Student Focus Group Interview Summary Fall 2004

In December, 2004 and January, 2005, an independent research team at Duke University organized three focus-group interviews to generate input from students about their past academic and personal experiences in DUSON’s online education program. The purpose of this focus-group format was to elicit dialogue amongst students so they could share thoughts and contribute responses freely. These groups consisted of 18 students and graduates between the ages of 25 and 50 who voluntarily agreed to anonymously participate in the study. Students were divided among three different focus groups that met independently in three different settings: face-to-face, phone conference, and asynchronous discussion forum.

Questions generated for this study were not meant to compare DUSON’s online courses to its face-to-face courses but rather to determine how students felt about the modes of instruction, academic accountability, communication, authentic learning opportunities, discussion forums and sense of community in their online programs. The results and recommendations below are paraphrased responses of students in all 3 focus groups.

What is Working

• Online vs. FTF
  o Encourages self discipline, introspection, and a more intensive thought process, when you cannot get an immediate response to a question or thought
  o Enables students to seek out the information by researching it or encouraging you to find additional resources they might never otherwise, know exist.
  o Internet opens new worlds of exploration
  o Students are expected to participate fully (can’t sink down in the back)
  o Can work and go to school
  o Can move at own pace and/or get ahead if going out of town
  o Live in rural area… classes available “at home”
  o Handouts can be saved as files- kept, reprinted, etc.
  o Allows for time to think before participating
  o Tech support at Duke is terrific
  o Can listen to lectures with difficult content over and over again
  o Flexibility of being able to listen to lectures according to one’s schedule
  o Instant feedback after taking a quiz or test.

• Instruction
  o Preparation
    ▪ Syllabus that defines objectives, expectations and grading criteria
    ▪ Staying with syllabus
  o Presentation
    ▪ Printable lectures are helpful
    ▪ Taped lectures with handouts
    ▪ Ability to pause audio lectures
    ▪ PowerPoint slides helpful but need ability to fast-forward through them
    ▪ Being able to hear a lecture over and over again very helpful
  o Assignments
When instructors assign the reading 1 week and (a-synchronous) discussion questions the next it helps break up the reading load

- **Accountability**
  - Works both ways for students and instructors- When it’s in print there’s no misunderstanding about what is said
  - Boundaries help procrastinators. Helps to know even what time to turn something in

- **Collaboration**
  - Like learning from each other and probing for ideas
  - Learned how different people in different fields would tackle problems
  - Teaches leadership and coordination efforts as you take classes that require that you work in groups or teams

- **Communication**
  - Little things like “welcomes” and “thank-you’s” validate students’ efforts
  - Feedback from the instructors gave suggestions on improvement or new angles on a topic

- **Motivation**
  - Recognize that students are adult learners
  - You get out of it what you put into it

- **Sense of Community**
  - Pre-class orientations helpful
  - Appreciate when instructors make opportunity to meet FTF
  - Background information and bios on students and faculty
  - When peers (students) get to know each other they are more willing to help out
  - Conference Calls while conducting web searches
  - Optional “social” class meeting
  - Helpful to hear what other students had going on in their lives

- **Authentic Instruction**
  - Case-based scenarios give real-life application to content
  - Posting realistic situations and allow students to group problem solve
  - Real-life examples give students a purpose for what they’re learning

- **Discussion Forums**
  - A-synchronous
    - Group discussion questions at the end of a lecture
    - Instructor participation (helps to) validate students’ responses
    - Allows students to help each other
    - Splitting up class cuts down on reading load
    - Probing questions helped students think about content in broader manner
    - Like the Spell-check feature in Bb
    - Learn a lot from contributions of others
    - Allows all students to respond without a time limit
  - Synchronous
    - Web NR: Live group discussions very helpful
    - Preferred over reading lengthy paragraphs in a-synchronous discussions

**Superior Example of Authentic Learning:**
Student conducted her research over at her local hospital. She knew that when a Code Blue was called that only ICU nurses were allowed to use the paddles. As a research
project she chose to determine whether or not the use of AEDs (which could be used by anyone trained) would decrease the shock time. She found that it did decrease the shock time by 60-70 seconds.

This research earned her a $500 grant to buy more resuscitation equipment and also a position of national faculty for the Heart Association.

**Areas of Refinement**

- **Online vs. FTF**
  - There is still a stigma about online classes even though they are clearly more work
  - Much more work intensive
  - Often feels self-taught
  - Pop-up blockers blocked online support
  - Shift to Bb difficult for students- Needed more instruction (Computer basics course helpful)

- **Instruction**
  - **Preparation**
    - Need to let students know up front how much work (# hours/week) will be expected in class
    - Expectations sometimes change throughout semester
    - Grading criteria did not match actual grade
    - Required research articles had broken links
  - **Presentation**
    - Some audio lectures are distorted and the volume changes
    - Quality and streaming time for some lectures cumbersome
    - Many lectures were difficult to listen to due to re-buffering, lost connections and poor recordings
    - Many lectures re-buffed or disconnected
    - Hard to tell how long a lecture will take each week
    - Lectures could not be paused
    - In rural areas dial-up connections are only available... some downloads could take up to 2 hours
    - Sometimes lectures that should last 30-45 minutes could much longer to play
    - Difficult to listen to 40 min.- 2 hr. lectures
    - Need more guidelines
    - Could sometimes tell when old material was being recycled for a new course… felt this was a sign of disrespect
    - Some materials outdated

- **Accountability**
  - Puts a lot of pressure on students to perform
  - Instructors have accountability to students to stick with their original expectations and not change them throughout the course

- **Collaboration**
  - Sometimes feels like a waste of time
  - Unrealistic expectations (making a video) stressful
- Distance makes it difficult to organize and complete group projects

**Communication**
- Sometimes not notified of changes in technology/access (i.e. proxy access)
- Grades and feedback not done in timely manner

**Motivation**
- Lack of instructor participation can make it feel more like an independent study
- Not all students are disciplined enough to succeed in an online course

**Sense of Community**
- Miss being able to see faces and read body language
- Miss personal contact with students and instructors
- Not knowing about colleagues can make students feel they are doing it all alone
- Encourage students to network with each other esp. if there are some that live in close proximity to one another

**Authentic Instruction**

**Discussion Forums**
- **A-synchronous**
  - Sometimes people post just to post
  - Too many people wait until the end of a week to post
  - Some people too chatty online
  - Sometimes students only talk back and forth to each other with no instructor intervention
- **Synchronous**
  - Hard to get all comments in
  - Does not allow for “think time”
  - Can’t keep up with discussion

**Recommendations**

**Instruction**
- **Preparation**
  - E-mail students 1-2 weeks before a course goes live to let them know at least 1 week in advance what the course will encompass, the number of hours per they will be expected to commit to the class, technology requirements, and the textbooks they will need
  - Compile research articles in 1 packet for purchase
  - Check all links (esp. for required research articles) in advance
  - Consider having a guest librarian give a lecture (either online as a tutorial or FTF) on how to conduct research both online and through the databases available through the Duke Library
- **Presentation**
  - Tape audio lectures in short 15-20 minute segments
  - Title each segment for easy reference
  - Provide option to pause audio lectures
  - Accompany audio lectures with PowerPoint slide show or written notes for reference
  - Alternate guest lectures
• **Discussion Forums**
  o **A-synchronous**
    - Define expectations in advance (how often to sign in, length of post, etc.)
    - Talk to students about proper netiquette
    - Refer students to the section of Bb that explains how to change colors and other aspects of text
    - Separate discussion forums and limit to 1 purpose (i.e. instruction, social, technological, etc.)
    - Limit students to the length (# of words) of their posts
    - Summarize and fill in gaps when discussion wanders
    - Encourage students to probe each other by asking questions or replying thoughtfully
    - Contribute to discussion regularly to let students know you are there
  o **Synchronous**
    - Limit # students in group discussion to no more than 4
    - Continue to use Web NR

• **Accountability**
  o Let students know exactly what your expectations are
  o Be specific about deadlines

• **Sense of Community**
  o Use creative ice breakers to encourage students to introduce themselves, share their backgrounds and get to know each other
  o Introduce yourself the same way

• **Communication**
  o Give prompt feedback for assignments
  o Send e-mails to students with technology/access changes (i.e. proxy server)
  o Be aware of the tone you set for your class. Avoid capital letters as it implies yelling.

• **Motivation**
  o Allow students to choose which articles they will read and summarize (i.e. if there are 12 articles have them choose 8)
  o Review course and purge all outdated information
  o Choose relevant and timely examples for case-based scenarios and real-life applications
  o Consider having modules within a course from which students can choose based on their personal learning goals

• **Authentic Instruction**
  o Get to know students’ backgrounds (i.e. how many students are in various specialties) and relate to content
  o Encourage students to share personal insights based on their past experiences as it relates to the content
  o Allow students to learn from each other
  o Encourage students to seek answers on their own and contribute to class