

PROJECT SL-IDE (SPEECH LANGUAGE-INTERACTIVE DISTANCE EDUCATION): UTILIZATION OF MULTI-COMPONENT TECHNOLOGY

Juliann Woods, Ph.D., Director of Clinical and Distance Education*
Linda Gessner, Ph.D., Project Coordinator*

Personnel preparation and service delivery go hand in hand as we prepare young professionals to meet the needs of children with communication disorders and delays enrolled in exceptional student education programs. Throughout the country, the greatest shortage of personnel to work with exceptional children with communication disorders is in the public schools. These positions are either vacant or filled with out-of-field or under-qualified persons (often with individuals with undergraduate degrees, who lack academic preparation and clinical experiences in diagnostic evaluation and treatment with this increasingly diverse population).

The state of Florida, recognizing the limits of preparation available at the undergraduate level, passed legislation in 1989 requiring a Master's degree to be certified as a speech-language pathologist in the public schools. Due to the shortage of master's level personnel in the schools, superintendents and administrators lobbied and altered the legislation to allow persons to be conditionally employed with the requirement that they be accepted into a graduate program within two years. Problems of program accessibility and the necessity of part-time enrolment for these employees immediately arose.

In response to this need, the Department of Communication Disorders at Florida State University instituted a part-time distance learning Master's degree program (Project SL-IDE) in the rural Panhandle area of the state for currently employed, under-qualified personnel serving exceptional children with communication disorders in the public schools. Twenty-four distance learning students, from 10 school districts, are currently enrolled in this 10 semester program. This cohort began in June 1999 and will complete their course of studies in August 2002. Courses are transmitted via two-way audio and video from the Florida State University main campus site in Tallahassee, Florida to the University of West Florida Main Campus in Pensacola, Florida.

The courses in this program are being taught utilizing multi-component technology. The students will be prepared to provide high quality SLP services and to enhance educational outcomes and the quality of life of students with disabilities and their families. These objectives will be achieved through the following experiences incorporated in the scientist-practitioner model:

- didactic courses offered via two-way interactive audio-video transmissions to distance learning sites;
- an emphasis on developing critical thinking skills through cooperative learning and problem-based learning activities via web-based, interactive projects;
- an emphasis on translating research to practice;

*Florida State University

- opportunities for intensive supervised clinical practicum in four settings following relevant coursework and in conjunction with clinical practicum courses;
- provision of Regional Coordinators serving as Co-Instructors for didactic courses, as Clinical Coordinators for students at their sites, and as Clinical Supervisors;
- incorporation of content for working effectively with paraprofessionals and with interdisciplinary teams;
- preparation to work with culturally diverse populations; and
- completion of a rigorous, part-time master's degree program in 10 semesters.

Distance education is defined as any form of instruction in which the learner is separated from the instructor but is linked by technology that permits live, real-time interactive audio and video exchanges (Barker, 1989; Barker & Hall, 1994; Keegan, 1990; Simonson & Schlosser, 1995). The distance learning delivery method used for this innovative Master's level program is two-way interactive videoconferencing from the main campus in Tallahassee, Florida to the branch campus in Pensacola, Florida, which allows teachers and students to see and hear each other during instruction. Consequently, visual and auditory communication is provided at both sites.

One camera typically focuses on the students in the classroom, one focuses on the instructor, and one is dedicated to showing overheads and other graphics. In addition, there are direct interfaces for broadcasting videotapes and for computer presentations. The instructor views the students at the remote site on a continually available 32-inch television monitor in the back of the classroom. There are additional monitors that students and the instructor can see for showing the view from other cameras or the other sources of transmission. There also is a fax machine available for communication between sites.

Full-time, tenure-track faculty members teach all of the courses offered to the distance learners. In addition, the main campus faculty member teaching the course travels to the remote campus at least once during the semester and transmit the class from that site. The exchange of examinations, books, reference materials and other hard copy materials were facilitated by a weekly courier service. Textbooks are delivered directly to the campus bookstore at the remote campus.

There is a faculty member assigned to direct the program and facilitate coordination between the two sites. Each faculty member also receives release time during the semester prior to their teaching assignment for planning with staff who assist at both settings. Strategies for effective teaching via two-way interactive audio-visual transmissions are shared and demonstrated. To facilitate learning and development of technological skills and student relationships between campuses, instructors utilize CourseInfo, a World Wide Web tool that allows them to develop and manage course materials and interactive classrooms. Instructors utilize their personalized "web site" to post announcements, study guides and pretest; identify and describe weekly assignments; establish small groups across sites; and facilitate discussion boards and virtual chats. Students use CourseInfo as a means of downloading pertinent classroom materials such as the course syllabus, lecture notes, and scoring rubrics. Group work between sites is

accomplished through the use of private group work areas that include discussion boards, e-mail, and electronic work sites.

To accommodate the needs of the working graduate students, courses are offered in the late afternoons or early evenings. Clinical practica occur during the summer allowing more flexibility in placement. Although the timing of the course offerings differ from the traditional program, the curriculum and departmental standards remain the same. The department is committed to maintaining the integrity of the distance learning curriculum in compliance with the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association's Educational Standards Board and its Council on Academic Accreditation (ASHA, 1993).

The curriculum offered to the distance learners initially focused on coursework relating to their school setting, and has expanded to coursework concentrating on adult disorders in other settings. Distance learners have been introduced to clinical methods for adults with aphasia, dysphasia, and voice problems in settings such as hospitals, nursing homes and rehabilitation centers.

Multiple opportunities are provided for students to receive hands-on experience with various aspects of technology. In addition to internet skills learned through CourseInfo, each student develops a personal website. The sites are an avenue to develop a portfolio and contain information such as personal and professional interests, pictures, and links to favorite websites, students past projects, and products from coursework and clinical practica. Weekly class meetings provide students opportunities to operate the technology utilized in the classroom. Class presentations, panel discussions, and small group work activities also provide teaching and learning experiences via two-way interactive audio-video transmissions. Assignments within coursework also require implementation and evaluation of computer-enhanced interventions with children with communication disorders. The use of technology becomes not only the vehicle for obtaining the graduate degree, but also a means for improving the quality of intervention.

REFERENCES

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (1993). Educational standards board accreditation manual. Rockville, MD: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

Barker, B.O. (1989, May). Distance education technologies: All that glitters is not gold. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Decisions about Technology Conference, Bismarck, ND.

Barker, B.O., & Hall, R.F. (1994). Distance education in rural schools: Technologies and practice. Journal of Research in Rural Education, 10(2), 126-128.

Keegan, D. (1990). Foundations of distance education. New York: Routledge.

Simonson, M. & Schlosser, C. (1995). More than fiber: Distance education in Iowa. Techtrends, 40(5), 13-15.