All for One and One for All: Relationships in a Distance Education Program

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Introduction

As distance education becomes more prevalent, higher education has attempted to meet the growing demand for courses, curriculum, and programs offered at a distance (Lindner, Dooley, and Murphy, 2001). The National Center for Education Statistics (1999) reported that more than 50% of higher education institutions offer courses at a distance. More institutions are projected to offer such courses in the future. Distance education technology is changing how universities and colleges teach. Dooley and Murphy (2001) noted that future success of Colleges of Agriculture would be dependent on faculty members' ability to use technology to enhance the teacher/learner process.

Responding to the changing landscape of higher education Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University have developed and delivered the first doctoral degree in agricultural education offered entirely at a distance. The Joint Doctor of Agricultural Education program was approved by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in 2000. The first cohort of twenty students who were place or time bound were admitted and began course work during fall semester 2000. The program is referred to as Doc-at-a-Distance (D@D). D@D is an Ed.D. program that attempts to provide: specialized curriculum designed for agricultural professionals in Texas; high quality learning environment that encourages discovery, integration, and application; expertise from two nationally recognized universities in agricultural education; skills necessary for agricultural professionals to advance in their current positions; degree awarded jointly from both institutions; and opportunity to further professional preparation while continuing your career. The first D@D course was initially delivered synchronously and supported with web course tools, using the Trans Texas Video Conferencing Network, to 11 sites. Subsequently courses are being offered using a variety of synchronously and asynchronously methods and techniques. This semester, the first anytime-anyplace (no face-to-face meetings and no deadlines) asynchronously delivered course is being offered.

Developing and delivering courses, curricula, and programs at a distance requires faculties and administrators to consider many factors including how to overcome barriers to effective and efficient implementation of distance education courses, curricula, and programs. Muilenburg and Berge (2001) found ten barriers that must be dealt with when delivering distance programs: administrative structure, organizational change, technical expertise, social interaction and quality, faculty compensation and time, threat of technology, legal issues, evaluations/effectiveness, access, and student-support services. Moore (2001) noted that to be successful in delivering online courses, faculty must: allow student to student interaction with minimal faculty intervention; engage students in regular assignments in order to monitor progress and intervene when needed; provide specialized attention to students with low levels of self-directedness; and help students become more self-directed. Students in distance education courses and programs often feel isolated and apprehensive. This may be due to lack of student to student and student to faculty contact (Muilenburg & Berge, 2001).

Tobin (2001) noted that distance education students and faculty must have good relationship skills. Poor relationship skills often manifests into conflict, problems, frustration and failure for both students and faculty. Tobin further noted that students in a distance education course or program who fail to engage and build relationships with students and faculty are more likely to fail than those students who do engage and build relationships with students and faculty. Jones, Lindner, Murphy, and Dooley (2002) found that although approximately 85% faculty members in the College of Agriculture at Texas A&M University were not philosophically opposed to distance education, only 42% indicated that learning requires face-to-face meetings between teachers and the students.

D@D has attempted to address the relationship issues and concerns noted above by establishing protocols and procedures for building, maintaining, and evaluating student to student and student to faculty relationships (Shinn, 2002). Specifically, the program attempts to: provide timely and appropriate interaction between students and faculty, and among students; provide appropriate training in methods and technologies for interaction for faculty who teach and for students who learn at a distance; encourage interactive teaching and learning that fosters critical dialogue, integrative learning, mentoring, cooperative peer learning, and group out-of-class activities; use e-mail or Web-based sites to inform students about opportunities for interaction in person-to-person or in distance settings; and monitor synchronous and asynchronous interactions between faculty and students to assess the total duration and systemacy of engagement.

In addition to the protocols and procedures listed above, D@D has developed and implemented a cohort framework for students to work within. A cohort can be defined as a group of people sharing a commonality. The initial D@D cohort consisted of 20 students. Two students dropped out of the cohort for personal reasons. The program called for subgroups or additional cohorts of three to six students based on location. The intent of the overall cohort and geographical cohorts were to create opportunities for increased student to student and student to faculty interactions. Distance education students often feel isolated, and cooperative learning models such as cohort groups can increase student to student and student to faculty interactions (Kochery, 1997). Such interaction may result in increased retention rates and provide a mechanism for helping distance education students deal with isolation issues associated with being time and place bound (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Dorn & Papalewis, 1997).

Although many distance education courses take advantage of online communication tools, such as email, threaded discussion, and chat, students often have limited face-to-face contact (Perrin & Mayhew, 2000). Students further often fail to establish strong and sustainable relationships with other students and faculty. Perrin and Mayhew noted that distance education might not be able to

create the amount of interaction associated with face-to-face courses. Miller and Wester (1997), however, found that faculty teaching distance education courses can provide students with similar amounts of interaction as they do oncampus students.

Little is known, however, about efforts to develop sustainable relationships and increase student to student and student to faculty interactions within a distance education program. Murphy (1997) noted that the instructional effectiveness of distance education is comparable to that delivered oncampus. For distance education programs to be successful they must provide "for appropriate and sufficient synchronous and asynchronous interaction between faculty and students and among students" (Murphy, 1997, p. 8). The research presented here is an attempt to gauge how well the D@D program has been at developing sustainable relationships between and among students and faculty. The data for this research is part of a larger formative evaluation conducted half way through the D@D program (Kelsey, 2001).

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of the study was to examine relationships in a distance education program. Specifically the study sought to describe student relationships with faculty of the D@D program, and to describe student relationships with cohort groups in the D@D program.

The study used qualitative methods to collect, analyze, and interpret the data (Patton, 1990). The data consisted of telephone interviews with all participants and historical documents provided by the program planners. The participants were assigned numbers 1 through 18 to protect their identity. Claims made by the students are supported with quotations.

The population for the study included all students who had completed the inaugural year of the Doc-at-a-Distance program (*N*=18). The program leaders initially solicited the participants by sending them a letter informing them of the study and asked for their participation in a telephone interview with the researcher. After the initial solicitation, the program planners gave the researcher the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the participants. All 18 students agreed to participant in the study by engaging in a one-hour telephone interview.

Interviews were collected during July and August 2001. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for verbatim accuracy. Copies of the printed transcripts were mailed back to participants for verification of accuracy. Seven transcripts were returned for corrections (1, 4, 8, 9, 11, 15, 18). All interviews adhered to a flexible interview schedule that was developed in conjunction with the purpose and objectives of the study. The researcher engaged participants in probing questions, which evolved during the interview process to explore emerging themes.

The data were analyzed and reported using commonly accepted qualitative procedures (Creswell, 1998):

1. *Organization of data*. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, cleaned by another individual who listened to the tape of the interview and read the transcribed document to check for accuracy, and then loaded into a qualitative data analysis software program called ATLIS.ti.
2. *Categorization of data*. Categories were identified (codes) and the data were clustered into meaningful groups using ATLIS.ti as the organizational tool.
3. *Interpretation of the data*. Specific statements that fell into like clusters were examined for specific meanings in relationship to the purpose of the study.
4. *Identification of patterns*. The data and their interpretations were scrutinized for underlying

themes and patterns that characterized the program and allowed the researcher to draw conclusions.

5. *Synthesis.* An overall portrait of students' responses was constructed where conclusions and recommendations were drawn based on the data presented.

Merriam (1998) recommended six strategies for enhancing validity qualitative research. Students' claims were *triangulated* with program planners' claims regarding certain facts regarding the program structure and format. *Member checks* were accomplished by first mailing students a copy of their interview transcripts for verification of accuracy and, second, by mailing students a draft copy of the report for verification of findings and conclusions. No reports were returned to the researcher from students for clarification of facts. One student emailed the researcher to express concern over confidentiality issues. Three students emailed the researcher to report that the findings were accurate (6, 8, 11).

Draft copies of the findings were also mailed to program planners for *peer examination* and feedback. The study was conceptualized with program planners, adding an element of *collaborative research* to further enhance validity. *Researcher's bias* can never fully be removed from an individual; however, an awareness of personal biases was acknowledged during the study and analysis of results.

Reliability is the extent to which research findings can be replicated. Guba and Lincoln (1989 p. 236-243) suggested different terms for discussing research reliability in qualitative studies: *dependability* and *consistency*. The question then becomes whether the results are consistent with the data collected. Four criteria for judging a research study are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Member checking addressed *credibility* when copies of the transcripts and a draft of the report were sent to the research subjects and program planners to confirm or disconfirm emerging hypotheses. *Transferability* may be achieved by providing descriptive detail to allow others to decide if the findings are applicable to other cases. There is generally no attempt to generalize results of an evaluation study to other populations; however some analytical generalizations can be drawn if other situations are similar to this one.

Dependability was addressed in the study by keeping detailed records of the data collected and analysis procedures. A transcript of each interview was created from the audiotape of the interview and provided to interviewees for verification or amendment. All documents and notes were retained for inspection. *Confirmability* was addressed in the study by including excerpts from the raw data that supported interpretations and conclusions drawn by the researcher.

Relationships with Faculty

All 18 students were asked a variety of questions regarding their relationships with faculty of the Doc-at-a-Distance program. They were asked to describe their relationships with their professors, if they were satisfied with the amount of interaction they engaged in with their professors, and if there were things they would like to change about their relationships with faculty. Not all students responded to all three questions directly but the conclusion was that students were happy with their relationships with the professors, that interactions were generally adequate with a few exceptions, and suggestions for change focused on increasing response time to communications and increasing time for non-structured interactions.

All 18 students reported that their relationships with their professors were positive and students

were very complimentary of the faculty's willingness to accommodate their needs. Faculty were reported as being available via email and telephone, and most were quick to return calls when messages were left by the students. Professors were described as being helpful, patient, generous, responsive, understanding, encouraging, innovative, and "bending over backwards for us" (11). One student commented that the gathering in August 2000 contributed to the formation of supportive and positive relationships between students and faculty (7).

Interaction with Faculty

Students spoke about the amount and quality of interaction with faculty. Thirteen students were satisfied thus far and reported no problems of any kind (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16) "They have all been so good to me, I can't complain. If I could hammer on one I would, trust me, I am paying a lot of money for these courses, I would hammer on them. That is the one thing that has probably been the most encouraging about this program; just how supportive those guys and ladies are… I have been totally impressed" (4).

One student reported that she was reticent to interact in one particular class because of comments the professor made in regard to stating opinions that were not backed by research findings. She was alienated by the repeated reference that "nobody really gives a [hoot] about what you think until you have a [doctorate title] behind your name" (1).

One student reported that he wished for more conversational time with the faculty and other students during class and that interaction was stilted and did not allow for natural conversation due to the nature of the interactive video conferencing system (6). When students desired to ask a question, the response was given to that one student, rather than a discussion among the class, leaving this student to feel excluded from the conversation (6).

One student observed that some professors talked continuously without pausing to allow for questions (6). The students did not know when to interrupt the professor to ask a question, and the student assumed that the professor could not see the students to observe body language that often depicts a need for clarification of a point when lecturing.

One student was content with the amount of in-class interaction, as this was her expectation for learning at a distance; however, if she were on campus she would expect a "huge increase in interaction" (8). This student was overly cautious to not criticize the faculty for the lack of in-class interaction as her appreciation for being able to work on her doctorate degree at a distance far outweighed her need for more interaction.

Two students reported that they were not satisfied with the amount of interaction between them and the professors and desired more interaction (5, 15). Two felt that not being on campus was a disadvantage to building relationships with faculty (6, 15), and one worried that the lack of face-to-face contact may impair her when she gets ready to defend her research (12). One student reported that when he was on campus he noticed warmth between faculty and on-campus students that was absent in his interactions with faculty and accounted for the difference by the distance (15). Two students complained that the response time for returning phone calls and email was slow among a few professors (14, 15), and two students complained that they could not reach certain professors (17, 18), but no names were mentioned.

Possible Changes

When asked if there was anything that they would change about their relationships with faculty, nine students said, "no, I'm pleased with my relationships with the professors" (1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10,

11, 12, 14). "I think everything is good and there is nothing to change" (3).

One student added that she was able to visit with the professors through her professional responsibilities and thought that it would be beneficial if others could engage in more face-to-face time with the professors as well (10). Another student felt that a once-a-month conference via interactive video conferencing where the time was dedicated to a question and answer session would benefit the group (13). Another student would like professors to be "a little more personable" when dealing with him (16).

Relationships with the Cohort Group

Students were asked to discuss their relationships with their cohort group. Several students were clustered at one site and several students were learning alone. Of those who were alone, most preferred to have a least one other cohort member at the site for support and interaction, but did not want to limit the number of sites available or disqualify applicants simply because there were fewer than two students per site (11).

Students were asked: "what benefit do you get from your cohort group?" Most students enjoyed the comradeship with the other students and reported a strong social network that operated to provide support and encouragement for persisting in the program. There was a sense of *all for one, and one for all*; that if one can succeed, they all could succeed. All 18 students reported feeling that their life stage - non-traditional students, married, children, and all working professionals, and their desire to earn a doctorate degree at a distance - inextricably tied them to one another.

The cohort provided "encouragement that everybody is working, in the same boat, and struggling. They have families that need them and so you know that you are all suffering but you are all suffering together and you're going to make it together" (1). "We are all in it together, that's the biggest benefit" (5). "When there is a problem that comes up or when somebody needs help with something, the email starts flying back and forth and everybody works together to keep the information going" (13).

One student commented that this group lacked a typical competitiveness that was often present in her other courses and that the cohort requirement of the program stressed cooperation (10). Specific benefits of the cohort group included tips on where to purchase textbooks at a discount, discussing family life, shared housing when traveling, interest in similar content areas, acting as study buddies, and learning from a wide variety of people with different worldviews and experiences. When asked how she would feel if she did not have a cohort group, a student replied, "I think I would probably quit" (18).

Fourteen of the 18 students responded to the question: "how many cohorts would be optimal at the receive site?" (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18). The number ranged from two to ten students per site with an average of 3.42. Eleven of the 14 respondents preferred at least three students per site. Three students reported that students who were at sites by themselves were at a disadvantage (1, 2, 17) (Table 1).

Table 1. Ideal Number of Cohorts at Local Site

Student Number	Students per site	Frequency
11	2	1

1, 2, 18	2-3	3
6, 12, 13, 15, 17	3	5
7, 16,	3-4	2
5	3-5	1
3	8-10	1
10	Don't know	1

Conclusions and Recommendations

All 18 students reported that their relationships with their professors were positive, and they were very complimentary of the faculty's willingness to accommodate their needs. Students were happy with their relationships with the professors, stating that interactions were generally adequate with a few exceptions. Suggestions for change focused on increasing response time to communications and increasing time for non-structured interactions with professors, perhaps at the end of interactive video conferencing sessions.

The cohort group concept proved to be a success for the program. Most students enjoyed the comradeship with the other students and reported a strong social network that operated to provide support and encouragement for persisting in the program. There was a sense of *all for one, and one for all;* that if one can succeed, they all could succeed. All 18 students reported feeling that their life stage - nontraditional students, married, children, and all working professionals, and their desire to earn a doctorate degree at a distance - inextricably tied them to one another. Of those students who were learning alone at the remote sites, most preferred to have at least one other cohort member at the site for support and interaction. Specific benefits of the cohort group included tips on where to purchase textbooks at a discount, discussing family life, shared housing when traveling, interest in similar content areas, acting as study buddies, and learning from a wide variety of people with different world views and experiences. The ideal number of cohorts at each site was at least 3 students.

Student autonomy should be examined in future studies of the Doc-at-a-Distance program. It appears that the cohort group concept, while proving to be a great comfort to students, may be inhibiting student autonomy within the program. Students reported that the cohort dynamics were related to student persistence. Future studies should more closely examine the relationship between the cohort learning environment and retention in the program.

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