

Tests of the Validity of Perceptions About Interactive Television Courses Among Faculty Members and Students

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In the 1990's many institutions have begun offering programs and courses delivered via distance learning technologies, particularly for returning adult learners who are time- and location-bound, desiring to advance their education and career opportunities yet constrained by job and family responsibilities. One popular form of distance learning is interactive television, a technology that connects two or more classrooms with two-way audio and two-way video. Many faculty members, however, have expressed reluctance to become involved in distance education. Since they are instrumental in this educational process, a study was conducted in which the perceptions of four distinct groups were explored regarding various aspects of the distance learning experience via ITV; students who have and have not taken an ITV course, and faculty/administrators who have and have not taught an ITV course.

The results of this descriptive study, conducted during the Fall 1997 semester at a regional university, indicate that there are highly significant differences between what students think they will experience in an ITV course and the report from students who have taken such courses. In general, students anticipate a less effective class due to technological limitations. However, this was not the experience of students enrolled in ITV courses. Interestingly, in spite of the lack of problems related to technology, both faculty and students who have had experience with ITV-delivered courses still prefer face-to-face sections. As expressed by both groups, these preferences do not seem to be the result of technology-related issues. Instead, it appears that factors other than those related to the technology itself impact overall satisfaction levels and teaching/learning preferences. This is important to those who

provide distance educational offerings since the success of distance learning programs and courses may well hinge on faculty members' and students' attitudes and perceptions. According to responses, teachers who have not used interactive television are most concerned about start-up issues and basic knowledge about the nuts and bolts of designing and managing distance education courses. Among faculty who had taught at least one interactive television course, the area of greatest concern was lack of personal contact, followed by the potential negative impact of technology on class discussions and course management-related issues.

A large number of faculty respondents also expressed concern about receiving appropriate training prior to teaching their distance education course. Consequently, one of the most important findings from this study is the potential impact that provision of appropriate training experiences may have on faculty attitudes towards teaching ITV courses. At the institution where the study was conducted, faculty who had taught ITV courses felt as though they were adequately prepared to enter the ITV classroom although the perception among those who had not taught such a course was that this was a major concern. Currently, at that institution faculty members are typically informed about training opportunities, after they have been assigned to teach an ITV course. Better promotion of these preparatory workshops, which are available at most institutions where ITV classes are taught, could help to mitigate faculty reluctance.

Pertaining to the student data, testing for significant differences between the two student groups (those who have and have not taken courses delivered via ITV) was conducted to compare answers obtained on ten items relating to ITV classroom experiences. These items included the ability to see and hear the instructor, the ability to see other students in the course, the ability to submit course materials to the instructor without too much trouble, and so on. In all cases the mean score among those who had not taken an ITV-delivered class was lower than among those who were enrolled in an ITV-delivered section during that particular semester. This may indicate that students who have not taken an ITV course perceive more difficulties/challenges with the ITV-

delivered class than are actually present. Nevertheless, among students who had taken an ITV-delivered course, mean scores on the items indicated that students had an overall favorable attitude towards various technical aspects of the course (e.g., the ability to see and hear the instructor). Yet when asked if they would take another class delivered via ITV, the mean response was 2.96 on a 5-point scale (Neutral) and when asked if they would recommend ITV-delivered courses to their friends, the mean was 2.74. Standard deviations were 1.19 and 1.15, respectively. Thus, it may be concluded that students' somewhat ambivalent feelings toward re-enrolling in ITV-delivered sections may be due to factors that are unrelated to technology. This preference could be a cohort effect. Due to thirteen years (K-12) of conditioning in traditional classrooms today's adults may be of the mind-set that this delivery mode is the only acceptable/effective method. As various forms of distance learning technologies become more available and pervasive in elementary and secondary education, the preference for traditional classrooms at the college level may be tempered.