

## Developing a Pedagogy of ITV Teaching Experience through a Teaching Circle

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**Abstract:** *Objective: Distance learning through the use of interactive television (ITV) has been a part of Social Work education for more than two decades. Amidst abundant proof of the overall successes of ITV programs, there are limited accounts of the pedagogical experiences and challenges encountered by faculty who are called upon to teach distant learning courses. This paper describes a pedagogy of ITV teaching experience derived through a teaching circle in a rural undergraduate program. Method: A teaching circle comprised of four social work faculty enabled data gathering through focused discussion and critical thinking of the ITV teaching experience. Results: Extended preparation, augmenting instructional design and technology to enhance interactivity and instructor comfort with the technology emerge as key observations. Pragmatic barriers like the technology and restricted face-to-face contact are workable challenges. Conclusion: Social Work education would need a sincere examination of the interface of synchronous and asynchronous teaching with sensitivity to context and course curricula.*

**Keywords:** *ITV, teaching circle, pedagogy, rural, interaction, technology*

### INTRODUCTION

With a century and a half of history, beginning with mail correspondence courses in Europe, 'distance education' has been described as the twenty-first century learner-centered model in higher education (Miller & King, 2003). Distance education has been defined [negatively] as "(f)ormalized instructional learning where the time/geographic situation constrains learning by not affording in-person contact between the student and instructor" (as cited by Miller & King, 2003, p.284). Raddon (2006) cites Perraton's definition of distance education as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner" (p. 157). His analysis of the narratives of distance learners describes the 'absence' (space/time) as an opportunity for access amidst demanding work and family roles.

Advances in technology have revolutionized the medium of teaching for social work educators, proving that the traditional face to face method of teaching is not indispensable. Social work programs, particularly those located within larger institutions, have increasingly included distance learning, such as compressed video and interactive video technology (ITV/IVT). These distance learning options have become part of both graduate and undergraduate teaching delivery programs. Course management programs,

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such as WebCT/Blackboard to enhance the delivery of such programs, are widespread (Pettracchi & Patchner, 2000; Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke & Adkins, 2009). According to Wilke and Vinton's (2006, p. 607-608) review, this growth has been a developmental process moving from the phase of 'off-campus programs' (faculty traveling to sites), to 'distributed education' (ITV), to 'computer-mediated education' (web-based courses), with at least sixteen percent of degree programs having gone this route. A recent online survey of social work programs (n=137) initiated by the Commission on Accreditation (Vernon et al., 2009) found that 40 percent of the programs at the BSW level and 50 percent at the MSW level were engaged in some form of distance education.

The outcomes of instruction using the ITV (interactive television) format have been evaluated predominantly in graduate programs out of large urban institutions. However, reports of outcome experiences in undergraduate programs have been limited, especially in rural areas (Pettracchi & Patchner, 2000; Vernon et al., 2009). Outcome studies show substantial evidence of the success of courses taught by ITV or the web in the form of student performance and feedback, particularly when drawing comparisons with traditional face-to-face methods (Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000; Huff, 2000; Pettracchi & Patchner, 2001; Potts, 2005). Nonetheless, such outcome studies have been limited in that they have not given adequate attention to the processes involved in the development of effective distance education programs. In particular, the description of processes of course evolution relative to the pedagogical experiences and challenges in streamlining a satisfactory learning environment has been scant.

The intent of this paper is to provide a case example of the processes involved, and challenges encountered, in creating and delivering an ITV program. This ITV based instruction was offered by social work faculty in a rural undergraduate program with limited ITV teaching experience. Observations of the collective experiences were gathered in a teaching circle formed by the faculty offering various undergraduate social work courses via ITV. The broad questions that this research addressed were: What was the sense of preparedness at venturing into teaching via ITV? What went into preparing faculty to teach via ITV generally and specifically for the course being taught? What were the teaching/course adaptations made to suit the new classroom environment? What were the lessons learned?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Interactive video technology also referred to as Interactive Television (IVT/ITV), is a synchronous form of distance education, where learners are separated from the instructor by physical space but present at the same 'time.' The students and instructor are able to see and hear each other via television screens, though students and instructor are situated in different locations (Miller & King, 2003). Detailed descriptions of this classroom environment and the technology have been given by other studies (Coe Regan, 2008b; Pettracchi, 2000; Pettracchi & Patchner, 2000). The credibility of distance education has been established, both by social work programs and the Council on Social Work Education (Vernon et al., 2009). A fifteen-year review (1984-1998) of evaluations of the distance education mode of instruction by social work faculty reveals that it has equally

positive outcomes (compared to traditional face-to-face format), with ITV being the most widely used technology for course delivery (Abels, 2005a; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000).

The twin advantages of ITV instruction that clearly stand out are accessibility to nontraditional students in remote locations and proven cost effectiveness (Raymond, 2005). The interactive television alternative to course delivery offers rewards to students in rural areas in the form of opportunities for higher education. Specific to Social Work, benefits are seen in rural regions for the public child welfare specialty in the form of expanding the workforce and the right to service by competent practitioners (Glezakos, 2005; Kleinpeter, 2005). Coe Regan's review (2005) argues that the single most important challenge in higher education is assisting faculty to integrate technology into instruction.

Courses taught and reviewed for their learning outcomes have covered a major part of the curriculum (Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000; Potts & Hagan, 2000; Vernon et al., 2009; Wilke & Vinton, 2006), including specific courses on research (Petracchi, 2000; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000), statistics (Harrington, 1999), practice (Coe Regan & Elliott, 1999), policy (Huff, 2000), electives like substance abuse and child welfare (Hollister & McGee, 2000; Petracchi, 2000), and field instruction (McFall & Freddolino, 2000; Stocks & Freddolino, 2000; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). Entire programs that have adopted the ITV mode of course delivery have also been evaluated with reports of favorable outcomes (Wilke & Vinton, 2006). A recent report reveals that a majority of the distance education courses offered in social work are electives followed by practice courses (Vernon et al., 2009).

However, references to the experiences of instructors in the processes involved in adaptation to this technological change as well as improvisation required in course content and delivery have received limited focus (Mottet, 2000; Potts & Hagan, 2000; Smith & Wingerson, 2006; Stocks & Freddolino, 2000; Wolfson, Marsom, & Magnuson, 2005). This often necessary transition from traditional face-to-face (F2F) to technology enhanced instruction has not been devoid of faculty apprehension, with many having already "made peace with the technologies of instruction of face-to-face settings and mastered them to an acceptable degree of competence" (Natriello, 2005, p. 1890). New to distance education but otherwise experienced, instructors rely 'heavily' on the traditional classroom experience when beginning ITV instruction (Natriello, 2005; Vernon et al., 2009).

There is some limited reference to 'teaching' social work courses using ITV in the literature. Petracchi and Patchner (2001) compared live instruction and interactive televised teaching over two years. Sharing their teaching experience of a research methods course at the Master's level, they express that the distance instruction left students desiring more interaction with other students and with the instructor. Instructor availability was facilitated via telephone contact and e-mail. Facilitating interaction between sites was proposed by the authors as a plausible way of enhancing cohesion between the student groups within a course. They further emphasized that ensuring availability of course-related resources outside the classroom adds to effective course delivery.

The need to build a cohesive class and focus on engagement is alluded to by Potts and Hagan (2000) as well. They taught practice courses via ITV originating from the urban campus of California State University to rural campuses elsewhere in the state. Some strategies mentioned included traveling at least twice a semester to teach live, holding office hours and social events at off campus sites, adapting teaching techniques in the form of oral reports via technology between sites, and planning assignments requiring e-mail linkages between student pairs. Specific to the practice class, on-site remote coordinators facilitated role-play sessions and small group discussions. Over time, the course was taught with support from remote site liaisons.

At Michigan State University, field instruction using distance education was facilitated by accommodating employment-based placements by having Field Advisory Boards at each site (McFall & Freddolino, 2000). Additional assistance was also provided by liaisons, a local coordinator, a faculty associate, and adequate technical staff. This infrastructure reflected additional financial investments (Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000). Consequent recommendations called for looking into course-specific issues, and examining the compatibility between the technology and the specific course being taught. Their futuristic question, "What is the right mix of human and technological supports required to create comparable quality learning environments for undergraduate and graduate social work education?" (Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000, p. 127) is the same that was posed by the teaching circle discussed in this paper when it was formed.

A systems perspective framework highlights an equilibrium that has to be established through the combination of teaching, learning, interaction, technology, policy, and administration (Potts & Hagan, 2000). Sensing the unpreparedness of many institutions for the cultural changes that this initiative demands, a gap in terms of a clear pedagogical model is observed (Natriello, 2005; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). The pedagogical gap suggests the need for a more complete understanding of limitations and possibilities from the educator's perspective. The quest for gaining an understanding can serve as a learning opportunity (Natriello, 2003) and build knowledge for best practices (Forster & Washington, 2000; Miller & King, 2003).

Forster and Washington (2000) proposed a valuable model for developing and managing distance education programs, underscoring the importance of course adaptation when translating into interactive video format. They also emphasized the relationship between opportunities to develop pedagogical skills and teaching effectiveness of instructors. The need for development of pedagogical skills is reinforced by Ouellette, Westhuis, Marshall, and Chang's (2006) recommendation that future research target pedagogical discussions and online strategies that facilitate creation of a context for good learning and a better understanding of learning processes. Vernon and colleagues' (2009) survey identified a strong felt need for skill building in teaching when it came to distance education. They found that it is not a matter of simply transferring teaching strategies from the traditional setting and is in fact a source of pressure for instructors in efficacy building. The need to examine various pedagogical strategies in ITV teaching environments is especially stressed in the context of undergraduate social work programs in rural regions which are required to operate distance education programs to meet the need for BSW graduates (Hylton & Albers, 2007; Vernon et al., 2009).

Against this backdrop, this paper draws upon the initial ITV teaching experiences of a group of faculty in a rural undergraduate social work program who also started with uncertain pedagogical agendas. At the time, the instructors had been teaching in the ITV format for at least three semesters and a maximum of five semesters. During this developmental phase, the instructors struggled through course adaptations, invented suitable teaching and learning strategies and attempted to discover what strategies worked and what failed. The formation of a teaching circle was envisaged to encourage knowledge building, affirm mutual teaching experience and evolve workable strategies. The following sections will address the outcome of the experiences of this teaching circle which met over two semesters to review the ITV format of teaching. It is hoped that this will add valuable knowledge to undergraduate social work teachers in distance education, particularly in rural areas.

## METHOD

The method of study is based on the outcomes of a teaching circle comprised of four social work faculty. The teaching circle focused discussions on eight social work courses taught using the interactive television (ITV) medium. Teaching circles have been described as a form of “peer review of teaching practices” driven by the shared purpose of understanding pedagogical goals and critically thinking through the processes involved in student learning (Marshall, 2008, p. 418).

In one of the only published reports found on teaching circles and social work (Strom-Gottfried & Dunlap, 2004) the authors bring attention to the limited training received by social work educators in equipping themselves for teaching. Comparing teaching circles to learning communities, Strom-Gottfried and Dunlap (2004, p. 67) see teaching circles as “structured to carve out convenient, consistent, common time for faculty to develop instructional skills and knowledge.” In listing the scope of the variety of curriculum issues that can form the content for teaching circles, they briefly describe at least a dozen of them. Technology-enhanced teaching is listed as one potential theme for teaching circles, in addition to sub-themes like creating effective assignments, supporting minority students, ethical dilemmas, grading standards and successes, to name a few. Their report also addresses some ways to evaluate the effectiveness of these teaching circles. For the purpose of this paper, the authors subscribe to the foregoing description and purpose in the use of the teaching circle to gain knowledge and enhance teaching skills in the ITV teaching environment. The teaching circle here has also been used as a data gathering tool through mirroring a focus group experience in a large part, in the validation building exercise.

The teaching circle met monthly during the fall semester of 2007 and spring of 2008. To guide and steer the discussion, a set of questions was presented by the first author for the teaching circle members to address in the context of their ITV teaching. These questions helped members look at their personal reactions to teaching via ITV, the preparations made, and changes adopted in course construction and method of instruction. In addition, through these questions, members were able to look at the teaching process (teacher- or learner-centered), specific instructional strategies used to

reduce social/psychological distance, differential student responses/attitudes between sites (if sensed), and individually analyze course-specific experiences.

### **Background to the Teaching Circle**

The seeds for attempting an extended ITV form of distance education spanning various Social Work courses were sown in the spring of 2005, when a few introductory courses were already being delivered in the format. There were apprehensions in terms of the new format of delivery and embarrassments about how appearances on screen would play out. What seemed to drive decisions to forge ahead with the plan was to be able to be pioneers in the Western Kentucky region, where the university serves 18 counties including counties in the neighboring States of Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Tennessee. The primary teaching site being this Mid-Western State University, two of the distance sites were within 60 miles and another two about 100-140 miles away. A potential population was ensured since a good contingent of students was already commuting these distances. All these geographic areas had community colleges whose Associate degrees could be linked with the undergraduate social work courses. With substantial leg work accomplished by the Program Director, negotiating logistics with communities and colleges, social work courses were incrementally added to the long distance ITV schedule. The cumulative ITV teaching effort culminated in the first cohort of exclusive distance education students graduating in December of 2007.

Once the entire BSW degree became accessible via ITV, the implications were that it was no longer one or two professors, but every professor in the department teaching via ITV. The ambivalence about the logistics of implementation essentially included the question of how conventionally taught courses would be adapted to the ITV situation. Given a brief 10 minute orientation on the use of the technology, the reality was that one just took the plunge. It thus evolved into a 'learning by doing' set of strategies, testing the waters in the respective classes that were taught.

An ethical commitment to be able to deliver education to those with limited access to the same became another key motivation. The University's mission of academic outreach coupled with the Social Work program's mission of equipping students to serve rural and underserved populations complemented this commitment. Serving a predominantly rural area, a considerable number of post-secondary students are not only first-generation college degree seekers, but also potential candidates to add to the rural social work workforce. The distance education option offers many non-traditional students the flexibility to balance multiple roles and pursue a college degree.

However, a pervasive sense prevailed about wanting to know what was working and what was not and needing to validate classroom experiences, especially in the light of diverse Social Work courses that were being taught. Thus evolved the idea of a teaching circle to put forth individual pedagogical experiences and look for streams of convergence and unique strategies that were course-specific. An added purpose was to search for available literature to validate and build a knowledge base.

Paul Abels' (2005a) edited work on 'Distance Education in Social Work' was read by all members of the teaching circle and served as the starting point in initiating the

discussion. Giving exclusive attention to ITV in Social Work as a form of distance education, Abels predicts this form of teaching to be a viable medium for future social workers to attain their professional degrees, especially those from rural locations. Based on experience of its use in Master's level programs, Abels highlights the positive and comparable outcomes on student performance (vs. F2F classrooms). With due acknowledgement of the limitations of the absence of face-to-face (F2F) opportunities, glitches in technology, and restricted visual cues, social work's sensitivity and familiarity with group dynamics is seen as an asset that could open possibilities to work through these barriers. Abels shows that whole programs have been taught ITV at the Master's level, but experiences in BSW programs receive less mention. He in turn expresses that little attention has been devoted to instructor experiences, the teaching process and preparation for a new class environment.

With this background, the teaching circle, in monthly sessions during the fall semester of 2007 and spring of 2008, uncovered, through an inductive process, some of the common strategies that developed and evolved. In addition to some unique course-specific approaches to course delivery, the barriers that were experienced came to light as well.

### **RESULTS OF THE TEACHING CIRCLE EXPERIENCE**

As a warm-up exercise, the members of the teaching circle shared thoughts on the unique context of the ITV teaching experience and individual responses to it. To begin with, what was available in terms of instructor preparation was a ten minute quick orientation to the ITV equipment by a technician. Primarily this included becoming familiar with alternate use of camera views of the instructor, computer (when being used) and a document camera (a modified chalkboard equivalent called the 'Elmo' used as a presentation tool) and use of microphones. Instructors were then immersed in the classroom situation, and it was noted that they relied on conventional F2F preparation skills to adapt courses to the ITV context.

Initially, because it was new to all in the program, little could be done to share experiences, especially when elements can be course-specific. Common to all, though, was the classroom context, in which one was on camera, able to view one's self on-screen, with one screen displaying the multiple site-based classrooms (a maximum of 4) in rotation. Students from the main site were seated in the classroom F2F with the instructor. The instructor must be stationary, on an elevated platform, facing the cameras, but must shift between the computer and the 'Elmo.' When using these forms of technology assistance, the instructor is blocked from students' sight at the distant sites, as only one view at a time is possible. Teaching circle members noted that not being able to move around the classroom was a barrier; due to the camera not being able to follow the instructor, the instructor must sit behind a desk in a positioned chair. As discussed in the teaching circle, this decreases the instructor's ability to interact with students—even distance learners—on a physical level.

A virtual learning environment in the form of Blackboard was a tool that the instructors came to use extensively to make up for the void in direct F2F communication.

Blackboard is a virtual course management system which consists of an integrated set of communication, assessment, and content management tools that instructors can use to mimic a regular classroom. The asynchronous communication enables e-mails, discussion boards, posting of course materials, links, announcements, tests, and grades (Littlefield, 2002).

Personal reactions to the prospect of teaching various courses through ITV varied among the members. The various courses taught by the members of this teaching circle via ITV included Introduction to Social Work, Social Work Practice with Individuals, Social Work Practice with Families and Groups, Social Welfare Policy and Services, Social Work Research Methods, Quantitative Analysis (Statistics), Senior Seminar and Field Seminar. At that point, each of these courses had been taught in the ITV class environment for a minimum of two semesters and a maximum of five semesters. The last mentioned (Field Seminar) had just been started in the ITV format. It seemed, for the instructor teaching the Practice with Families and Groups class, that if it were a matter of choice she would have opted out, due to concerns of effectiveness of the ITV platform. This instructor described adapting method and materials as the course proceeded, sometimes stumbling on effective techniques. Another instructor had some previous exposure, having participated in state-wide class sessions delivered via ITV, and therefore had realistic expectations as well as a sense of the limitations. For the other members, there was a prevailing sense of unease and reluctance in venturing into an unfamiliar teaching setting, but the commitment to making education accessible and a desire to succeed became the driving forces. The following sections give an account of individual course teaching experiences as reflected upon and shared by respective instructors.

**Introduction to Social Work.** For the instructor teaching this course, the class size was relatively large (40-60) with the course taught mostly through lectures. Students at this beginning level tend to be less familiar with technology. Due to the limitations in opportunities for interaction, student engagement was considered important. A way to facilitate a positive situation for this class was establishing ground rules the first day of class. Giving an orientation to students on the class environment, student and instructor expectations, technology issues and especially for the distant sites “what happens if” situations (e.g., if communication was lost), was one strategy that worked well. Encouraging students, especially remote site students, to ask questions, and acknowledge the challenges of ITV (“this was hard” and it was best “to lay it on the table”) helped in the acclimation process for both instructor and students.

Student reticence to interact via ITV was a barrier for interaction during daily class discussions; encouraging students not just on the first day of class but also throughout the semester was deemed very important. Due to the inability of the instructor to see if a hand is raised at an offsite, a student must press a button and begin speaking; then the camera will move to their site. Only when a student from the distance site talks by pressing on the microphone is the camera activated and the site/student visible to the instructor. If students from an extended campus are not willing to take that initiative, they could feel disconnected from the class process. However, a rotation feature allows the instructor to view the sites automatically in rotation at about 30 second intervals. The

instructor also stressed the importance of contrasting the ITV experience from watching TV for entertainment, where the culture is to multitask or take breaks while only partly engaging with the medium. This multi-tasking is evident in the form of students conversing with each other, briefly leaving the classroom, using their laptops or reading other material. Students at off sites who view the instructor on a TV monitor had a tendency to slip into this culture and lose sight of the fact that they were being watched. The alternate distraction can convey lack of attention or indifference, and students in turn can miss important course content. The reminder of the TV culture analogy gradually helped students stay on task in the classroom and restrict break-taking.

**Social Work Practice I (SW with individuals).** Teaching the class posed a challenge, considering the interaction required and the need to use role-play as a teaching tool. Conducting role-plays becomes even more difficult when there is just one student at a site with no partner in a role-play situation. The first semester that this course was taught via ITV, role-play seemed impossible: students were given role-play assignments to try at home and discuss the experiences in class. Realizing that this did not accomplish any skill learning, the instructor attempted a “hot seat” exercise. In a “hot seat” exercise, a student is assigned a role by the instructor and students take turns in the “hot seat,” or social worker’s chair, in order to complete a psychosocial evaluation. One student would start out and when that student began to struggle, another student in the class would volunteer or be called upon to jump into the “hot seat” to complete the psychosocial assessment. Initially the exercise seemed awkward, since some students could not see each other due to the camera position, and there seemed to be a disconnect between on-site and offsite students’ level of involvement (a higher participation level from the on-site students was noted). Over time both on- and offsite students began moving into the “hot seat” without prompting. The “hot seat” game is now used weekly in this practice class to help students practice, develop, and critique their own skills. The learning curve was seen to be staggered and slower among distant site students when compared to on-site students.

**Social Welfare Policy and Services.** Implementation of ITV instruction in this class was not particularly difficult. The instructor had already innovated teaching strategies to be learner-centered, given the nature of a policy course. One such strategy was to give students chapter questions to complete before a class session so as to initiate interaction and discussion. However, small groups that were used to enable discussions in a live classroom were not as practical in an ITV classroom. Consequently at the distant sites, the limited students present became one discussion group. An additional difficulty with the small group technique was the difficulty the instructor had monitoring the participation of offsite participants. Panel presentations of policy analysis by student groups were not necessarily smooth due to difficulties in across-site communication. For instance, groups of three to four students that constituted a panel for a policy presentation were not all visible on screen and individual students would have to position themselves for the camera to be seen and heard. It seemed that the students at the main site had a “better” experience than the remote site students. As is evident, in this course traditional teaching methods were transferred to the ITV classroom and the nuances of the technology were accommodated.

**Social Work with Families and Groups (Practice II).** Teaching this course posed more challenges since the traditional format involved observation of in-class task groups as a learning exercise. With distant sites, mixing groups (between sites) was not practical and groups had to be formed within sites. For a better evaluation experience the instructor chose to travel to sites. Students, however, were not able to observe closely when watching a group onscreen. Closely observing non-verbal behaviors like facial expressions is very difficult, since zoom features are extremely limited on the ITV cameras. Trying out specific group exercises in class had to be withheld when there were only two or three students at a particular distance site. One strategy that was somewhat effective was to have students from all sites come to the main campus for a 'lab day,' where group demonstrations were presented. Though it was time-consuming and required extensive advance planning and coordinating with other faculty and class schedules, it was a worthwhile learning experience that accomplished course goals. Therefore, in this instance the instructor had to move away from the ITV classroom to the traditional F2F format to facilitate a better learning and skill-building experience.

**Social Work Research.** The already intimidating nature of research and statistics courses is made no better in an ITV learning environment. Strategies that were used in traditional classrooms to initiate favorable attitudes toward learning research methods were transferred to the ITV setting in the form of warm-up exercises, discussions of research as a professional activity, and soliciting student opinions and reactions. One way of enhancing the inclusion experience and replicating the feel of an onsite classroom was inclusion of presentations of research proposals. The primary objective was to have students present ideas to their peers and to interact and gain exposure to different contexts and issues. Geographical and other site-specific differences came into play in the kind of ideas presented. Wherever possible, in-class exercises were included that would get students involved. Sample student papers were also distributed as a way to get students oriented to writing literature reviews and proposals. It also helped to re-organize course content, space out topics and stagger the pace of course delivery in keeping with class readiness. This monitoring of pace was especially a felt need in the ITV class setting where students who are otherwise reluctant to ask questions/clarifications feel intimidated by the camera and microphones. The instructor takes on a more active role in posing questions and reviewing to get a sense of where the class is in relation to the topic.

**Quantitative Analysis.** Challenging mathematics content and (at least for the less computer-savvy) difficult software (Excel) pose challenges even in a conventional classroom. For ITV application, topics had to be simplified and the pace of delivery adapted to be more learner-centered than they are conventionally. As mentioned with the research course, the pace of student learning and understanding directed the pace of the course. In a F2F classroom, nonverbal cues from students give the instructor additional indicators of response to course material which are nonexistent (for distant site students) in the ITV classroom environment. Student dissatisfaction can also be heightened due to inability to meet the instructor after class. An added advantage was that students were able to use their laptops, when they had one, to simultaneously try out exercises on Excel. Laptops were made available for the students during class time at a couple of distant

sites. This was a feature that was accommodated wherein students in a traditional setting would work in a computer lab.

In the core assignment for this class, students administered a survey to the class, their sample, using the e-mail feature on Blackboard. They then worked through data organization and analysis steps to produce a report. The survey exercise not only got all the sites connected but also sensitized students to the vagaries of data collection and response rates. Although this assignment was originally part of a traditional teaching strategy, in the ITV classroom it served the much needed purpose of inclusion and connectedness. For this instructor, what was seen as paramount was ensuring a comparable immediacy of connectedness with students at all sites through prompt e-mail communication, clarification, and reaching out when there were concerns. Student comfort was enhanced when the instructor was in control and able to stay prepared in advance. This preparedness included faxing/ mailing handouts/quizzes to sites, judicious use of Blackboard, and making backup plans in anticipation of possible technology failures. The last-minute inclusion of an interesting handout or quick print-out of a quiz or exercise before class is not a possibility in the ITV class. Visits to the remote sites when class schedules permitted were an essential complement.

**Senior Seminar.** This is the final course in the curriculum, a pre-field class taken by students in their last academic semester in preparation for their field experience. These seminars were greatly enhanced by the generous utilization of the Blackboard tool to post reading material, guidelines and the like, where previously they were printed and handed out in class. A switch to electronic mail to receive student assignments was made. Following a semester of planning logistics, students from the 'Social Work Practice with Individuals' class were enlisted to partner with students in this class for role play sessions to practice interviewing. Both classes were scheduled at the same time and therefore made this a mutually beneficial exercise. Other technological aids like videos and YouTube clips, also used in conventional classroom settings, complemented teaching efforts. Guest speakers from various sites also helped to enhance student interest. The instructor ensured availability through e-mail and cell phone access and also visited the sites at least twice in a semester. One of these visits was to plan field placement interviews and thus served a dual purpose.

**Field Education.** Based on student distribution among the sites, faculty liaisons were the best way to plan periodic face-to-face seminars with their respective field groups. At the time of this research there were three instructors who shared the internship supervision. On occasion, use of liaisons to facilitate seminars from other sites has added to the quality of the experience. However, budget constraints have made continued use of liaisons uncertain. The ITV classroom setup is only used for two seminars (first and last) when the entire field intern group is on the same chronological level. During the rest of the internship each site (section) meets as an independent group. It has been observed that the instruction and supervision work better when there is an on-site liaison available. The lack of this option requires the respective faculty member to travel to the site. The latter option is the practice even in a non-ITV situation. For the ITV setup, the creation of virtual discussion groups on Blackboard has been so well received and used that it

mirrors the face-to-face experience. In addition, Podcasts have been used to disseminate information prior to the discussion board exercise.

## DISCUSSION

In reviewing the data gathered through the teaching circle experience, it was found that basic to making this form of synchronous distance learning work is being able to create a new classroom culture and a new learning community. The physical distance between students and between students and instructor created by the geographical distance and the bridging of this distance by the technology requires the instructor to facilitate this connection. This connection has to complement the basic commitment to instruction and engagement.

Common to all instructors was the need to get prepared for the different teaching environment. Assessing one's own technological and pedagogical skills and preparedness to adapt course content and teaching style is tied to taking those first steps. Feeling one's pulse on what will drive commitment to teaching in this format is also a good reflective exercise, especially for the less technologically savvy or the skeptical. Also evident, especially in a discipline like Social Work, was that planning course delivery and instruction is course-specific, driven by course content and expected outcomes. The limitations posed by restricted F2F contact and minimal sensing of nonverbal cues has to be compensated for by more active instructor presence and interaction. For the practice-oriented classes requiring role plays and group exercises, there is a suggestion about making a minimal class size requirement for off-sites to prevent the possibility of ending up with a site with only one student present. The monitoring of an optimum class size, however, will not compensate for the severe limitation in sensing nonverbal cues on screen (student-student and student-instructor) and the value of live interaction. The absence of nonverbal cues is indeed an imposing gap in the learning experience in practice-oriented classes with no known immediate solutions.

Thus, preparation and advance planning are essential with respect to tasks like copying and faxing or e-mailing handouts or materials for class exercises, scanning documents where necessary, and posting them on Blackboard in advance. Although not far removed from preparing for conventional classes, there is the added urgency to get the materials to the distant sites in time for use. In bridging the 'social distance,' asking direct questions of various sites by calling on students by names, and using the camera and zoom feature to focus on students when they speak (especially in presentations) helps in facilitating inclusion and group cohesion. The skill involved in engaging students in this environment includes the appropriate and planned interspersing of videos, PowerPoint, YouTube clips and Elmo with the lecture delivery. One instructor used news clips that featured information from the respective counties and cities (relevant to the class) to generate interest and participation. Although these strategies are no different from those common to on-campus classes, they could be deliberate choices necessary in the ITV class environment.

Apart from facilitating active interaction through inviting participation and strategic questioning within the classroom, an instructor's virtual presence through an alternate

learning environment like Blackboard is almost indispensable. Use of the virtual discussion board feature on Blackboard holds promise especially when the class is asynchronous, as in internship periods or online classes. While ITV students do have a synchronous classroom experience, the participation on asynchronous discussion boards fluctuates based on the assigned topics and participation credits. Additional supports at remote sites in the form of site coordinators or liaisons are a welcome boon. Flexibility to navigate the unexpected, travel to sites, and train oneself makes the ITV form of teaching an interesting challenge. At this institution, instructors do receive travel support every semester for the trips they make to the remote sites. At the beginning of every semester administrative coordinators at every distant site give an update of equipment and other infrastructure support available at their sites for the benefit of the instructors.

### **Barriers and Solutions**

Some barriers identified in this ITV teaching experience range from issues with *technology* to *relational struggles*, including student-faculty relationships, classroom or peer-student relationships, classroom dynamics, and struggles with *time and logistics* around classroom planning and implementation. The technological barriers were the most pervasive, followed by relational issues, especially when considering the social work curriculum and courses that are oriented towards interactional skill-building. Initial struggles with students being intimidated by the technology (especially on-site students who were used to face-to-face classes) and technology failures impeding class projects were ubiquitous experiences. The more instructors overcame these barriers themselves over repeated semesters, the more they were able to put new students in these classes at ease.

Instructors also had to learn to anticipate and work with technological glitches at all sites and be prepared to compromise on class time, interruptions, and abrupt endings to a class session. Responding to such glitches by instructors requires establishing contact as soon as possible with the affected sites within or outside the classroom (as the situation demands) to keep them tuned in and give them updates of what they missed (if anything). Here, the 'Announcement' feature on Blackboard enables connecting with and updating the class as a whole. When visiting and teaching from other sites, one encounters dissimilar equipment that needs attention. With the increased use of cell phones becoming concerns even in non-ITV class settings, ITV classrooms have had the added challenge of cell phone sounds interfering with the transmission equipment. Laptop use by students within the classroom often needs monitoring; at distant sites the laptops could complement instructor use of Power Points or the web by providing more clarity. However, the absence of the instructor at the distant site perhaps encourages students to use the laptop for non-class purposes as well.

With regards to what could be termed *relational barriers*, the struggles include not being able to better understand student concerns, dealing with students competing with one another for instructor attention, and issues with helping students interact across sites. Attempts to form "open relationships" with students and address mutual fears (students' and professors') around readiness to try something different were ongoing. The negotiation of ongoing relational barriers calls for a certain cultural sensitivity to the

demographic and geographic differences and the dynamics that emerge, probable 'site specific tensions,' alliances, and discords. Offsite students do not have the advantage of an informal class discussion before and after class with the instructor. This constraint to meeting the instructor may need consideration when organizing class time. It thus demands more time than 'traditional classrooms' without any compensation or accommodations with respect to extended 'ITV air time.'

In discussing instructor investment the teaching circle members were drawn to look at the impact on teaching evaluations as well. Discovering that the ITV teaching setting did not engender favorable teaching evaluations, particularly in the experimental stages, there were suggestions about considering a different evaluation tool. This tool should take into consideration the instructor's skill level with ITV instruction, and should not include a tool that was used to evaluate teaching in traditional class settings.

### **Summary of Findings**

It is evident that there is a need for understanding and accepting ITV instruction in rural educational settings. There are, however, manifest issues related to overcoming technical difficulties, integrating off-site with on-site classrooms, and developing relationships between instructors and their students. The primary struggle seems to be developing new pathways for classroom "interaction" removed from more traditional methods of teaching.

The experiences of the teaching circle discussed here reveal an increased need for instructors to engage in planning and exploring alternative methods of technology to augment teaching, as well as a willingness to travel to alternative sites. Improvement of interaction among students, as well as between students and instructors, requires a high level of creativity geared to the special dynamics of the course and the particular composition of a given group of students.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Having unraveled the pedagogical experiences of the teaching circle in a Midwestern rural undergraduate setting, a parallel exercise was to search for affirmation of the circle's conclusions by reviewing the literature. Circle members assigned themselves the task of delving into the literature to validate the discoveries made and understand the philosophy that guided the instruction. This concluding section attempts to identify the most relevant findings of the general literature that support the observations of this teaching circle.

For example, Glezakos (2005) compiled a list of 'lessons learned' from distance education that capture much of the experience of the teaching circle. This includes anxiety-provoking limited computer literacy, camera shyness, negative student reactions to an instructor's dry sense of humor, sharing the classroom with site-coordinators or other assistants, and the effect of student evaluations on faculty.

Also in keeping with the teaching circle is the conclusion that the two most important challenges are technological barriers (e.g., quality of audio/video, time loss, disruptions)

and the loss of F2F/personal contact (of instructor) with students and between students (Coe Regan, 2005; Hylton & Albers, 2007).

The repeated emphasis on 'interaction' or 'interactivity' is evident as quintessential in the literature on distance education. Instructors need to work towards infusing such interaction, especially due to loss of F2F contact (Coe Regan, 2005; Darabi, Sikorski, & Harvey, 2006; Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Knowles, 2002; Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003). Instructor comfort with the technology has a direct bearing on the teaching quality and management of classroom logistics (Coe Regan, 2008a; Darabi et al., 2006). So, the more instructional design components that instructors can add to augment meaningful interactions, facilitating collaboration between and among students and themselves, the greater the success (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003). Some of the recommended exercises from the literature that were used by the teaching circle included ice-breakers, small group exercises, team-building activities, debates, and problem-solving sessions. The instructional design also included use of technology such as e-mail, podcasts, Blackboard, and blogs to maximize interactivity (Beldarrain, 2006; Kim, 2008; Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003).

In addition, it is stressed that instructors need to share responsibility with students to promote interactive learning and create an atmosphere supportive of favorable interaction and learner autonomy. Evidence of high instructor engagement is seen to be reflected in "timely, consistent and useful feedback" to students (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003, p. 89).

Instructors in the teaching circle were also cognizant that a not so easy but encouraging note for current and future instructors is to have realistic expectations and to be aware that student non-responsiveness may influence teaching and quality of teacher-student relationships. As reported by Mottet (2000), the lack of nonverbal responsiveness may not relate to quality of instruction and need not color effectiveness as distance teachers. In the substantial absence of visual cues, paying attention to voice tones, pitch, and developing a 'keen sense of listening' are recommended (Mottet, 2000).

It became clear to the teaching circle that a competent distance teacher needs to manage the logistical aspects of the course (coordinate with personnel, have back-up plans, plan synchronous and asynchronous activities, ensure access to and functioning of equipment) (Darabi et al., 2006) and be more of a facilitator and mentor than lecturer or expert (Knowles, 2002). It is better for instructors to be "overprepared" and to make greater use of audio-visual materials, graphics and creative questioning techniques to draw students to engage and form a cohesive learning community. Conscious use of humor, monitoring one's nonverbal behavior, and paying attention to the pace of instruction are also recommended (as cited by Coe Regan, 2005; Hylton & Albers, 2007).

Abels (2005b, p. 18) alludes to McFall and Freddolino's "action steps" to meet fieldwork requirements for students in Social Work distance education programs. These action steps include resource building (community and office), enhancing cultural sensitivity to agency uniqueness, and giving due regard to confidentiality issues (individual and organizational). Glezakos (2005) suggests that knowledge of site-specific practice issues and diversity characteristics would assist in gauging student expectations and negotiating course requirements.

The teaching circle experience confirmed the finding of Kleinpeter (2005) that, in order to counter the challenges of the multi-site classroom environment, it is productive to engage site coordinators who can complement instruction by offering experiential exercises and discussions, proctoring exams, and conducting student advising. Technological support, monetary compensation and travel benefits have been emphasized in the literature as well. All of these combined, namely, training and support, have been underscored as most helpful contributors to successful course delivery (Coe Regan, 2005).

'Technology and teaching' is not a part of the accredited graduate curriculum in Social Work. Is a possible implication of this study that utilization of technology should be incorporated into the Social Work curriculum? Rural communities have a definite need as indicated by this research. At a minimum, graduate programs in rural communities may want to consider this as a possibility.

Despite substantial support from Social Work faculty for distance education, the existing gap in pedagogical experiential reports is obvious and in need of being bridged. While there have been scattered efforts at capacity building through training and even certification to teach in distance education (Abels, 2005c), published reports of the instructors' own pedagogical, course-specific discoveries are still scant. This research effort has made a beginning, and a continuation of this thread is recommended. Within this aspect of competence and its dissemination, proposals have also been made to reward ITV instructors through special recognition by tenure systems (Coe Regan, 2005).

In recognizing the value and credibility of the ITV format of distance education to empower 'underserved populations,' there is continued stress on the need to track graduates of this distance education stream. Such a follow-up would help recognize the professional performance, market value and competencies gained through a nonconventional medium of instruction (Potts, 2005).

On a concluding note, distance education is no longer a nonconventional approach given the changing demographics of students and growing demand for online education. For example, 24 percent of today's students are single parents, of whom 75 percent are nontraditional students (Gonick, 2010). The growing demand for online education (Ahala, 2009; Kim & Bonk, 2006; Vernon et al., 2009) and the complementary role of technologies such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, e-books and the like have opened avenues to examine the suitable integration of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. Asynchronous teaching methods enhance cognitive participation while synchronous methods enable personal participation (Hrastinski, 2008).

Chernish and associates' (2009) comparative assessment of students in traditional, ITV and online classroom environments revealed no difference in learner achievement levels. However, students in the traditional classroom had the highest 'comfort' levels and 'group' sense, whereas students in the online environment had the lowest. Having established a firm foothold in the arena of distance education, social work educators have to undertake the task of understanding and establishing the goodness of fit given the variables of contexts and needs (curricular and learner). Ahala's (2009) examination of

the interface of online and F2F instruction with specific reference to social work education advocating for a blended learning approach is a case in point.

Last but not the least, the members of this teaching circle strongly recommend the use of the teaching circle for pedagogical pursuits as well as a knowledge building research tool. In today's environment of increased accountability, evidence-based practice and cost-efficient, quality-assured delivery of service, the teaching circle provides just the platform to realize some of these objectives.

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