



Evaluating Distance Learning in Graduate Programs

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The Problem

- Distance learning technologies make graduate programs available to technical communicators almost everywhere.
- Do these programs provide an education that is as rigorous and rewarding as those provided by traditional on-campus programs?



The Courses

- Utah State University master's program in technical communication
- Publications Management—Fall Quarter 1997, 13 students
- Usability Studies—Spring Quarter 1998, 7 students
- Courses conducted as seminars; demanding reading and writing requirements

The Students

- Nearly all were full-time technical communication practitioners with at least two years of experience.
- Most were residents of the U.S., but several Canadians and one British national working in Thailand were enrolled.
- Multiple time zones made synchronous communication essentially impossible.

The Questionnaire

1. What did you think about the number and quality of the reading assignments?
2. What did you think about the number and quality of the written assignments?
3. What did you think about the quality of the online discussion?

The Questionnaire, continued

4. Do you think you got good value for your money?
5. Was this virtual seminar as rigorous and rewarding as a “real” graduate seminar should be?

Holistic Scoring of Essay Responses

5. Very favorable
4. Mildly favorable
3. Neutral
2. Mildly unfavorable
1. Very unfavorable

Mean Responses to Questions

Question	Mean Response Publications Management Course	Mean Response Usability Studies Course
Perception of reading assignments	3.7 (N = 9)	3.9 (N = 7)
Perception of written assignments	4.3 (N = 8)	4.1 (N = 7)
Perception of online discussions	3.1 (N = 10)	3.1 (N = 7)
Perception of return on financial investment	4.6 (N = 5)	4.4 (N = 7)
Perception of rigor and return on intellectual investment	4.0 (N = 5)	4.2 (N = 5)

Perceptions of Reading Assignments

- “I found the reading assignments to be valuable to class discussions. They were also applicable to . . . the workplace.”
- “The reading assignments were challenging yet not overwhelming.”
- “I was forced to block out significant chunks of time just to do the reading.”

Perceptions of Writing Assignments

- “Our assignments . . . targeted our everyday work as technical writers/publication managers.”
- “The assignment schedule was rigorous, but it’s what I expected from a graduate level course.”
- “. . .very cool. I haven’t worked that hard for quite some time”

Perceptions of Online Discussions

- “The class discussions never really had the give and take that one might expect.”
- “I found this to be one of the pleasant surprises of the course. . . . I thought the postings were excellent.”
- “I’m learning to adjust my expectations of online classes. [They] provide a different experience than regular classes.”

Perceptions of Return on Financial Investment

- “The course gave me lots of new ideas for approaching project planning, and it gave me confidence to try these new ideas.”
- “Not only do I think I got good quality, but my employer thinks so.”
- “At times I was a little concerned that I could have done this course myself with just a purchase of the books.”

Perceptions of Rigor and Return on Intellectual Investment

- “. . . this course was more work than most seminars I’ve taken. What was missing was the depth.”
- “Compared to other classes . . . , this class was quite demanding and intense. I liked it very much.”
- “. . . this virtual seminar was more rigorous than a ‘real’ graduate seminar.”

Recommendations

- Easily available texts and supplemental readings identified well in advance of course
- Assignments that provide experience in both theory and practice
- Greater instructor involvement in online discussions
- Alternatives to traditional library research