature review was limited and primarily referenced previous work by Buxton. Although the asynchronous group responded more positively, this may be more indicative of the fact that it was their initial delivery preference. Since participants were not randomly assigned to groups, it makes truly comparing perceptions of delivery methods a challenge. Future research should consider a random sample selection to increase reliability.

This article provided an overview of the history and growth of distance education in the United States in order to examine the impact it has had on higher education as a whole in the US. Qualitative information that was gathered was then analyzed to determine the impact, as well as any themes that may have emerged as a result of the evolution of the distance education sector of higher education. The overwhelming theme derived from the collection of data is the concept of change and the need for higher education to be responsive and adaptive to the continual change that will occur as the field of distance education evolves. While the authors touch on many of the key issues surrounding distance education (e.g. quality, effectiveness, resistance from traditional practitioners, etc.), the result of the study is not revolutionary. The authors suggest studies conducted on learning effectiveness are needed but we’ve learned in our other readings that this type of research is overabundant in this field. However, an important question was asked in the context of the massive rise of online education in the recent years: How long will the growth continue?


The article reviewed the sordid history of educational access in South Africa, a country with one of the lowest graduation rates in the world, and the discriminatory, location-based social divide that has historically played a significant role in access to education
and other resources. Democratization and urbanization in the country has improved access for previously disadvantaged groups. The study first looked at location (urban or rural) to determine if that variable impacted the dropout rate and then a secondary analysis looked at the location variable combined with other demographic factors (e.g. population group, language, gender, age, employment). The researchers utilized the longitudinal-process model of dropout developed by Kember to establish trends in the records of 2,615 students in a distance education taxation module. The analysis showed that rural students still had a higher dropout rate in the majority of multi-variable comparisons, showing that the geographical position is still a dominant factor in retention. Data also showed that specifically rural, black, unemployed males were most likely to drop out and that the specific characteristics of the rural populations could also influence drop-out rates.

The authors provided a significant amount of cultural insight in to the data, although the article was lacking in citations to previous research. Access to more historical data as a point of comparison, rather than relying on a general understanding of South Africa’s educational past, would not only strengthen the results, but help to better understand the impact of urbanization on educational access from past to present. The sample also included a significantly larger number of urban students enrolled than rural, which seems to reinforce that geography is still impacting access. The benefit of this study is that the results may help distance education institutions in South Africa to create support interventions for groups with the demographic characteristics connected with high drop-out rates.

The authors, using past research in which online learning and interaction were evaluated as a basis, identify crucial gaps in the research. Their novel study examined data extracted from the course management systems of 349 lower-level online, undergraduate business courses in order to see how the time spent in specific interaction activities impacted student outcomes. They did this by looking at the relationship between course enrollment, faculty participation, student participation, and completion of the course. The most surprising result was a significant, negative correlation between student participation and course completion, which led to additional questions and thoughts for future research, based on the authors’ recognitions of limitations in their methodology. The study contributed to the ongoing conversation surrounding the importance of dialogue in an online setting. The value of interaction to the online learning experience is well documented in distance education literature but the recognition of the unanswered questions in the field surrounding how interaction impacts student success are important in future course design and faculty interventions, tying nicely into our discussion of CoI and levels of presence in online courses.


Gravel set out to illuminate the types, content, and quality of interactions between 235 students and their academic advisers at a non-profit university in New England. The
study used a two-phase exploratory, mixed-methods research design based on an existing advising framework established by Crookston. Data was gathered using the Academic Advising Inventory (AAI) and additionally, two participants were interviewed one-on-one. The results showed that students experienced high levels of developmental interactions regarding academic decision making (e.g. selecting courses) but desired personalized advising focusing on their goals and values.

The author provided a thorough review of the literature and was very deliberate in her analysis and organization of the data. Although the title would suggest retention as an underlying theme, the study didn’t use the data to draw a definitive connection between advising and student success. More extensive research involving a broader sample of students at multiple institutions would help to bolster the initial data, particularly since only two individuals participated in the one-on-one interview portion that addressed what students’ desire from an adviser relationship. A question for additional research is how can advising be personalized but scalable? The author suggests an online advising portal to automate the more developmental interactions. Research in this area would be valuable in the rapidly growing realm of online learning.


A variable in the resistance for faculty participation in online education stems from faculty concerns about resources to develop quality courses and institutional support with learning technology. Based on how the adult education learning theories of andragogy
and transfer of learning relate to successful faculty development, the researchers created a training program aimed at assisting faculty with technology adoption for creating courses, teaching, and learning online. Three-day summer workshops, Bootcamp, were conducted at Carroll University. Faculty were taught in small peer groups to redesign a current face-to-face course through investigation of research in online learning, technology tools, and the integration of both within the context of their specific course. A monetary stipend was provided to faculty for attending. Faculty were then given a follow-up questionnaire to rate their perception of knowledge acquisition, increased confidence with the elements of teaching online, and comfort creating a course for an online education setting.

The results were overly positive in all areas, although the study was not constructed to assess for transfer of learning. Additional considerations were presented regarding improvements for future Bootcamp models. While the trials were small in number, elements of this research are valuable for current and future institutions providing distance education, particularly when considering development of and compensation for faculty teaching online. The Bootcamp considers the key motivational factors influencing participation in online instruction of institutional support, peer communities of learning, compensation, and course development training.


As the size of online classrooms continues to grow, there is a need to identify ways in which faculty can cope with these large student numbers without sacrificing teacher presence and student satisfaction and retention. The evolution of learning management
systems has provided additional opportunities to meet these needs. This study aimed to investigate 1) how course designers and instructors can maintain a CoI as class sizes increase and 2) whether increased social presence and interaction with peers can compensate for a lack of intimate teacher presence. The subject for the initial study was a half-year research methodology course for masters' and doctoral students in South Africa and participants were surveyed based on the use of the elements of the LMS, the peer review process, and regarding overall CoI in the course.

Survey feedback from the study was overwhelmingly positive, as was student retention, illustrating that innovate uses of LMS and peer review processes have the potential to create a balance in the levels of CoI, despite the number of students in a particular course. The sample for this study was relatively small, consisting predominantly of students under the age of 35. It also left me wondering if the needs and skills of undergraduate students are the same as graduate students. Additional research should be done using a larger, more diverse sample, as well as separately with an undergraduate cohort.


With the explosion of online learning, there has been much debate over using a time-based credit hour for measuring an asynchronous form of education. This study was based on prior research that cited inconsistencies in how the credit hour is determined and used in distance education. The primary research question was, “What methods do public higher education system policies set forth for determining the translation of asynchronous online class time into credit hours?” The author gathered and analyzed state policies and
interview data from participants representing 10 systems. The results showed variances between state systems regarding the use and definition of the credit hour and that the responsibility of determining those parameters was commonly placed on the faculty and administration at each academic institution. In response to the research question, it was shown that standard policies guiding the use of the credit hour do not exist at the state level. The ambiguity in the methods and results made the validity of the study difficult to assess. However, the author does present some alternatives for measuring learning outside of the credit hour, which is a valuable contribution to the conversation. Issues pertaining to the credit hours role in determining budgets, financial aid, and accreditation could make waves in the future, particularly as accreditation policy continues to evolve along with higher education.