Distance Education in Dissertations: A Literature Review

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Introduction

Higher education for better or worse has accepted distance education as a viable instructional environment. Graduate students in recent years view the distance educational environment with normalcy and acceptance of its necessity. Too often the predilection of young researchers is to study draw inspiration from their immediate environment. The purpose of this literature review is therefore to identify literature created by graduate students of distance education. A survey of the published literature revealed a concentration of topical issues surrounding distance education of importance to graduate students. A review of this nature may shed light on future research opportunities as well as an indication of issues involving graduate students in the distance educational environment.

Methodology

A question was formulated to guide the methodology of this review: What is the direction of research in the field of distance education and student achievement as defined by the dissertation output of this decade? A search of ProQuest’s Dissertation & Theses Full Text was conducted. The search terms included the keywords: “distance education” and “student achievement” with the implementation of the limiters, “Full Text” and “year 2000 to present.” Abstracts for all studies were examined for relevance to the question. Only studies available in full text online were included in this literature review. Twenty-five studies were identified for review. These studies were then categorized by subject or study character for discussion.

Analysis and Discussion
Examination of the collected articles revealed that graduate students who studied distance education were most interested in four questions:

- Does learning environment, face-to-face or at a distance, affect student achievement?
- How is the structural and behavioral environment of online learning constructed?
- What influence does the technical difficulties of computing have on learning?
- What are the learner’s preferences in the online learning environment and what role do these preferences play in learner satisfaction?

*The Effect of Learning Environment: Distance or Face to Face*

Numerous studies (Arenas, 2005; Beeler, 2002; Coose, 2006; Herman, 2004; Hjorth-Gustin, 2004; Lee, 2003; Russell, 2003) were conducted of the effect of learning environment on students’ achievement, specifically face-to-face versus distance education. The studies compared the achievement levels of learners in the two different environments with a variety of levels and courses. All but one (Conklin, 2008) of the studies met with the same conclusion, that environment plays no significant difference in achievement.

Conklin’s study (2008) offered a vastly different outcome from the other studies of environment. There was significantly lower achievement from the online learners than the face to face learners. The researcher attributes these results to the societal conditions of the study population who were learners at an urban community college in New York. Further study of the effects of socio-economic indicators on online learning is warranted.

*Environment of Online Learning*
Four studies (Duplissis, 2006; Gallegos-Butters, 2008; Lightfoot, 2004; Sellers, 2001) conducted ethnographic examinations of online learning environments. These studies represent concerns of how online learning environments are constructed behaviorally and structurally. The intention of each study was to provide information for further improvement of online learning environments. Lightfoot (2004) attempted to define the “initial training experience,” “course development,” and “implementation” stages of online course management. This investigation provided feedback for professional development improvement.

Two other researchers were concerned with identifying the role of implementers. Sellers (2001) took a different approach in a case study that provided insight on initial training of teachers for online instruction. The outcome was the creation of an orientation guide for teachers new to online learning. Duplissis (2006) identified his study as an analysis of an online education program and its future; but a major focus of the study was the role that administrators play in online education.

Gallegos-Butters (2008) surveyed professors in an online business program to discover their pedagogical beliefs and best practices. A study of this nature may provide information for the development of an evaluation system for online programs. Further research in this area may provide more data to consider for triangulation.

found that video conferencing yielded some unanticipated behaviors that contributed to achievement success. Williams (2004) found that open learning instruction and synchronous instruction demonstrated small gains in achievement.

**Technical Influence**

Four studies (Chelus, 2003; Chen, 2005; Libron-Green, 2004; Richmond, 2005) examined the influence of technical factors on student achievement. The studies focused on the effects of bandwidth, support services, threading capabilities with discussions, and automated feedback. One may conclude from these studies that an increase in achievement was proportional to the amount of technical difficulties in the learner’s experience.

**Learner Preferences and Satisfaction**

Several researchers (Beldarrain, 2008; Butler, 2008; Miller, 2001; Sutton-Folkestad, 2000; Ruksasuk, 2000; Witowski, 2008) sought to discover what may affect student satisfaction in the online learning environment. Miller (2001) and Witowski (2008) found that instructional delivery mode did affect student satisfaction. Beldarrain (2008) and Sutton-Folkestad (2000) found student satisfaction was affected by their interaction preferences, but also found that interaction level had no significant affect on achievement. Butler (2008) and Ruksasuk’s (2000) studies yielded similar results. These researchers found that while cognitive learning style had no significant effect on achievement, cognitive learning styles did affect student satisfaction.

**Summary**

Graduate students draw inspiration for research first from their own immediate experiences. Many graduate students will utilize some form of distance education during
the degree process. A survey of literature surrounding distance education written by graduate students has yielded a topical dissection of issues. Early research focused on achievement and construction of learning environments. More recent research has concentrated on technical issues, learner preferences, and satisfaction.
References


