Developing and Teaching Research Methods Courses in the Computer-mediated Asynchronous Learning Environment.

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Abstract
The paper describes the unique experiences of developing and teaching two research methods graduate courses, Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Educational Research and Mixed Methods Approaches to Educational Research, in the computer-mediated asynchronous learning environment using the Blackboard platform. The uniqueness of the approach rested with blending a discussion format related to methodological and procedural issues with practical application through research projects performed by students in real-life settings. The paper explains the approaches used for the courses’ development, courses’ content and structure, and instructional approach. It also addresses the issue of value added.

With the advent of technology being infused into all dimensions of society, it is expected that higher education would look to its employment as a means for ensuring students were provided with requisite learning opportunities. But expertise in research design is not a common talent, and the ability to provide high quality instruction to students, especially advanced graduate students, is less abundant. Compounding the dilemma is the increasing requirement for providing learning to dispersed students, those matriculating in extended educational programs and those who are geographically removed from the locus of the home institution. Furthermore, it is increasingly important to allow such “distance students” to participate in courses at times when personal schedules allow, and not restrict involvement to a stated time. A resolution to the issue was to consider a vehicle to provide such learning to students and to ensure the learning was meaningful. The venue was computer-mediated asynchronous learning (CMAL). The objective of the manuscript is to share the unique experiences of developing and teaching two qualitative and mixed methods research courses to doctoral students in the CMAL environment using the Blackboard platform.

The uniqueness of both courses rested with the blending of a discussion format, related to methodological issues of qualitative and mixed methods inquiry, with practical application through research projects performed by students in real-life settings. Being location and time free, the online course format provided students the convenience of working at their own pace, but within the boundaries established for completion of work. Balancing the integrity of the learning requirements against the anticipated resources available to the participants was the responsibility of the instructor. It was expected that the courses would be labor-intensive for the instructor; at least a four-fold requirement when compared to conventional courses. Thus it was pivotal to ensure that upon satisfactory completion of the course, all participants would be able to display value added, but without inhibiting the instructor from performing other requisite duties as a professional member of a faculty.

The development of the courses was funded through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Office of Extended Education and Outreach during the fall of 2003 and spring of 2004. The goal was to meet the needs of distributed graduate students as they sought to fulfill their respective research tool requirements for a Doctoral Degree (either the EdD or the PhD). The courses are taught during a conventional 16-week spring and fall semester and a summer term of 8 or 12 weeks. Importantly, a summer course covers the identical material and
imposes the same expectations upon students. Certainly it demands participants to be exceptionally well-structured and to devote the requisite time for learning and applying the information, but simultaneously it is a considerable workload for the Instructor. A limit of 15 students is imposed but the Instructor has the prerogative for raising that number.

Content wise, the courses provide a practical introduction to qualitative and mixed methods research and how their principles apply to research in education and social sciences. Students in each course develop an understanding of these concepts: the history of the qualitative or mixed methods research and the basic philosophical assumptions of the studied research approach, its major characteristics and designs, data collection and analysis strategies, and validation techniques. The courses also address ethical issues related to these two forms of inquiry, the role of researcher, and strategies for reporting and evaluating qualitative and mixed methods results. Finally, students learn about the qualitative research software, QSR N6, and its use for data analysis.

Students get access to the course websites through the Blackboard student webpage, and are able to enter a number of work areas from the main page: information about the course, the Instructor, participant information, course documents and assignments, faculty office, class discussion board, private project team work areas in the qualitative research course, course virtual library, virtual cafeteria, and external links related to the course. Each course area has its own academic purposes and is interactive. A very comprehensive syllabus is provided, which includes the information on the course sequence, requirements, manner of performance evaluation, philosophy of the course, and all other related information. Of note is the syllabus’ need to be crafted with the view that readers are at a distance and consequently the instructor had to anticipate how or what students might find ambiguous. Clarity is important in the presentation of such information and oftentimes it was necessary to insert examples so students would have a specific example to follow.

The instructional approach consists of providing methodological guidance to students while they develop understanding of the research and master research skills. Due to the online mode of the course delivery, the primary course strategy includes student interactions related to the course concepts in the Course Discussion Board. It serves as the forum for each student to validate his or her knowledge in a secure and supportive environment. It is where students address the Instructor’s topics, interact with each other, and discuss the issues and/or points of view presented. Multiple threaded discussions occur concurrently during the progression of a topic module.

The courses’ content evolve logically and follow the steps necessary to design and conduct the course research project. Over the duration of the course, students are able to share different stages of their projects and receive constructive feedback from both the Instructor and other students. The notion of formative feedback is paramount and thus helps each person move forward toward mastery of both the content and manner for application.

Both courses have been offered several times over spring and summer 2004 and 2005. More than 50 doctoral students enrolled and all successfully completed the courses, despite being at varying stages of their programs of study. Geographically they were dispersed across the United States, but spontaneously created working networks beyond the confines of the course. The students varied in terms of number of academic credit hours completed, with the range being between 6 and 50 hours of earned graduate credits. Prior experience with online learning apparently did not affect the students' ability to participate in online discussions, to work independently, as well as collaboratively and productively. The notion of restricting involvement in research design courses until a student completed a major portion of a graduate program was proven to be fallacious. From these course offerings it seemed evident that motivated students could be successful when working with an Instructor sensitive to learning needs and knowledgeable in both the content and manner for presentation.
The quality of students’ work and their group and individual research projects provided evidence of the effectiveness of the courses’ format and content. Students’ final evaluations highlighted strengths of the course: the right balance between theoretical knowledge and development of practical skills, efficient course structure, and invaluable experience of group work. The primary strength of the courses was application of knowledge and ability to constantly receive the Instructor’s and other students’ feedback as it related to different stages of students’ research projects.