Distance Education:
What Do Our Students Tell Us?

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Objective: Given the rapid growth of distance education in social work, there is need to evaluate contemporary efforts in schools of social work, including multisite assessments of distance learning. This article reports multisite data addressing the question of how students enrolled in distance learning courses at two urban campuses (one using Interactive TV [ITV] and the other videotape) perceive their learning experiences. Method: 142 students' responses were received from voluntarily submitted survey questionnaires querying students regarding their experiences with the technology used in their course, their learning environment, the instructor's teaching skills, and perceived resource availability. Results: Respondents at both sites were pleased with their learning experience, with 100% of ITV students and 75% of the students who viewed video-taped courses indicating they would enroll in distance learning again. Conclusions: The opinions of remote student respondents suggest positive learning experiences are had by students in schools of social work, particularly as they experienced these two delivery formats.

Distance education includes all types of formal instruction conducted when teachers and students are located a geographic distance from one another. Historically, distance learning evolved from the field of correspondence education. Today, telecommunication technology is the likely connector between the instructor and his or her remote students (Gilbert, 1995). These new technologies provide us with opportunities to expand access to education and information at a favorable economic cost. As a result, interest in distance education has grown significantly in recent years among social work educators. In fact, a recent survey of accredited schools of social work in the United States found a 5% rise in the use of distance education over a 2-year period, with 16% of all accredited programs now employing technologies to deliver social work courses (Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, & Flynn, 1998).

As social work educators recognize the potential that telecommunication technologies offer for expanding our means of delivering courses, interest in distance learning should also prompt thoughtful consideration of how students view these learning experiences. At the spring 1998 Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), faculty representing more than a dozen schools of social work met to discuss forming a consortium to systematically evaluate distance education efforts in accredited schools of social work. Part of the agenda established at this meeting included the goal that researchers with multisite data available to them begin assessing common elements of the distance learning experience for our students.

This article is one response to the consortium's goal. It presents details of multisite data available to the author that address the question of how students enrolled in distance learning courses perceive their learning experiences. Remote students' perspective of their learning experience is important because the more we know about how students experience our teaching, the better able we will be to influence the learning process. As our knowledge of the nature of teaching improves, so will our understanding of social work education and our own abilities as effective social work educators (Solas, 1990).

Information for the current assessment is derived from assessments of students enrolled in distance learning courses at two different urban campuses. At one campus, the University of Pittsburgh, students were enrolled in an interactive television (ITV) course. At the other campus, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, remote students viewed prerecorded videotapes of a social work course. Although the courses and technologies differ from site to site, this exploratory assessment provides information on the experiences common to students at remote sites. The present findings, although not definitive, can spark fruitful discussion and more careful examination of the burgeoning field of technological innovations in social work education, a field that must both examine technology and economies of scale for educational institutions and assess the impact of different teaching strategies on the experiences of the students enrolled in courses using the latest technology for teaching.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The extent to which schools of social work incorporate distance education into existing baccalaureate and/or graduate curricula is expanding. Although distance education was once rarely used (Falk, Shepard, Campbell & Maypole, 1992; Lynette, 1985; Reinhoehl & Shapiro, 1986; Rose & Finn, 1980;

Seabury & Lewis, 1993), current information indicates that larger public institutions with combined MSW-BSW programs are the most likely academic environments to use multimedia technologies to deliver courses (Siegel et al., 1998). Of 68 accredited schools of social work found to be engaged in distance learning, the predominant technologies used for course delivery were satellite transmission (42%), television (42%), and compressed video or ITV (39%) (Siegel et al., 1998).

The social work distance education literature includes several models for maximizing the potential of technology in schools of social work (Anglin, Denholm, Ferguson, & Pence, 1990; Blakely, 1992, 1994; Raymond, 1988; Weinbach, Gandy, & Tartaglia, 1984; Wodarski & Kelly, 1987). However, little information exists detailing the experiences of social work students enrolled in courses offered using multimedia technology. Of the investigations of distance education in social work that have been conducted since the 1970s (Chapanis, 1976; Kuramoto, 1984; Nelson, 1985; Puzzuoli, 1970), only four relatively recent studies have assessed distance education experiences from the students' perspective. Heitkamp (1995) evaluated ITV in North Dakota, where technology was used to provide baccalaureate and graduate social work courses to rural communities located 90 to 370 miles away from the main campus. In this assessment, the course satisfaction of remote rural learners mirrored that expressed by the on-campus students (Haga & Heitkamp, 1995). Similarly, Jennings, Siegel, and Baskind (1992) as well as Thyer, Artelt, Markward, and Dozier (1998) found no significant differences in overall satisfaction between on-site and remote students registered in ITV courses. However, Thyer, Polk, and Gaudin (1997) compared live instruction with two-way ITV for a required MSW course and found remote students preferred live instruction over instruction using two-way ITV.

Given the limited literature addressing remote students' experiences with distance education, it is not surprising that no literature was located assessing common elements of the experience for students across different schools of social work. Hence, information is needed that underscores the importance of obtaining feedback from students experiencing this nontraditional educational interaction—feedback that highlights experiences common to students across settings, regardless of the specific technology used to deliver a course.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDIES

The assessment under discussion is exploratory in nature and focuses on the distance learning experience exclusively from the perspective of the student.

Remote student respondents were drawn from courses offered by two midwestern schools of social work that housed combined MSW-BSW programs: the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison, School of Social Work. Each school is experienced with distance education, having offered courses for at least 2 years. At the University of Pittsburgh, information was drawn from voluntarily submitted course evaluations from students enrolled in a required foundation research course offered via ITV. At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, information was available from voluntarily submitted course assessments completed by students enrolled in an elective course delivered by prerecorded video and broadcast over public television. Remote students' experiences were measured by the common practice of questionnaire administration. Students were queried via open- and closed-ended questions regarding their reactions to the technology used in their course, their learning environment, the instructor's teaching skills, and perceived resource availability. Although the surveys in each of these courses differed, the common elements found in these surveys are reported in this article.

The host schools, the courses, and the remote technology chosen for this assessment are reflective of the latest information published by Siegel et al. (1998). In their study, Siegel et al. found that social work programs housed in larger public universities are the most likely environs to employ distance learning strategies. Television and compressed video were two of the most frequently used technologies in schools of social work offering courses at a distance. Furthermore, courses that most easily make the teaching paradigm shift from the traditional classroom to telecommunication technology are courses that require less face-to-face interaction between the instructor and the student, such as the courses selected for this assessment.

University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work

Distance education delivery process. At the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work (henceforth referred to as Pitt), students were enrolled in a foundation social work research course. One group of students received primarily face-to-face instruction in a media-readied classroom, whereas the other group of students simultaneously viewed the course at a remote site via ITV (for one lecture, the instructor originated his teaching from the remote site). Students receiving on-campus instruction were seated in an ITV classroom, where they could view the remote students over TV monitors and could interact with them. Conversely, students at the remote site were able to see and hear students who received on-campus instruction and also had the

ability to interact with them. The students receiving face-to-face instruction took this course on the main campus of the university; those who received instruction primarily via ITV took the course at a regional campus about 2 hours' driving time from the main campus. Students on the main campus had the option of enrolling in other, traditionally delivered sections of this course; remote students only had the ITV section of the research methods course available to them.

All students enrolled in this course met once a week for the 15-week spring term of the year. The course consisted of lectures, with brief in-class assignments primarily focusing on developing research skills. All students were required to take an objective midterm and final examination based on the content in the lectures and readings. In addition, students submitted final papers written in the format of a journal article. An evaluation of student learning in this course is reported elsewhere in the literature (Patchner, Petracchi, & Wise, 1998).

Measure and data collection procedures. During the final week of the ITV course, a survey was mailed to students at the remote site and distributed in class to on-campus students. The survey assessed students' experiences with the ITV course. It included a series of both open- and closed-ended (Likert scale) items tapping students' impressions of their technical experiences with the course, the instructor's interactive skills vis-à-vis ITV, and resource availability. Both on-campus and remote students were provided with a stamped envelope addressed to the independent faculty evaluator, an instructor at the school who had not been involved with course delivery. Students were asked to return their completed surveys at their convenience and were assured that survey results would not be shared with the instructor until after final grades for the course had been submitted to the university registrar.

University of Wisconsin–Madison, School of Social Work

Distance education delivery process. At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, School of Social Work (henceforth referred to as Madison), two groups of students were enrolled in a social work elective course covering content on substance abuse. This course was originally designed to be a large lecture course enrolling more than 200 students. An alternative section of this course was not available.

Remote students viewed broadcasts of the prerecorded videotaped course, which were aired over public television. The broadcasts were aired in 2-hour segments during the standard 15-week spring term. Remote students

videotaped these broadcasts and viewed them at times of their choosing and came to campus to take the same midterm and final examinations. These exams were based on content included in course lectures and readings. An evaluation of student learning in this course is also reported elsewhere in the literature (Petracchi & Morgenbesser, 1995).

Measure and data collection procedures. At Madison, a student experience questionnaire was included in the packet of readings distributed to course participants. The questionnaire consisted of closed- and open-ended questions asking students about their experiences with the technology used in the course, the instructor's teaching skills, and resource availability, as well as questions regarding the learning environment and the context within which the remote students viewed the course. Remote students were asked to complete the questionnaire at the end of the course. They could either submit their questionnaires at the final exam site or mail them to the instructor's secretary (most students chose the former). Students were assured their responses to the questionnaire would be kept confidential and that no questionnaires would be reviewed by the instructor or the teaching assistant until after final course grades were submitted to the university.

RESULTS

Responses to questions eliciting both qualitative and quantitative information illustrate the experiences of the students enrolled in distance education at two urban schools of social work. Remote students described and evaluated the benefits and the drawbacks of these two methods of distance learning. Remote students also indicated whether their experience had been such that they would enroll in a distance education course again. Table 1 presents a summary of the instructional and assessment methodologies, response rates, and reported student willingness to enroll in distance courses for each school.

University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work

There was a 63% response rate to the questionnaire among Pitt students. Of the 22 students enrolled in the course at Pitt, 16 students returned their surveys to the independent faculty evaluator (9 on-campus and 7 from the remote site). Pitt students were asked to respond to three distinct categories of questions. First, students were asked to assess the teacher's interactive skills while using the technology. Second, students were asked about resource

TABLE 1: **Summary Findings From Voluntarily Submitted Student Assessments From the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Wisconsin–Madison Schools of Social Work**

University	Technology	Data Collection	Response Rate	Enroll in distance Learning Course Again?
University of Pittsburgh	Interactive TV ($N = 22$)	Self-administered survey with self-addressed and stamped envelope	63% ($n = 16$)	100% Yes
University of Wisconsin–Madison	Videotape ($N = 260$)	Self-administered survey, submitted by student to school	48% ($n = 126$)	75% Yes

availability, so that experiences of students receiving on-campus instruction could be compared with the experiences of those remote students receiving instruction via ITV. Finally, student attitudes about ITV were assessed. Although it is traditional in the existing social work distance education literature to consider the responses of on-campus students involved in ITV instruction as if they were a comparison group of students who received traditional course delivery, the responses of on-campus students are included in the findings reported in this assessment because they, too, used technology in their learning experience. That is, the on-campus students were remote for at least one lecture, and all their interactions with remote students for the entire term involved the use of multimedia technology. Therefore, their experiences with technology are considered a valid component of this assessment. Unfortunately, there were not enough respondents to perform meaningful analysis of the Likert-scaled items.

Questions regarding the teacher's interactive skills asked students to assess the course instructor's ability at verbal and nonverbal communication. Students indicated they were pleased with the instructor's ability to make himself clearly and easily understood, both verbally and nonverbally ($n = 16$). Typical of student comments was "[The instructor was] superb, he couldn't have been more accommodating and eager to make this work for all of us." Both on-campus and remote students were asked to assess the instructor's quality of interaction with remote students during course lectures. Only 1 on-campus student felt the amount and quality of interaction between the classroom instructor and remote students was inadequate during lecture. Yet, all students agreed that the instructor did very well in making himself available to students outside the classroom sessions.

Questions regarding resource availability should be paramount to schools of social work contemplating the delivery of courses to remote sites. Instructors must be mindful to ensure comparability of the learning experience for remote students with on-campus students. Unfortunately, instructors often have less control off-campus over the availability of books, required readings, or other resources. At Pitt, remote students' experiences with resource availability did not differ from the experiences of their on-campus peers. All students ($n = 16$) agreed that textbooks and classroom materials (including the return of papers and tests) were available in a timely fashion. Only 1 remote student felt the library and research facilities at the remote site were inadequate and inaccessible.

When students were asked to assess the technology itself, both on-campus and remote students ($n = 16$) were pleased with the various video transmissions (i.e., human images, videotapes, and other instructional aids) viewed on their monitors. However, 1 student expressed concern about the clarity

and understandability of sound transmissions. Six students commented about the need to be mindful of the technological requirements each time they spoke. As 1 reported, "Remembering to press the microphone button was tedious."

Finally, Pitt students were asked whether the course met their expectations and whether they would enroll in another course delivered in this format. Almost three quarters (72%) of the remote students ($n = 5$) and 89% of the students receiving on-campus instruction ($n = 8$) felt their expectations for this course were either met or exceeded. There were no statistically significant differences between students receiving on-campus and remote instruction. Three students (1 on-campus and 2 remote) reported that the course did not meet their expectations. Nonetheless, 100% ($n = 16$) of the students who responded to this survey indicated they would enroll in another course if it were offered in the ITV format.

The University of Wisconsin–Madison, School of Social Work

At Madison, 48% of remote students responded to the survey request. Of the 260 remote students enrolled in the course, 126 students submitted questionnaires. The questionnaire distributed to remote students at Madison asked them to respond to questions regarding their experiences with the technology used in the prerecorded videotaped course, their learning environment, and the instructor's teaching skills.

Remote students responded very favorably to the course, highlighting more advantages than disadvantages in their experiences with learning via technology. More than half (56%, $n = 71$) of remote students indicated they videotaped the broadcasts and viewed them in the week they became available. Although 8 out of 10 students ($n = 101$) viewed their broadcast videotapes alone, 20% ($n = 25$) viewed the course with a friend, a family member, or another student.

Advantages of prerecorded video courses broadcast over public television. The majority of remote students found it helpful to be able to replay the videotaped broadcasts as often as needed to understand course content. In fact, 38 (30%) indicated that replaying the videotapes allowed them to take more adequate notes and prepare more effectively for exams. As 1 of these students opined,

> The benefits [of this class] for me were the idea that I could tape the class and watch it whenever I had a chance. . . . Before the exam while I was studying I realized that some of my notes were unclear. So, I was able to watch certain parts of lectures over again to clarify.

More than half of the 126 remote students ($n = 67$) indicated that, by far, the greatest advantage to a course of this type was the scheduling component. The format allowed students to view the course at their own pace, when it was most convenient. Remote students indicated that viewing the course at home, where they could make themselves most comfortable, was a distinct advantage of a course of this type. As one wrote,

> [The] benefits (of this course) included watching when it fit my schedule; not having any distractions (people whispering, etc.) like in lectures. I also felt that the material I learned through self-motivation (that is, not being required to attend lectures) was of value and was more likely to be retained.

Another student commented, "It was beneficial to be able to watch it at a time when I was rested and alert vs. classroom lectures when I'm not always in peak mental condition." Those balancing competing demands of school, employment, and family life were especially pleased with the format. Typical remarks were

> It was very helpful to have a (videotaped) course for those of us who need to work during the daytime.
>
> I liked the flexibility (of this course) I work full-time, am a new mom, and take one or two classes each semester. . . . (This course) was interesting . . . fun to watch . . . (and) extremely informative.

Finally, 90% ($n = 112$) of the students responded favorably to a particular segment included in each course session, the Community Programs and Perspectives segment. This segment was filmed on location at human services agencies and provided real-life examples of client behavior. This result was encouraging because developing these segments was the most difficult part of the course to schedule and to film. As an advantage of the prerecorded videotaped format, the instructor had hoped that filming in human service agencies would underscore material recorded in the studio, bringing "real life" examples into the course. The positive student responses to this segment indicated that the instructor had been successful in this goal for the course. A typical student comment was "[The Community Programs and Perspectives segment was] excellent. [They] made agencies seem more real, more accessible. It would . . . be nice to show these in class lectures." Another student remarked, "It was a real advantage to travel places with/through the camera that couldn't be captured in a textbook."

When asked to describe their impressions of the instructor, a majority of remote students were positively predisposed to the instructor (67%, $n = 85$). This response was typical: "I felt [the instructor] was not only knowledgeable,

but he had a genuine interest in the subject matter and the people involved. He was quite interesting and the classes were fun to watch, besides being extremely informative."

Problems with prerecorded video courses broadcast over public television. In response to open-ended questions, 27 (21%) students indicated they sometimes found it difficult to motivate themselves to stay focused on the videotape for the duration of the class session. Paradoxically, although they preferred the flexibility of viewing a prerecorded videotaped course, the videotaped format made it easier for the student to fall behind than it would have been in a traditional course.

> The only drawback [to the videotaped course] is the temptation to leave the lectures until the last few weeks. Still, it is much better to have the choice to do the course at home. It is also nice because you can stop and rewind if you miss an important point.

Siegel et al. (1998) note that a major philosophical barrier to distance education is the perceived loss of classroom interaction and instructor/student relationship when teaching via technology. Interestingly, only a small number (15%, $n = 19$) of Madison students said they missed the personal interaction with an instructor and fellow students not afforded by a course delivered in this format: "A minor drawback [of this course] would be that I didn't have immediate interaction, but I always knew that I could take my questions to someone the next day." Fully 87% ($n = 109$) of students believed that a scheduled discussion group should not be a requirement of this distance course. Three fourths of the Madison students ($n = 96$) indicated, if they had it to do over again, they would enroll in a course offered in this format.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATIONS
TO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

This article resulted from the need for more information on the learning experiences of distance education students, particularly across sites, so that the commonalities of the remote learning experience from the students' perspective could be examined. As an exploratory assessment, there are a number of research design limitations. This assessment was conducted post-hoc and lacks experimental controls. Furthermore, not all potential respondents submitted assessments at either school. Those who did respond may differ in unknown ways from those who did not. Moreover, remote student response rates differed noticeably between the two schools of social work

used in this article. It is possible that the lower response rate at Madison was due to two facts. First, survey administration at Madison was not a distinct event, as it was at Pitt. At Madison, students' survey instrument was in their packet throughout the semester. On the Pitt campus, students received the instrument during the last week of class as a unique event. Second, remote students at Madison had to complete the survey and either remember to bring it to the final exam site or mail it to the school via intercampus mail or the U.S. Postal Service. Pitt students, on the other hand, were provided with self-addressed and stamped envelopes to return their responses. Finally, the use of convenience samples that vary in size and were exposed to dissimilar technology prevents generalizing the findings beyond these samples of students.

The above limitations notwithstanding, the common experiences of students' learning via technology deserves attention. Thus, it is noteworthy that a majority of students from both schools indicated they had had very positive experiences with distance learning. Although their reasons differed depending on the technology, students found that neither the ITV nor the videotaped format interfered with their learning experiences.

Madison students described the greatest advantages to distance learning as flexibility and their ability to view the videotaped course broadcast at times when they were most highly motivated to learn. As reported in earlier articles, contemporary research suggests that learner independence and motivation have a statistically significant relationship with learning. In fact, remote students were found to perform the same as or better than their in-class peers on midterm and final exams at Madison (Petracchi & Morgenbesser, 1995).

Pitt students did, however, note the classroom microphones as being a concern. This is not a surprising reaction to ITV, as technicians expend most of their efforts in ITV on sound transmission and problems with it (Spirek, 1995). Essentially, two ways exist to station microphones in most ITV classroom, either stood on the desk or hung from the ceiling. When microphones are positioned from the ceiling, there is no discrimination between voices and other noises within the air range of the hardware—all noises are amplified and transmitted. On the other hand, when microphones are placed on tables, the best approach was the one used by Pitt wherein students pressed a button to activate the microphone when they spoke. This prevented all ongoing table noises (e.g., paper scrunching, pencil tapping) from being picked up and transmitted. Although Pitt students found the use of a button to activate their microphones "tedious," it is likely they would have been far more distressed with open microphones picking up all table noises or noises captured from the ceiling range.

Although Siegel et al. (1998) point out that no single standard type of technology is preferred, the responses from Madison students to the Community Programs and Perspectives segment underscore the positive aspects of flexibility inherent in using technology in course delivery. In terms of instructional design, highlighting course lectures with real-life examples of social work practice provided students with opportunities to be exposed to material they otherwise would not have had available to them (particularly in a large, urban school of social work, where a field trip to an agency would not prove feasible for large numbers of students). These videotapes have the additional advantage of being available for use by other courses in which information about a particular client group or agency may be part of an educational module.

Multimedia technology also allows instructors to adapt courses originally designed to be presented with minimal interaction between instructor and student, so that student involvement with their learning is enhanced. Madison students indicated the greatest benefit to them was a sense of control over their learning environment (i.e., when to watch, when to have breaks, how much material to absorb at a specific time). Although these same students also indicated that the course fostered a sense of isolation and passive learning (i.e., they couldn't ask questions, couldn't discuss material or issues, or tended to watch alone), they rejected requiring attendance at discussion groups as a component of this course. Pitt students did not feel disadvantaged in terms of resource availability. They felt that texts and supplemental materials were readily available and that assignments were returned in a timely fashion. Moreover, students at both schools had a positive regard for their instructors.

Perhaps the most significant result of this assessment was the positive response students had to the question, "Given the opportunity, would you enroll in a course delivered in this format again?" An overwhelming majority (100% at Pitt and 75% at Madison) of the 142 students included in this assessment gave responses to this question, reporting that they would, in fact, enroll in distance education courses again.

This article was designed to meet a need in the social work distance education literature for information on the learning experiences of remote students. Two promising approaches to distance education and learning were presented. The perspectives of our remote students should prove encouraging to social work programs facing the daily explosion of telecommunications technology while concurrently facing the challenge of weighing the costs and benefits of offering distance education courses to their students. Although further studies using more sophisticated methodologies are warranted, the opinions of remote student respondents to the questionnaires assessed in this

investigation suggest positive learning experiences for these students, particularly with these two delivery formats.

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