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PROPOSAL SUBMISSION FORM

Presenter:

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Title: Trends and patterns in contemporary distance education research: A content analysis of 2010 dissertations in P-16 distance education
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PURPOSE and SIGNIFICANCE:

According to Moore and Kearsley (2005), “distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special course design and instruction techniques, communication through various technologies, and special organizational and administrative arrangements (p. 2).” For centuries, distance education has evolved. In the early 1880s the invention of the postal service provided people with the ability to obtain instruction from a teacher at a distance. In 1840, Isaac Pitman began a “Penny Post” correspondence program for Great Britain that assured the delivery of a letter for a penny where students could learn shorthand. During this period, formalized correspondence language instruction was popularized in Berlin, Germany by Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langenscheidt (Schlosser & Simonson, 2005). During the 1920s and 1930s, broadcast radio became the instructional media and delivery tool preferred by educators in distance education (Picciano, 2001). For the first time, instruction could be delivered to a large population at once. Radio, however, did not live up to expectations. Radio became generally replaced by television in the 1940s and 1950s. Television instruction sparked even more interest and led to the development of the Open University which evolved in 1971 by the British government. The Open University integrated audio and video and correspondence together with face to face tutorials. (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Distance education then moved on to teleconferencing. Teleconferencing used video, audio and computers to provide the ability for learners to interact with other learners and an instructor in real-time. Innovations continued to improve distance education bringing us to the online internet-based virtual classes, which is where we operate today.
Distance education continues to grow and change. Research in distance education is growing exponentially and research in this field has exploded. Technological advances in communication have transformed the way we deliver instruction. Understanding the trends and patterns in topics of research is pivotal in the advancement of research in online education. New media and technologies are being developed at a rapid pace and therefore the world of distance education is constantly changing. Research in distance education becomes outdated almost overnight. Therefore, research in distance education needs to be current with these new technologies in order to make distance education most productive.

The primary purpose of this study is to conduct a content analysis of contemporary research in online education. Specifically, I will analyze the abstracts of dissertations completed between January 2010 and November 2010 to identify trends and patterns in contemporary research. Lee, Driscoll, and Nelson’s (2004) categorization system will be the foundation for the content analysis. The authors identified six topics that they used as a basis to examine research articles published in four prominent distance education journals between 1997 and 2002. They found that article topics varied from year to year and have been closely related to the occurrence of new media technologies. The six topics they used for categories are (a) design related topics, (b) development related topics, (c) management related, (d) evaluation related topics, (e) institutional and operational related topics, and (f) theory and research related topics. A secondary purpose is to present a strategy that doctoral students or other novice researchers can use to identify patterns and trends in contemporary research across their field of study.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Five research questions are the foundation for this study.

1. Based on Lee, Driscoll, and Nelson’s framework, what topics define contemporary doctoral dissertation research?

2. What epistemologies are used in contemporary dissertation research (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods)?

3. What grade level is the focus of contemporary dissertation research (P-3; 4-6; middle level, secondary level; post-secondary).

4. Who are the participants (students, instructors, administrators, etc.)

5. How was data collected? (surveys, tests, scales, interviews, observations, etc.

RESEARCH METHOD

Sampling. The unit of analysis will be abstracts for dissertation published in Proquest between January 2010 and November 2010. ProQuest is an electronic publisher and microfilm publisher. It provides a dissertation database. The following search terms will be used to identify dissertations in the realm of distance education: online learning, online education, distance education, distance learning, instructional design, virtual learning, virtual school and web-based learning. The citation and the abstract will be searched for these search terms. Abstracts will be printed to use in the coding process.

Data Collection. I will develop five coding forms, one for each of the research questions. Each coding form will consist of appropriate coding categories. Content analysis involves creating a set of categories linked to the research problem and the research questions. For example, Coding Form 1 will list the six topical categories identified by Lee, Driscoll, and
Nelson (2004). In addition, the coding form will include an “Other” category in case the topic does not align with one of the six a priori categories.

Data analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) will be reported in five tables, aligning with each of the research questions. Patterns and trends will be discussed.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

This study will provide doctoral students a way to focus research interests as they relate to distance education. There has been much research conducted on distance education and this study would provide the doctoral student with data on what areas are lacking in the research and find areas that they could begin to focus on. The results will also be of interest to other novice researchers because the study demonstrates a strategy (content analysis) for identifying trends and patterns in published research.
References


