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Evaluation of an Online Master Program: From the Distance Learning Users' Perspective

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Abstract

This study examined the functioning of a group of instructional designers (IDs) in higher education through the lens of Communities of Practice (CoPs). The study particularly focused on whether and how the grouping of experienced and novice IDs operated as an effective CoP from the perspective of novices. The findings indicated that a group of IDs working in a midwestern university was able to cultivate a CoP within a clearly defined domain, a well-established community, and the shared practice with a specific body of knowledge. Particularly from the perspectives of novices, they highlighted the positive impact while participating in the CoP by contributing to their shared domain and defining who they are, developing expertise by interacting with experienced designers, and learning through different trajectories of participation. The rich description of this case study would further inform educators and practitioners in their efforts to improve the professional preparation and development for novice IDs in the higher education contexts.

Keywords

Distance education, Gaming simulation

Disciplines

Curriculum and Instruction | Online and Distance Education

Comments

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Keywords: Distance Education, Gaming/Simulation

Abstract

The growth of distance learning in higher education has heightened the need to evaluate the effectiveness online degree programs. Twenty-eight educational practitioners pursuing an online Masters of Education degree participated on this evaluation study. The analysis of their responses to a 46-item online survey showed the program effectiveness; recommendations for improvements on course design and development, assessment strategies and learner support were made.

The Need for this Study

The increasing growth of online programs in higher education calls for a need to evaluate these programs in a systematic way. In this study Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen's (2011, p. 7) definition of evaluation is used. They define evaluation as determining "the value, worth or merit of an evaluation object in relation to a set of criteria."

As cyberlearning becomes a trend, being able to conduct methodologically sound evaluative studies on the impact of online programs becomes an important part of the program itself.

Program evaluation is a vital element of successful distance education programs (Rovai, 2003). It should highlight students' learning contexts and serve as a vehicle for students to voice their recommendations for program improvement. Therefore, this study is focused on evaluating the effectiveness of an online Master's program from the students' or users' perspective. Online graduate programs should be designed with adult learners in mind to meet students' goals, expectations and their learning styles. Do online programs effectively offer courses that accommodate student's needs? To answer this question and others, an evaluation of an online Master's of Education degree program in curriculum and instructional technology was conducted. The results of this evaluation are described in this paper.

Goals of this Study

The online program evaluated was offered at a major research and land-grant university in the U.S. This degree was created to meet the needs of adult learners, especially K-12 teachers, and other educational practitioners, who were seeking and an advanced degree in Education, but could not enroll in a residential program. Using a cohort model, students enter the program every other year and enroll in one course per semester completing the program in three years. In the fifth year (after one cohort had completed the program, one cohort was in its second year, and a third cohort was starting the program), a study on the effectiveness of the online M.Ed program from the perspective of the distance learning users became a priority. The purpose was to conduct a systematic evaluation to inform decisions and actions for improving the quality of the online program. The evaluation addressed the following questions:

Q1: Has the program achieved its purpose?
Q2: Has the program helped students to define their educational goals?
Q3: Has the program content met the students' expectations?
Q4: Are students applying the knowledge and skills that they have learned in this program into their own professional practice?
Q5: What kind of issues have students encountered while pursuing this program?

Evaluation Methodology

The Online Program

The online Master's of Education in Curriculum and Instructional Technology (M.Ed in CIT) graduate program consists of 9 courses and 32 credits offered in a learning community environment to a cohort of students with a new cohort starting every two years. Cohort groups ranged in size from 8 -20 students. Most of the courses were delivered using WebCT as the learning management system. A creative component, such as an action research study or a portfolio, served as the culminating experience for students to synthesize their learning throughout the program.

The program uses a blended instructional approach where 85% of the instruction is on-line and 15% is face to face. Generally, students enrolled in one course per semester and each course begins with a face-to-face meeting (some courses had additional face-to-face meetings during the semester). When feasible, students travel to the university. Those who cannot travel, participate via internet conferencing (e.g. Skype, etc.). The face-to-face meeting allows for students and instructors to see each other and get to know one another in a non-mediated forum. In these initial meetings participants review course expectations, receive essential instruction (best provided face-to-face) and use the on-site technology laboratory facilities. Technical support is provided by the program coordinator, who assists students in resolving technical problems, assists faculty in the design of online course materials, and serves as a communication liaison between faculty and students. At the time of the study, there were six full-time faculty members and one administration staff involved in the M.Ed in CIT.

Students entering the program the same semester are grouped into cohorts. Cohorts have been used effectively in a wide variety of educational settings to foster learning (Barnett & Muse, 1993); cohorts are especially important for on-line students to quickly acclimate to being physically distant from their peers and instructors. Cohort grouping helps to develop and maintain group dynamics across individual classes throughout the program. But to prevent the phenomenon of "group think" (where everyone is so familiar with each other that new ideas and approaches are

rarely introduced, explored, and accepted) 3-5 additional students, not in the cohort, enroll in courses with the cohort students. That is to say, students who may be in the traditional face-to-face program or in other degree areas often enroll in courses with the online cohort students.

The Participants

Twenty-eight students participated in this study from January to December 2009. All students had a background in teaching, and most were or had been full time K-12 teachers. Out of the 28 students, four were from the first cohort (cohort 1, beginning in 2004), 11 from the second cohort (cohort 2, beginning in 2006), and 13 from the third cohort (cohort 3, beginning in 2008).

The four cohort 1 students were females between the ages of 20 and 40. In cohort 2, four students were male and seven were female ranging in age from 20 to 50 years old. Cohort 3 had seven males and six females ranging from 20 to over 50 years old. Additional demographic information about the students who participated in this study is summarized in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1: Student Online Survey in Cohort 1 (Demographic Data)

Category		Number of Students n = 4
Gender		
	Female	4
Age		
	20 – 30	3
	31 – 40	1
Position		
	K12 Teacher	4

Table 2: Student Online Survey in Cohort 2 (Demographic Data)

Category		Number of Students n = 11
Gender		
	Male	4
	Female	7
Age		
	20 – 30	7
	31 – 40	3
	41 – 50	1
Position		
	K12 Teacher	5
	Technology Coordinator	2
	Elementary Technology Teacher	3
	Instructional Designer/Software Engineer/Trainer	1

Table 3: Student Online Survey in Cohort 3 (Demographic Data)

Category		Number of Students n = 13
Gender		
	Male	7
	Female	6
Age		

	20 – 30	7
	31 – 40	3
	41 – 50	2
	more than 50	1
Position		
	K12 Teacher	6
	Technology Coordinator	5
	Instructional Designer/Software Engineer/Trainer	2

Data Collection Method

An online survey was used to collect the data. It consisted of 46 questions: 4 questions on demographics; 7 open-ended questions; and 35 close-ended questions with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The areas addressed on the survey were: (a) program objectives, (b) learning activity experiences, (c) delivery of materials, (d) instructor, (e) assessment, and (f) program administration. A pilot study of the survey was conducted to support reliability of the scores generated by the online survey items. This survey used some of the evaluative areas identified by Rae (2004) and the Michigan State University Virtual University Design and Technology (2007).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS. Qualitative data from the open-ended items were analyzed through the use of thematic coding and content analysis.

Results from the Evaluation

The online masters program evaluated had an 88% persistence and graduation rate for its cohort 1 students beginning in 2004, with 7 of the 8 students remaining in the program until the completion of all coursework and successfully graduating with a Masters of Education degree. Cohort 2 students, who began in 2006, had a 92% persistence and graduation rate with 12 of the 13 students completing all coursework and graduating in Spring 2009 (Correia et al., 2009). Out of the 17 students initially enrolled in cohort 3 that started in 2008, 14 are expecting to graduate in Spring 2011.The results from the evaluation are organized by cohort and evaluation question.

Cohort 1 Student Perspectives

The return rate for students in Cohort 1 was 57% for the online survey. Four (57%) out of seven students who graduated responded to the online survey.

Q1: Has the program achieved its purpose?

Cohort 1 students responded positively to the survey items related to the program's purpose with an overall average of *4.65* (Table 4). However, the mean score for item 2, 3, and 4 was below average *(item 2: m = 4.25, item 3: m = 4.5, item 4: m =4.5)*. Students expressed mixed opinions regarding the fact that the program was improving their leadership and management skills. Open-ended comments reflected concerns related to balancing full-time work and pursuing the online degree program.

Table 4: Online survey items categorized under Q1 (cohort 1).

		Response (%)					
#	Items	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	n = 4 (Mean)
1	This program provided me with real-life experiences useful to my profession.	-	-	-	-	100%	5

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 4 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
2	I have improved my leadership skills by attending this program.	-	-	25%	25%	50%	4.25
3	This program helped me to better understand learning and teaching issues.	-	-	25%	-	75%	4.5
4	I improved my management skills by attending this program.	-	-	25%	-	75%	4.5
5	The program was flexible enough to accommodate my needs.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
	Average of Q1						4.65

Q2: Has the program helped students to define their educational goals?
Cohort 1 students were satisfied with their course experiences with an average score of *4.8* (Table 5). They stated the following opportunities were available to them: (1) to engage in collaborative activities, (2) to use their own professional experiences in course activities, (3) to discover new things, and (4) to synthesize new information; however, students were not that positive in relation to the time they had to learn at their own pace, and the availability of well-designed social and practical activities (item 3, 8 and 9 were below average).

Table 5: Online survey items categorized under Q2 (cohort 1).

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 4 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	There were collaborative activities in the courses I took.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
2	I have learned from collaborating with my classmates.	-	-	-	25%	75%	4.75
3	This program offered well-designed social activities.	-	-	-	50%	50%	4.5
4	Activities required me to use my own professional experiences.	-	-	-	-	100%	5

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 4 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
5	There were practical activities in this program.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
6	I had many opportunities to discover new things in this program.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
7	Course activities encouraged me to synthesize new information.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
8	In this program, practical activities were well-prepared.	-	-	-	50%	50%	4.5
9	I was given enough time to learn at my own pace during the program.	-			50%	50%	4.5
	Average of Q2						4.8

Q3: Has the program content met the students' expectations?

Most of cohort 1 students agreed that the program content met their expectation with an average score of *4.5*(Table 6). However, open and close-ended questions showed some concerns about adequate evaluation activities to assess their own learning and opportunities to assess themselves in every learning activity. Mean scores for items 10 and 11 in Table 6 were significantly below the average *(item 10: m = 3.5, item 11: m = 3)*. Students recommended additional and timely feedback from the course instructors about students' progress.

Table 6: Online survey items categorized under Q3 (cohort 1).

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	I was able to obtain course materials easily via a variety of technological tools.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
2	I was able to work in WebCT.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
3	Course materials were well-designed.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
4	Course materials were motivating.	-	-	25%	50%	25%	4
5	Delivery of course materials were suitable for me.	-	-	-	-	100%	5

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
6	Instructors had good knowledge of subject.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
7	Instructors organized course well.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
8	Instructors were well prepared.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
9	I was able to easily communicate with instructors.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
10	There were adequate evaluation activities to asses my own learning.	-	25%	25%	25%	25%	3.5
11	I was able to assess myself in each activity I participated.	-	50%	-	50%	-	3
12	Student assessment strategies enhanced my learning.	-	25%	-	25%	50%	4
13	Grading was accurate.	-	25%	-	25%	50%	4
	Average of Q3						4.5

Q4: Are students applying the knowledge and skills that they have learned in this program into their own professional practice?
Cohort 1 students were clearly able to utilize knowledge/skills gained from the program in their own professional practice (Table 7). Open-ended questions revealed students were satisfied with this aspect of the online graduate program.

Table 7: Online survey items categorized under Q4 (cohort 1).

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	I could apply what have learned in this program to my profession.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
	Average of Q4						5

Q5: What kind of issues have students encountered while pursuing this program?
Students were asked to rate the administration of the program, which related to the program length and course sequence, support received, and educational cost and value. This aspect received an average rating of *4.75* (Table 8). It seems that the program administration was not an issue for any of the students and that they received adequate

administrative and technology support throughout the program. However, items 6 and 7 were rated below the average, which shows that the students were likely not fully pleased cost and value of the overall program.

Table 8: Online survey items categorized under Q5 (cohort 1).

		Response (%)					
#	Items	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	n = 11 (Mean)
1	The length of this program is adequate to complete a Master's Degree.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
2	The courses I took were logically sequenced.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
3	I was given appropriate administrative support when I had questions (admission, add/drop courses, tuitions/fees)	-	-	-	-	100%	5
4	My major professor encouraged me to pursue my area of interest.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
5	I was given appropriate support when I had any course -related technology problems.	-	-	-	-	100%	5
6	The program cost as a whole was reasonable.	-	-	25%	50%	25%	4
7	The value of education outweighed the program cost.	-	-	-	75%	25%	4.25
	Average of Q5						4.75

Cohort 2 Student Perspectives

The return rate for students in Cohort 2 was 92% for the online survey. Eleven (92%) out of twelve students who graduated responded to the online survey used for this study.

Q1: Has the program achieved its purpose?

Overall, cohort 2 students agreed that the objectives of the program were met. It is shown in Table 9 that evaluative question 1 received overall average of *4.18*. According to students, the program helped them to improve leadership skills. It provided real-life experiences for their profession. However, the mean score for item 3, 4, and 5 in Table 9 was below average *(item 3: m = 4.09, item 4: m = 3.82, item 5: m =4.09)*. The findings indicate that students found the management skills and enhancing understanding of their job after engaged in this program were appropriate, but the course content is still need to be improved. Therefore, it is likely that some of the coursework might not really applicable to their teaching and enhancing their management skills. They commented that they wanted to learn more about the use of technology in the courses, which may contribute positive effect on their own teaching and classroom.

Table 9: Online survey items categorized under Q2 (cohort 2).

		Response (%)					
#	Items	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	n = 11 (Mean)
1	This program provided me with real-life	-	-	-	63.63%	36.37%	4.36

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
	experiences useful to my profession.						
2	I have improved my leadership skills by attending this program.	-	-	-	45.45%	54.55%	4.55
3	This program helped me to better understand learning and teaching issues.	-	9.0%		63.63%	27.28%	4.09
4	I improved my management skills by attending this program.	-	9.09%	9.09%	72.73%	9.09%	3.82
5	The program was flexible enough to accommodate my needs.	-	18.18%	18.18%		63.64%	4.09
	Average of Q1						4.18

Q2: Has the program helped students to define their educational goals?
The students were asked to assess the learning activities that they had experienced in order to set their educational goals. Cohort 2 students were satisfied with their course experiences and the average score of satisfaction was *4.42* (Table 10). They indicated that the program structure was flexible and allowed them to work from home, adjust teaching schedules as well as family commitments; however, one student responded that they were not given enough time to learn at their own pace during the program (reflects from item 9 was below average, *item 9: m = 4.36*). Students really appreciated being a cohort group as they learned as much from other students in the group; they were together throughout the program, developed a strong relationship, and could rely on each other for assistance and guidance. The program also provided them with opportunities to get involved in collaborative activities, discover new things, and synthesize new information, which they could connect those experiences into their own classroom teaching. It can be said that the program helps students to set their educational goals through providing the flexibility of the program structure, schedule, and cohort system.

Table 10: Online survey items categorized under Q2 (cohort 2).

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	There were collaborative activities in the courses I took.	-	-	-	36.36%	63.64%	4.64
2	I have learned from collaborating with my classmates.	-	-	18.18%	9.09%	72.73%	4.55

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
3	This program offered well-designed social activities.	-	-	18.18%	45.45%	36.37%	4.18
4	Activities required me to use my own professional experiences.	-	-	-	63.63%	36.37%	4.36
5	There were practical activities in this program.	-	-	-	63.63%	36.37%	4.36
6	I had many opportunities to discover new things in this program.	-	-	9.09%	54.54%	36.37%	4.27
7	Course activities encouraged me to synthesize new information.	-	-	-	27.27%	72.73%	4.73
8	In this program, practical activities were well-prepared.	-	-	-	63.63%	36.37%	4.36
9	I was given enough time to learn at my own pace during the program.	9.09%			27.27%	63.64%	4.36
	Average of Q2						4.42

Q3: Has the program content met the students' expectations?
Students were asked to evaluate several aspects of the program related to program content, which including course materials, learning support, and assessment. Students were satisfied with these aspects and the average score of satisfaction was *4.32* (Table 11). This indicates that the element of TPACK (Technology, Pedagogical and Content Knowledge) was embedded in the course contents. Although the score was high, students commented that they should have been exposed to more technology tools that could be used in their classroom. It is shown that it is good to have an alternative to WebCT and that it may be better to use contemporary technology tools, so that students are able to work with sophisticated tools in order to enhance their technological skills.
On the other hand, the mean scores for items 10, 11, and 12 in Table 11 were below than category *'Agree' (item 10: m = 3.91, item 11: m = 3.73 item 12: m = 3.91)*. Most students indicated that the course materials were easy to access and well prepared, but be motivating and consistent in courses organization.

Adequate and timely feedback from instructors is essential in any teaching and learning setting. Students reported that most of the instructors were very experienced and knowledgeable, and cooperative. However, some students felt that they did not receive adequate and timely feedback from instructors. They commented that high quality rubrics should be designed for each assessment in order for students to examine their learning outcome. Thus, it is noted that instructors need to be more clear and precise about their expectation and to also provide a platform for

students to ask questions and interact with others.

Table 11: Online survey items categorized under Q3 (cohort 2).

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	I was able to obtain course materials easily via a variety of technological tools.	-	-	-	27.27%	72.73%	4.73
2	I was able to work in WebCT.	-	-	-	-	100%	5.00
3	Course materials were well-designed.	-	-	-	72.72%	27.28%	4.27
4	Course materials were motivating.	-	-	-	90.91%	9.09%	4.09
5	Delivery of course materials were suitable for me.	-	-	9.09%	63.63%	27.28%	4.18
6	Instructors had good knowledge of subject.	-	-	-	9.09%	90.91%	4.91
7	Instructors organized course well.	-	-	-	81.81%	18.19%	4.18
8	Instructors were well prepared.	-	-	-	72.72%	27.28%	4.27
9	I was able to easily communicate with instructors.	-	-	-	45.45%	54.55%	4.55
10	There were adequate evaluation activities to asses my own learning.	-	18.19%	9.09%	36.36%	36.36%	3.91
11	I was able to asses myself in each activity I participated.	-	18.19%	9.09%	54.54%	18.18%	3.73
12	Student assessment strategies enhanced my learning.	-	18.19%	9.09%	36.36%	36.36%	3.91
13	Grading was accurate.	-	-	-	54.54%	45.46%	4.45
	Average of Q3						4.32

Q4: Are students applying the knowledge and skills that they have learned in this program into their own professional practice?

Cohort 2 students felt they applied their learning to their own profession and were able to add technology into their own curriculum effectively. They evaluated these aspects relatively high with a mean of *4.64* (Table 12). Most of the comments focused on gaining research skills and the ability to integrate new technology into their profession. The students were mostly pleased with the skills that they have learned from this program such as project based learning with technology integration and strategy of metacognition.

Table 12: Online survey items categorized under Q4 (cohort 2)

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	I could apply what I have learned in this program to my profession.	3.5%	-	-	36.36%	63.64%	4.64
	Average of Q4						4.64

Q5: What kind of issues have students encountered while pursuing this program?
Students were asked to rate the administration of the program, which related to the program length and course sequence, support received, and educational value. This aspect received average ratings of *4.34* (Table 13). It seems that the program administration was not an issue for most students and that they received adequate administrative and technology support throughout the program. However, items 6 and 7 were rated below the average (*item 2: m = 4.27, item 6: m = 3.57, item 7: m = 4.18*). It shows that the students were likely not satisfied with the sequence course taken in the program and also the program cost.

Table 13: Online survey items categorized under Q5 (cohort 2).

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 11 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	The length of this program is adequate to complete a Master's Degree.	-	-	-	18.18%	81.82%	4.82
2	The courses I took were logically sequenced.	-	-	-	72.72%	27.28%	4.27
3	I was given appropriate administrative support when I had questions (admission, add/drop courses, tuitions/fees)	-	-	9.09%	18.18%	72.73%	4.64
4	My major professor encouraged me to pursue my area of interest.	-	-	27.27%	9.09%	63.64%	4.36
5	I was given appropriate support when I had any course-related technology problems.	-	-	9.09%	27.27%	63.63%	4.55
6	The program cost as a whole was reasonable.	-	27.27%	9.09%	45.45%	18.19%	3.55
7	The value of education outweighed the program cost.	-	9.09%	9.09%	36.36%	45.46%	4.18
	Average of Q5						4.34

Cohort 3 Student Perspectives

The return rate for students in Cohort 3 was 93% for the online survey. Thirteen (93%) out of fourteen students who are planning to graduate in spring 2011 responded to the online survey used for this evaluative study.

Q1: Has the program achieved its purpose?

Overall, cohort 3 students agreed that the objectives of the program were met with an overall average of *4.62* (Table 14). According to students, the program provided real-life experiences, helped them to better understand learning and teaching issues and was flexible enough to accommodate their needs. However, the mean score for item 2 and 4 in Table 14 was below average, which displays some areas of program improvement on developing leadership and management skills. Open-ended questions also included positive comments (flexibility, application and pace) to the program and its objectives, but some concerns/ issues were raised: (1) inconsistency on participation and strategies for engagement on online discussions, (2) need for more lecture-style presentations (pre-recorded live), and (3) inconsistency on work load among the different courses and design of the online environment.

Table 14: Online survey items categorized under Q1 (cohort 3).

		Response (%)					
#	Items	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	n = 13 (Mean)
1	This program provided me with real-life experiences useful to my profession.	-	-	7.7%	38.5%	53.8%	4.69
2	I have improved my leadership skills by attending this program.	-	7.7%	-	61.5%	30.8%	4.38
3	This program helped me to better understand learning and teaching issues.	-	-	-	46.2%	53.8%	4.77
4	I improved my management skills by attending this program.	-	-	15.4%	46.2%	38.5%	4.46
5	This program was flexible enough to accommodate my needs.	-	-	7.7%	46.2%	46.2%	4.77
	Average of Q1						4.62

Q2: Has the program helped students to define their educational goals?

Overall cohort 3 students were satisfied with their course experiences with an average score of *4.35* (Table 15). They reported opportunities to work collaboratively in class and activities where they were able to apply their professional experiences, encouraged to discover new things and synthesized new information. Lower scores (below average) were shown regarding the offering of social activities, design of practical activities and enough time to learn at their own pace (items 3, 8 and 9 with $m = 4.08$, $m=4.23$ and $m=3.69$, respectively).

Table 15: Online survey items categorized under Q2 (cohort 3).

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 13 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	There were collaborative activities in the courses I took.	-	-	-	46.2%	53.8%	4.54
2	I have learned from collaborating with my classmates.	-	-	-	23%	76.9%	4.77
3	This program offered well-designed social activities.	-	-	23%	46.2%	30.8%	4.08
4	Activities required me to use my own professional experiences.	-	-	-	46.2%	53.8%	4.54
5	There were practical activities in this program.	-	-	-	53.8%	46.2%	4.46
6	I had many opportunities to discover new things in this program.	-	-	15.4%	30.4%	53.8%	4.46
7	Course activities encouraged me to synthesize new information.	-	-	-	53.8%	46.2%	4.46
8	In this program, practical activities were well-prepared.	-	-	7.7%	53.8%	30.8%	4.23
9	I was given enough time to learn at my own pace during the program.	-	15.4%	23%	38.5%	23%	3.69
	Average of Q2						4.35

Q3: Has the program content met the students' expectations?

Students were asked about their satisfaction in relation to course materials, learning support, and assessment with an average score of *4.20* (Table 16). Even though access to course materials in WebCT, appropriateness of the mode of delivery and instructors' technology, pedagogical and content knowledge were scored above the average, there were several aspects of the program content that had lower scores (*m< 4.90*). They were:

- the overall design of the course materials (*item 3: m=3.86*),

- the motivational design of the course materials (*item 4: m=3.85*)
- communication with the instructors (*item 9: m=4.15*), and
- evaluation activities, assessment and grading *(item 10: m = 3.92, item 11: m = 4.00, item 12: m = 4.00, item 13: m=4.08)*.

Table 16: Online survey items categorized under Q3 (cohort 3).

		Response (%)					
#	Items	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	n = 13 (Mean)
1	I was able to obtain course materials easily via a variety of technological tools.	-	-	-	76.9%	23.1%	4.23
2	I was able to work in WebCT.	-	-	-	46.2%	53.8%	4.54
3	Course materials were well-designed.	-	-	7.7%	69.2%	23.1%	4.15
4	Course materials were motivating.	-	-	23.1%	69.2%	7.7%	3.85
5	Delivery of course materials were suitable for me.	-	-	7.7%	61.5%	30.8%	4.23
6	Instructors had good knowledge of subject.	-	-	15.4%	46.2%	38.5%	4.85
7	Instructors organized course well.	-	-	7.7%	53.8%	38.5%	4.31
8	Instructors were well prepared.	-	-	-	76.9%	23.1%	4.23
9	I was able to easily communicate with my instructors.	-	-	7.7%	69.2%	23.1%	4.15
10	There were adequate evaluation activities to asses my own learning.	-	7.7%	23.1%	38.5%	30.8%	3.92
11	I was able to asses myself in each activity I participated.	-	-	23.1%	53.8%	23.1%	4.00
12	Student assessment strategies enhanced my learning.	-	-	23.1%	53.8%	23.1%	4.00
13	Grading was accurate.	-	-	7.7%	76.9%	15.4%	4.08
	Average of Q3						4.20

Q4: Are students applying the knowledge and skills that they have learned in this program into their own professional practice?

Students reported that they applied the knowledge and skills they were learning in the program into their

professional practices with an average score of *4.46* (Table 17). Most of the comments focused on the opportunities to use different applications in the classroom and to effectively use technology for instruction. Other students mentioned the application of instructional design principles into their practices; with other students explaining that they were using what they were learning in the program into professional development activities.

Table 17: Online survey items categorized under Q4 (cohort 3)

		Response (%)					
#	Items	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	n = 13 (Mean)
1	I could apply what I have learned in this program to my profession.		-	-	38.4%	53.8%	4.46
				Average of Q4			4.46

Q5: What kind of issues have students encountered while pursuing this program?
Cohort 3 students rated a variety of features of the program regarding the administration, program length and course sequence, support received, and educational value of the program. This aspect received average ratings of *4.00* (Table 18), with items 4 and 6 rated below that. This shows that the students were not fully satisfied with the encouragement they got from their major professor on pursuing an area of interest (*m=3.31*) and with the cost of the program as a whole (*m=3.69*). Two of the major issues pointed out by the students were on the open-ended questions: (1) keeping self-motivation, (2) willingness to self-discipline and self-monitor; and (3) inconsistency among instructors in course planning, instructional materials development, course communications, and assessment.

Table 18: Online survey items categorized under Q5 (cohort 3).

		Response (%)					
#	Items	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	n = 13 (Mean)
1	The length of this program is adequate to complete a Master's Degree.	-	-	7.7%	53.8%	30.8%	4.23
2	The courses I took were logically sequenced.	-	-	7.7%	69.2%	23.1%	4.15
3	I was given appropriate administrative support when I had questions (admission, add/drop courses, tuitions/fees)	-	-	23.1%	38.5%	38.5%	4.15
4	My major professor encouraged me to pursue my area of interest.	7.7%	-	53.8%	30.8%	7.7%	3.31
5	I was given appropriate support when I had any course-related technology problems.	-	-	7.7%	61.5%	30.8%	4.23
6	The program cost as a whole was reasonable.	-	15.4%	23.1%	38.5%	23.1%	3.69
7	The value of education outweighed the program	-	-	23.1%	53.8%	23.1%	4.00

#	Items	Response (%)					n = 13 (Mean)
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	
	cost.						
	Average of Q5						4.00

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the participants of the online Masters of Education in Curriculum and Instruction were positive about the program. From the users' perspective the program had achieved its purpose of providing a high quality online graduate program in education. A large majority of students completed the program or were on schedule to complete the program in the 3-year timeframe. Although the students were positive about the program in general, they offered relevant suggestions for program improvement as well as pointing out components of the program that supported its effectiveness. Student comments included the following:

- "I don't know if the workload for this program is any different than the workload for other Masters programs, but the discussions we have online definitely get me participating more than I would in a normal classroom setting. I am also able to bring my classroom experiences into the learning environment and get useful feedback from colleagues."
- Keep the cohort system as it provides a sense of belonging among the students and develops strong relationships
- Expand into an online MS and/or Ed.D/Ph.D.
- Courses should offer more opportunities to engage with the latest technologies for learning and teaching
- Assessment methods and criteria should be made more explicit through examples of deliverables, homework, and discussion replies
- Coursework should be more aligned with the portfolio standards plus provide additional support in creating portfolio.
- "Push the idea of 'anytime, anywhere' through the fusion of on-line & on-campus instruction. Also, the collaborative & collegial atmosphere found in the Cohort would be attractive to most applicants. If someone is interested in this field, they would like to see the variety of instructor interests…"

The demands of a technology-saturated society require that degree programs at all levels be offered via distance education. The results of this study indicate that offering an online graduate degree in education with an emphasis in instructional technology can be an effective means for K-12 teachers to expand their educational background and technology integration skills and knowledge. In this study, students who were in or had recently completed an online graduate degree were positive overall about their online learning experiences in the program. Greater insight into their views at various stages throughout the three-year graduate program will allow instructors and instructional designers to better develop environments that meet their situational needs and learning demands. Further research in this area is appropriate and needed.

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