Online Course Offerings: Issues of Retention and Professional Relationship Skill Development[*]

Tod Allen Farmer

Mark Weber

This work is produced by The Connexions Project and licensed under the
Creative Commons Attribution License [†]

note: This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. In addition to publication in the Connexions Content Commons, this manuscript is published in the International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, [1] Volume 5, Number 1 (January − March 2010). Formatted and edited in Connexions by Theodore Creighton, Virginia Tech.

1 Relationship Skills

Johnson (2006) believes that, "there is no way to over emphasize the importance of interpersonal skills and their use to build constructive and effective relationships." He defined interpersonal skills as "the sum total of your ability to interact effectively with other people" (p. 398). Research involving the concept of relationship building and maintenance is well established. Thomson (2006) explained that:

1.1

The Michigan leadership studies (1950s) took place at about the same time as those at Ohio State. Under the general direction of Rensis Likert, the focus of the Michigan studies was to determine the principles and methods of leadership that led to productivity and job satisfaction. The studies resulted in two general leadership behaviors or orientations: an employee orientation and a production orientation. Leaders with an

---

employee orientation showed genuine concern for interpersonal relations. Those with a production orientation focused on the task or technical aspects of the job (p. 4).

Relationship skills are vital for educational leaders. Leaders must use relationship skills to build consensus, develop social capital, and shape the critical mass that is necessary to affect change in the school setting. Relationship skills are also necessary to shape organizational culture. Sharif (2007) found that social relationships directly influenced quality of life (p. 31). Effective educational leaders use relationship skills to form mutually beneficial professional working relationships whose needs are aligned with organizational objectives. These professional relationships can then collectively and collaboratively influence organizational culture and thereby enhance the quality of life for members of the organization. Leadership preparation programs should include instructional activities designed to develop professional relationship skills.

The articulation of defining relationship oriented behavior varies. For instance, Gorton, Alston, and Snowden (2007) define relationship oriented behavior as behavior valued by leaders who concentrate not only on the task at hand but also on their relationship with their subordinates (p. 9). Lundengurg and Ornstein (2004) defined relationship behavior as leadership that engages in two-way communication by providing social-emotional support, "psychological strokes," and facilitation behaviors (p.143).

In general, education leadership preparation programs place great emphasis on the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationship skills. Harris (2006) emphasized that in the world of education leadership, "relationship building is vital"(p. 79). Fullan (2003) points to the campus principal as the person who must establish a climate of relationship trust within the organization to effectively tackle tough issues (p. 63). Bryk and Schneider (2002) also focus on the school principal as the key person in developing relational trust with his/her campus faculty and staff. They identified four dimensions or criteria on which they based their measure of relational trust. The four were respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity (p. 43).

The traditional higher education classroom uses various teaching techniques to allow students to experience relationship building activities while in the classroom and during planned field experiences. Many education leadership textbooks contain activities that are designed to promote relationship building and maintenance techniques. For instance, discussion groups are often formed to allow student expression or reaction to topics presented in a verbal or written format with classmates. Students actively participate in debates, present research findings, use questions to both inquire and inspire, react to practitioner's scenarios, create vision statements, plan together, form consensus, explain and demonstrate a concept, collectively work through the decision making process, use dialogue and non-verbal language to work through common situations experienced by practicing educational leaders, and more. These activities are designed specifically to expose personal traits such as those described by Johnson (2006) as follows:

1. Disclose yourself to others to let them recognize you as a distinct and unique individual.
2. Build trust between yourself and others.
3. Communicate your ideas and thoughts effectively.
4. Communicate you feelings verbally.
5. Communicate your feelings non-verbally.
6. Listen to others' problems constructively and respond in helpful ways.
7. Face conflicts with the other person and resolve them constructively.
8. Manage anger and stress in constructive ways.
9. Value diversity and build relationships with individuals who are different from you.
10. Overcome the internal barriers to relating effectively with others (p. 389).

The overall goal of educational leadership classes is to allow students to participate in activities designed to replicate practical learning experiences while preparing for their future as effective school administrators.

2 Those Who Say No to Online Course Delivery

Can these interpersonal activities be implemented as effectively if delivered to students via the on-line format? There are those who would resoundingly say "no" to this question. For instance, Noble (2002) criticizes online

learning as a method of education that is turning post secondary learning into an impersonal commodity he calls "commodification" that benefits educational producers and distributors, but not its recipients, the students (p. 2). Brown & Green (2003) reported that opponents of online course delivery have suggested that it lowers the quality of academic standards (p. 148-149). Others have viewed the online course delivery as a "cash cow" as reported by Yang & Cornelious (2005). Brandt (1996) expressed concerns that include the changing nature of technology, the complexity of networked systems, unstable online environments, and the limited understanding of how much students and instructors need to know to successfully participate. Gallick (1998) opines that online instruction threatens to commercialize education, isolate students and faculty, reduce standards, and devalue university degrees.

3 Those Who Say Yes to Online Course Delivery

Conversely, Schank (2001) believes that online course delivery is pedagogically superior to traditional course delivery. Ascough (2002) and Rosie (2002) agree that online courses can promote student's critical thinking skills, and they can encourage collaborative learning and problem solving skills. Proponents also argue that online courses can encourage non-discriminatory teaching and learning practices since all students must participate with equal access to fellow students and instructors.

The combination of traditional and online instructional delivery, called the "blended" approach, is emerging as a mode of delivery most preferred according to Eijil, Pilot. & Voogd (2005). Rovai and Jordan (2004) explain that the hybrid or blended type of course delivery can give students the reassurance they need to see the instructor and ask questions in person.

A study by Allen & Seaman (2003) revealed that a majority of academic leaders (57%) already believe that the learning outcomes of online education are equal to or superior to those of face to face instruction. Nearly one third expect that learning outcomes for online education will be superior to face to face instruction in three years (p. 3). The belief that online delivery of instruction maintains a high degree of credibility is becoming quite popular.

4 The Demand for Online Course Delivery is Increasing

According to the Sloan Consortium (2008), the number of students taking online courses has risen from 1.6 million in 2002, to 2.3 million in 2004, 3.5 million in 2006. This trend toward online learning is expected to continue, especially as more traditional institutions add online components to their programs. Jones (2003) adds that at the same time, enrollment in higher education is expected to grow at 16% over the next decade. The forecast for rising online enrollment is due in large part to the projected increase in online program offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2004). Howell, Williams, and Lindsay, (2003) concluded that educational institutions are responding to the changes by offering online versions of a number of traditional campus based programs, and in some cases creating a virtual campus.

In addition to the general positives that online instruction offers for students, such as flexible scheduling and virtually no travel costs, other benefits of attending online courses include students' ability to enroll in multiple institutions, sometimes simultaneously, temporarily stop-out, or have multiple transfers between institutions (Johnstone, Ewell, & Paulson, 2002). Shaik (2005) writes, "with the simple click of a button students are able to shop for courses and programs that best accommodate their schedules and learning styles" (p. 2).

5 Study Results Comparing Online to Traditional Methods of Delivery

Studies by Tucker, (2001), Phipps and Merisotis, (1999), Johnson, Aragon, Shaik and Palma-Revis (1999) and others were conducted to determine if differences exist in the area of student outcomes between online education students and traditional face to face education students. Gubernick and Ebeling (1997) stated that online education students scored from five to ten percent higher on standardized achievement tests than did students in the traditional classroom setting. Tucker's (2001) study found that online education can be just

as good as traditional face to face education. She found that there were no significant differences between pre-test scores, homework grades, research paper grades, and final grades. However there were significant differences between online education students and traditional face to face education with regard to age, post-test scores, and final exam scores. Online education students scored higher in all three categories. Tucker (2001) goes on to say that "this is not sufficient evidence to conclude that distance education is superior to traditional education" (p. 6-7).

Guillot's (2003) research revealed that there was general agreement among online instructors that online teaching and face-to-face teaching were very different. An example of the difference was presented in a thematic analysis conducted by Nation (2006) which revealed that the technology skill levels of both online instructors and their students influenced course content and teaching practices. Research conducted by Ledbetter (2003) supported the belief that online instructors could be successful in demonstrating transformational leadership by: 1) trusting their students; 2) developing personal relationships; 3) assigning interdependent group projects; 4) building rapport; and 5) emphasizing meaningful application during the teaching and learning process.

Additional studies indicate students' attitudes differ toward online and traditional instructional delivery. Cicco's (2007) analysis of variance (ANOVA) reported that an online student group clearly possessed more positive attitudes toward online instruction than a student group that received instruction in the traditional face to face setting. There is additional empirical evidence pertaining to online students having expressed a desire for online instructors to provide more clearly stated guidelines among things that faculty could have done more of to assist their online learning (Guillot, 2003). Szucs Werner's (2009) research involving online nursing students revealed that online students perceived a connection with their instructors and the university equal to that of nursing students attending class. However, students attending class had a stronger connection with other students on campus.

6 Student Retention Issues Associated with Online Education

Nitsch (2003) stated, "Retention of adults in online programs is a persistent and perplexing problem for providers of adult education" (p. 3). With online learning, there is a greater likelihood that a student will not complete courses and stay enrolled in an online program than in an on-campus course (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Student drop-out rates in online courses are as high as 35% to 50% (Lynch 2001). Nitsch (2003) summarizes the reasoning behind the high attrition rates for online learners as follows:

6.1

The online learner is isolated from much of the social activities of learning (White & Weight, 2000). The online student lacks immediate support of peers and instructors, an important element of student success as described in Tinto's model of attrition (Tinto, 1993). In this model, several factors that impact attrition are explained with emphasis placed on the need for social integration as part of the learning process. Lonely people tend to be less involved in the learning process (Pugliese, 1994). With this lack of physical proximity, there is a decrease in the motivation to succeed in the online courses. Where many of the students seek out online learning because of its flexibility, this flexibility puts a student in the position of having to depend only on oneself to maintain the desire to complete a course. Without an adequate support system, a student could easily lose sight of the reasons for completing the program and decide to drop out (p. 7).

Fjortoft (1995) found that students with high levels of perceived intrinsic benefits were more likely to succeed in an online program. The University of Illinois offers a list of student profiles that could be used to demonstrate the skills needed to be a successful online learner. They are:

1) Are you able to work independently?
2) Will you sacrifice personal time to complete assignments?
3) Can you write clearly and articulate your thoughts coherently?
4) Are you a self starter?
5) Are you able to manage time?

6) Do you have strong study skills?
7) Do you need direct lecture to understand materials?
8) Are you comfortable asserting yourself in a group?
9) Are you computer literate?

Student level of satisfaction regarding course delivery has also been found to be an important factor in retaining students in online courses. Herbert (2006) revealed that the data from his study showed that almost without exception, successful completers were more satisfied with all aspects of an online course (p. 8). Carr (2000) maintains that gifted instructors can always work around problems encountered with online course delivery.

The literature reveals some online teaching strategies that may increase student retention levels and in turn strengthen the online course experience for students. Among the many teaching techniques highly valued include:

1) Training of educators on how to teach online classes is very important (Serwatka, 2005).
2) It is crucial for instructors to let students know how much time and computing skill is necessary to be a successful distance education student (Carr, 2000).
3) Engage students as early as possible and keep them engaged. Successful distance education professors e-mail their student frequently and respond to email messages promptly, hold regular office hours, and develop personal touches to make contact with their students, such as posting photographs of themselves (Carr, 2000).
4) Herbert (2006) echoed Braxton's (1997) belief that "A critical issue in retention in onlone courses is related to a student's sense of belonging (page 2). The instructor should strive to create a sense of community among the students so they care about one another and are interested in what others have to say. This can be done by providing an online informal discussion area where students can share information about each other, debate topics and share points of view. This is sometimes called a "discussion board" (Serwatka, 2005).
5) Yang and Cornelious (2005) warned that instructors should understand that online education is not merely uploading teaching materials, sending and receiving e-mail messages, and posting discussion topics onto the Internet. More importantly, it provides an arena for an interactive, deep collaborative, and multidimensional thinking and learning environment (page7).

7 Conclusions

According to WebSiteOptimization.com (2004) the number of U.S. households that had Internet access was 18% in 1997, 41% in 2000, and 75% in 2004.

As stated earlier, the Sloan Consortium (2008) reported the number of students taking online courses currently exceeds 3.5 million. These statistics are the foundation for the recent increase in demand for online delivery of course instruction. To meet the demand, higher education institutions must restructure their programs to accommodate, that is, unless they want to risk declining enrollment.

There will always be traditionalists who argue that online courses will never be able to supply the personal interaction that some students crave in order to be successful (Carr, 2000). They maintain that personal relationship building and maintenance can only truly be accomplished in the physical presence of others. However, recent studies support online course delivery to be just as effective as traditional course delivery and in some cases more effective, regarding student outcomes and scores on standardized tests. Many would argue that a combination of the two delivery methods may be the best compromise for all, while others maintain that totally online delivery will eventually be the norm in our every changing society. Regardless, online learning is here to stay and it will be a determining factor in the success of education leadership programs for many years to come.

8 References

Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2003). *Sizing the opportunity: The quality and extent of online education in the United States. 2002-2003.* Needham MA: The Sloan Consortium. Retrieved from http://www.aln.org/resources/sizing_oppo .

Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2004). *Entering the mainstream: The quality and extent of online education in the United States.* 2003-2004. Sloan-C Series Books onOnline Education. Retrieved from http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/index.asp[3] .

Ascough, R. S. (2002). Designing for online distance education: Putting pedagogy before technology. *Teaching Theology and Religion, 5*(1), 17-29.

Brandt, D. (1996). *Teaching the net: Innovative techniques in Internet training.* Paper presented at the 11th Annual Computers in Business Conference, Washington D.C. (ERIC Document No. ED 412 975).

Brown, A., & Green, T. (2003). Showing up to class in pajamas (or less!): The fantasies and realities of online professional development. *Clearing House, 76*(3), 148-151.

Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools.* New York, NY: Russell Sage.

Carr, S. (2000). As distance education comes of age, the challenge is keeping the students. *Chronicle of Higher Education,* February 11, 2008, Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/weekly/v46/i23/23a00101.htm. [4]

Cicco, G. (2007). A comparison of online instruction, and in-class instruction as related to graduate students' achievement, attitudes, and learning style preferences. Retrieved from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=1&did

Eijil, P., Pilot, A., & Voogd, P. (2005). Effects of collaborative and individual learning in a blended learning environment. *Education and Information Technologies, 10*(1-2), 51-65.

Fjortoft, H. (1995). *Predicting persistence in distance learning programs.* Paper presented at the Mid-Western Educational research Meeting, Chicago, IL.

Fullan, M. (2003). *The moral imperative of school leadership.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Gallick, S. (1998). *Technology in higher education: Opportunities and threats.* University of California at Los Angeles. (ERIC Document NO. ED 415929).

Gorton, R., Alston, J., & Snowden, P. (2007). *School leadership & administration: Important concepts, case studies & simulations.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Gubernick, L., & Ebeling, A. (1997). I got my degree through e-mail. *Forbes, 159*(12), 84-92.

Guillot, F. A. (2003) *Teacher and student perceptions of online instructional methodology in higher education: An explanatory mixed methods study.* Retrieved from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=17&did=775148821&Sr

Harris S. (2006). *Best practices of award winning secondary school principals.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Herbert, M. (2006). Staying the course: A study in online student satisfaction and retention. *Online Journal of Distance learning Administration, 9*(4). Retrieved from: http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter94/herbert94. .

Howell, S., Williams, P., & Lindsay, N. (Fall 2003). Thirty-two Trends Affecting Distance Education: An Informed Foundation for Strategic Planning. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration , 4*(3). Retrieved from: http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall63/howell63.html[7] .

Johnson, D. (2006). *Reaching out: Interpersonal effectiveness and self actualization.* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Johnson, S., Aragon, S., Shaik, N., & Palma-Rivas, N. (1999). *Comparative analysis of online vs face to face instruction.* University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. (ERIC Document NO. ED 448 772)

---

[2]http://www.aln.org/resources/sizing_opportunity.pdf
[3]http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/index.asp
[4]http://chronicle.com/weekly/v46/i23/23a00101.htm.%20
[5]http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=17&did=775148821&SrchMode=1&sid=2&Fmt=2&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VNa
[6]http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter94/herbert94.htm
[7]http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall63/howell63.html

Johnstone, S., Ewell, P., & Paulson, K. (2002) Student Learning as Academic Currency. *ACE Center for Policy Analysis*. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/bookstore/pdf/distributed-learning/distributed-learning-04.pdf[8] .

Jones, R. (2003). A recommendation for managing the predicted growth in college enrollment at a time of adverse economic conditions. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration 6*(1). Retrieved from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring61/jones61.htm [9] .

Ledbetter, T. W. (2003). *Leadership: Practices used by online instructors in higher education.* Retrieved from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=5&did=765164141&SrchMode=1&sid=3&Fmt=2&VInst=PROD&VType=P

Lynch, M. (2001). *Effective student preparation for online learning.* Retrieved from: http://technologysource.org/article/e

Nation, D. L. (2006). *A study of the effects of faculty knowledge of educational technology on online classroom faculty leadership practices.* Retrieved from: http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=1232426251&SrchMode=

Nitsch, W. (2003). *Examination of factors leading to student retention in online graduate education.* Retrieved from http://www.decadeconsulting.com/decade/papers/StudentRetention.pdf[13] .

Noble, D. F. (2002). Technology and the commodification of higher education. *Monthly Review, 53*(10), 1-8.

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2003). *The virtual student.* (pp.17-28). San Francisco , CA : Jossey-Bass.

Phipps, R., & Merisotis, J. (1999). *What's the difference? A review of contemporary research on the effectiveness of distance learning in higher education.* Washington: The Institute for Higher Education Policy.

Pugliese, R. (1994). Telecourse persistence and psychological variables. *The Journal of Distance Education, 8*(3), 22-39.

Rosie, A. (2002). Online pedagogies and the promotion of "deep learning". *Information Services & Use, 20*(2/3), 109-116.

Rovai, A. and Jordan, H. (2004). Blended learning and a sense of community: A comparative analysis with traditional and fully online graduate courses. *International Review of research in Open and Distance Learning.* Retrieved from http://www.doaj.org/doaj?func=openurl&genre=journal&issn=14923831&volume=5&issue=2&da

Schank, R. (2001). Revolutionizing the traditional classroom course. *Communications of the ACM, 44*(12), 21-24.

Serwatka, J. A. (2002). Improving student performance in distance learning courses. *The Journal, 29*(9), 46-51.

Shaik, N. (2005). Marketing distance learning programs and courses: A Relationship marketing strategy. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 3*(2). Retrieved from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer8 .

Sharif, B. A. (2007). Social capital and health in a digital society. *The Health Educator, 39*(1), 31-37.

Sloan Consortium (2008). Retrieved January 2, 2008, from: http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/index.asp[16]

Szucs Werner, L. J. (2009). *Analysis of online learning and community.* Retrieved from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?

Thomson, G. (2006). *Leadership theories and studies.* Retrieved from http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/management/Int-Loc/Leadership-Theories-and-Studies.html[18]

Tucker, S. (2001). Distance education: Better, worse, or as good as traditional education?, *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 2*(4).

---

[8] http://www.acenet.edu/bookstore/pdf/distributed-learning/distributed-learning-04.pdf
[9] http://www.westga.edu/%7Edistance/ojdla/spring61/jones61.htm
[10] http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=5&did=765164141&SrchMode=1&sid=3&Fmt=2&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VNan
[11] http://technologysource.org/article/effective_student_preparation_for_online_learning/
[12] http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=1232426251&SrchMode=1&sid=6&Fmt=2&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VNa
[13] http://www.decadeconsulting.com/decade/papers/StudentRetention.pdf
[14] http://www.doaj.org/doaj?func=openurl&genre=journal&issn=14923831&volume=5&issue=2&date=2004
[15] http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer82/shaik82.htm
[16] http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/index.asp
[17] http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=6&did=1856734761&SrchMode=1&sid=7&Fmt=2&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VNa
[18] http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/management/Int-Loc/Leadership-Theories-and-Studies.html

White, K., & Weight, B. (2000). *Online teaching guide:A handbook of attitudes, strategies, and techniques for the virtual classroom.* Boston: Allen and Bacon.

WebSiteOptimization.com (2004). Retrieved from http://www.websiteoptimization.com/bw/0403/[19]

Yang, Y., & Cornelious, L. (2005). Preparing instructors for quality online instruction. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 8*(1), 1-16. Retrieved from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring81/yang81.htm

---

[19]http://www.websiteoptimization.com/bw/0403/
[20]http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring81/yang81.htm