

Outreach Scholars Study Circle Summary Report

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Project: An Evaluation of the Use of Technology to Link Students in the Classroom with Outreach Professionals in the Field

Project Description:

This project, which was shared with the study circle group on March 4, 2005, is designed to expose students to the theory and practice of extension and outreach: the conversion of University research and knowledge into programs that benefit the public. Picture Tel, a two-way, interactive video/internet system, will be used to connect 12-20 students with 12 Extension agents from various County Extension offices who work in natural resource-related fields. The Extension agent featured in each class session will discuss their community outreach work, their experiences fulfilling the Land Grant University's outreach mission, and the lessons they have learned. Students will then have the opportunity to ask questions and engage in dialogue with the speakers.

In sum, the students will not only be exposed to professionals in the field, but they will also learn how Picture Tel technology can be used to enhance teaching and learning. Furthermore, students will evaluate their experience learning through Picture Tel by means of a comprehensive evaluation of the use of technology in the classroom. Hence, while the primary goal of the course is to expose students to professionals with whom they would not normally have a chance to interact with through the use of Picture Tel technology, a secondary goal of the course is to have the students and guest speakers evaluate the effectiveness of using Picture Tel as a learning/teaching tool so that future Picture Tel classes can benefit from the lessons learned.

Outreach Scholarship Component:

The outreach scholarship component of the project will come in the form of a pre and post evaluation of the use of distance education technology in the classroom to enhance

teaching and learning. As the project coordinator and investigator, I will utilize the evaluation results as a basis for my research on the use of technology in the classroom. The evaluation research will be targeted for publication in the Journal of Extension.

A longitudinal evaluation approach will be utilized to evaluate the course. Prior to the course, each of the participating students will be administered an evaluation instrument designed to examine their preferred learning environment, as well as any pre-conceptions that they have of the use of distance education technology. Subsequent to the course, the students will receive a post evaluation instrument to determine if their own conception of their preferred learning environment was modified as a result of the course, as well as if any pre-conceptions that they had pertaining to distance education were modified through the course of the semester. The intent of this longitudinal evaluation is to provide insight on how individual perceptions and conceptions about the use of distance education technology change through direct experience. These changes in perception might prove to be useful in designing future Picture Tel courses.

In addition to evaluating students, each of the guest lecturers will be administered an evaluation instrument pre and post their Picture Tel presentation. This evaluation is designed to examine changes in their perceptions about the effectiveness of distance education technology, as well as how individuals might modify their teaching style in the future to more effectively utilize Picture Tel.

The results of the evaluation will be published in the Journal of Extension, a refereed journal which is designed to build a bridge between the theory and practice of Extension and outreach. Other journals may be targeted, as well. The hope is that this evaluation will provide research-based insight as to how Picture Tel and other distance education technologies can effectively be used as a teaching tool that exposes students to outreach professionals in the field.

Study Circle Feedback:

Feedback on this project proposal was provided by Kristine Baber, Christine Shea, Peter Erickson, and Jason Boccaro. Overall, the comments were quite helpful. Below is a summary of the comments:

- The project is quite ambitious in that it seeks to do two things; 1). expose students to outreach professionals, and 2). garner the help of students to evaluate the use of Picture Tel in the classroom. It might be helpful to narrow the focus.
- The evaluation instrument should really be reviewed by experts if the goal is to measure any behavioral change that takes place in the students.

- Kristine Baber indicated that if students are expected to conduct a community project, perhaps with the mentorship of Extension agents in the field, then much time should be spent in setting up an effective mentoring model.
- Jason Boccaro indicated that there is a lot of information on youth mentoring and that there is an up-coming conference that I might want to attend.
- Peter Erickson indicated that he would potentially like to be a collaborator on this project, given that he has students in the Animal Sciences Department that could benefit from this applied experience.
- It was suggested that I limit the PictureTel lectures to an hour, as that seems to be the saturation point with many students.
- Each guest lecture presentation should be preceded with some information on a particular aspect of Extension and Outreach, of which there is a large body of literature.

Outcome and Learning as a Result of Study Circle:

As a result of these comments, I have developed a course format that incorporates theoretical component on Extension and Outreach. I have also chosen to limit the guest lectures via Picture Tel to one hour. And I have begun to delve into the literature on effective mentoring to see if a model can be constructed to enable students to get the most out of their community project experiences.

With regard to the scholarship component of the project, I will likely seek assistance from Jason and Kristine in developing the pre and post evaluation. Additional faculty with experience in longitudinal studies focusing on behavior change were also identified. A great deal of background work will need to be conducted in order to build an effective evaluation tool.