

BACK TO THE BEGINNING: MY FIRST YEAR IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Michigan State University is approaching the tenth anniversary of its interactive video program, which now provides all required courses for the MSW to several locations around the state using ITV. The author reflects back on the early history, as well as on the programmatic and personal lessons learned in this decade of work.



Ten years ago, in February 1993, the Director of the School of Social Work at Michigan State University (MSU) called me into her office to talk about "a possible new opportunity" for the School. She had recently received a phone call from the director of the University's educational outreach office in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, 400 miles from campus. An unanticipated turn of events there had prompted his call to our School and set the stage for what would become our ten-year odyssey into the world of distance education.

In the phone call from Marquette, Marilyn Flynn, our director, learned that the plans of the BSW social work program at Northern Michigan University (NMU) to start an MSW program had been rejected at the last minute by the University's governing board. NMU had already begun advertising for the new program, and understandably many people were upset at this development. The call to Marilyn Flynn involved a simple question – "Is there anything MSU's School of Social Work can do?"

Professor Flynn knew that MSU had recently begun using a new (at the time) technology for delivering courses to locations around the state. In our meeting, she told me briefly about it, noting that it involved two-way interactive audio and video, similar to what we see on a television news interview. She then asked if I would be willing to chair a small faculty committee to explore the

possibility of using this new technology to deliver our MSW program to Marquette.

Professor Flynn is a visionary with a willingness to take risks. This project sounded interesting, so I accepted the assignment and agreed to have our committee's report ready for the April faculty meeting. It seemed like an exciting subject to look into, especially because it would give me a chance to learn about some of the new technology around campus. Little did I know how much of an impact this decision would have on the School's development and on my professional life.

Let me digress from the story a bit to fill in some background details. It was not a random event that brought me into Marilyn Flynn's office that day. Since my arrival at MSU in 1979, I had been involved in most of the School's educational outreach efforts. Beginning in 1980, the School had offered the complete MSW program to cohorts of students in communities around the state through what we called the "portable MSW program" (Freddolino, Reed, & Ruhala, 1983).



Under this model, the School essentially brought the MSW program and many of our tenure-stream faculty to a distant community using the expensive and time-consuming technology I later came to call "car-net." My colleagues and I logged many miles of driving to distant communities in the lower peninsula of Michigan, and some of my colleagues used state-government-owned aircraft to commute to the far reaches of the Upper Peninsula (UP). Using this approach, between 1980 and 1991 we brought the entire MSW program to students in Traverse City (twice), Sault Saint Marie, Lapeer, and Alpena.

My roles in these efforts encompassed a range of activities. In the first Traverse City project I was the internal evaluator, charged with documenting what the program involved and assessing student and other stakeholder perspectives on the program, its quality, and its impact/value. I communicated regularly with the faculty who taught on site in Traverse City, and I maintained a regular dialogue with the external evaluator charged with assessing impact on and conformity with external standards. For the second Traverse City cohort and the Sault Saint Marie cohort, I continued as the internal evaluator, but I had less direct contact with the stakeholder groups. In large part this was because my own research agenda in mental health had taken off, consuming most of my time and energy.

For the Lapeer cohort my role changed again, and this time I was one of the faculty who commuted to teach on site. Driving two to three hours (one way) each week depending on the weather gave me a first-hand impression of what both students and faculty had been experiencing throughout these off-campus programs. Teaching research to this group of experienced practitioners in a classroom at a decommissioned state hospital 100 miles from MSU was challenging, exciting, and exhausting. By the time the Alpena cohort came around, my only involvement was to

serve as a research consultant to the faculty conducting the internal evaluation.

Throughout the 1980s, however, describing and evaluating the School's distance education activities remained one of my priority research areas. The work formed the substance of numerous conference presentations and publications. Information and evaluation results concerning the School's "portable MSW program" model were widely disseminated through an effective writing collaboration with several colleagues – particularly Tom Ruhala and Celeste Sturdevant Reed. These efforts gave me my first 'visibility' in social work education.

Another impact of this early work is more difficult to quantify or even describe. The experiences of teaching and talking with students, field instructors, agency directors, and others in the communities around Michigan where we offered the MSW program gave me a profound understanding of the value placed on graduate social work education in underserved areas. These people were passionate about their desire to learn, to improve the services available to their clients, and to enhance their personal sense of self-worth and accomplishment. They were grateful for the opportunity brought by the portable program, and at the same time they demanded that the time and energy they invested go toward a program that was really of value to them and their work. Completing the degree program involved some great sacrifices on their part; they just wanted the sacrifices to be worth it. This dual perspective – gratitude for having the program accessible combined with a demand for a quality program worth their sacrifices – was to resurface in the context of the next distance education initiative.

All of this activity in distance education came at a great cost to the School's faculty, however, and after the Alpena cohort graduated in 1991, the faculty voted for a moratorium on further off-campus programs.

The perceived benefits from yet another off-campus program – making a contribution to the community, fulfilling our land grant mission, being visible in another region of the state – were seen by faculty as too small to compensate for the time and wear-and-tear factors involved. This is the context in which the faculty committee was conducting its inquiry into the possibilities of the new interactive television (ITV) technology for yet another off-campus program.

The next two months brought an extensive schedule of meetings, observations, demonstrations, and the like for me and the other members of the committee. By far the most important of these was our visit to the classroom on campus used for the ITV system. Here we had our first exposure to the new technology and our first tutorial on how it had been and could be used. Several things struck us at the time of that first demonstration.

First and foremost in my estimation was the overwhelming sense that this technology was 'personal.' Sitting in that classroom talking with an ITV staff member in another linked ITV room on campus, we did not 'feel' like we were talking to a machine or through a machine. He was real, up close, smiling, talking, interacting, laughing – he could have been right there next to us. In fact he seemed closer than he would have seemed if he were in the back of the classroom we were in. As the three of us talked about it later, we all had the sense that this was a technology that could work in the classroom.

Second was the striking awareness that in this environment, it would be difficult to avoid completely the need to be 'performing' for the students. We could feel it in the conversation with the ITV staff member in the other room. Excited verbal exchanges produced an energy that was palpable, but as the conversation continued and eventually slowed, the brief silences became more noticeable. As the three of us considered this

notion of 'performing' we realized that some of our colleagues would do better with the technology than others. For both good and ill, this meant that the ITV environment would be similar to the face-to-face environment in which we all worked. While this familiarity was comforting in some ways, the performance aspect made it scary.

The third reaction was not particularly logical. The best I can do is to put a feeling into words. "We really don't know a lot about this new technology, and there are a lot of unanswered questions about how we might be able to offer an entire off-campus program using it. In fact, it's a little overwhelming. But.....it's exciting to think about it!" After that demonstration we did lots of reading, talking with experts, and discussing, but looking back I believe our ultimate recommendation to the faculty drew its energy from our reactions at that first visit.

Our report was on the agenda for the April 1993 School meeting. All three of us participated in presenting the information we had gathered during our research, laying out the facts as we knew them, with advantages and disadvantages. We also mentioned the numerous aspects that we did not know about. Our report concluded with a recommendation that the faculty endorse the Distance Education Initiative, establishing a new MSW program in Marquette using this new ITV technology.

After our report and the motion, there was an extensive discussion that covered a wide range of issues. Was the picture clear enough to see? (Absolutely.) What was the sound quality like? (Pretty decent, although there was a noticeable lag between when we spoke and when the sound was heard in the other room.) Did it feel like you were on stage? (Yes in some ways for the first few minutes, but then you got used to it.)

Other questions were more complex, sensitive, and difficult to answer. One I distinctly remember concerned the videotapes



made routinely by ITV staff of every class meeting on the ITV system. Raised by one of the members of the committee, the question generated an intense and wide-ranging discussion that centered on two issues: who owns the videotapes, and what will they be



used for? It was an issue we had not even considered, and so it was discussed in this important meeting for the first time. What evolved was the notion that the videotapes should belong to the School; that they would be available only to the instructor and the students in the course; and that they would be destroyed when each program ended. There was a clear sense that they would not be available for review by the director of the School or by other faculty unless specific permission was obtained from the individual faculty member on the tape.

More important than the specifics of the discussion was the fact that so many issues were raised, discussed, and resolved during that meeting. Some conclusions were rationally based on information, but others represented a shared leap of faith. Looking back on the meeting, it is almost shocking to realize that the faculty voted unanimously to leap into the dark, to take a risk, unsure of where it would lead. This was uncharted territory for social work, and we seemed willing to take a bigger risk than we had ever taken as a faculty.

Given the tone of my comments above it will probably not be a surprise to you that I accepted the offer to head the new Distance Education Initiative. The director met with me shortly after the faculty meeting, and asked if I would head up the implementation effort. It

was a Friday, and I asked if I could think about it over the weekend. She agreed...but I knew almost immediately that I wanted to give this a try. It seemed exciting...and scary. Mainly, it would force me to learn about the new world of technology that clearly seemed to be the wave of the future. I was also at a point in my academic career where I was seeking a new area for investigation, and this seemed like the most promising star on the horizon. After confirming things with my family that weekend, I came in Monday morning and told the director that I would accept the challenge.

The next required activity involved intensive planning for a trip to Marquette. The faculty's decision was made in April, and we were hoping to have the first ITV course start in late August! Jo Ann McFall, Associate Director for Field Instruction, joined me in developing the plans, making the contacts, and eventually making the trip. We flew into Marquette and rented a car, and while driving into town a big black bear ran across the highway about 100 yards ahead of us. We both took that as an omen that some great things were going to happen here!

The meetings in Marquette involved the local MSU staff and several key NMU administrators – some of whom we learned were not thrilled that MSU was taking over “their” MSW program. A second essential group included agency practitioners from Marquette and throughout the Upper Peninsula, without whose support – as field instructors and agency directors – a full MSW program could not succeed. It was also time to find out exactly how big the market might be by holding a public information session to describe our plans for the program, and we scheduled one for the second evening.

Although we had some tentative numbers from phone calls to the MSU office, we had no way to predict how many people would actually appear for that first information session. Jo Ann McFall and I were pleased

with how the administrative and practitioner meetings had gone. Although there were a few ruffled feathers, people realized that it was not MSU's fault that the program had been curtailed, and there was general support for MSU's effort to begin a program. The question on everyone's mind was whether or not we were really serious, and our answer was a consistent 'yes' – as long as we had sufficient interest. Advertisements about the information session had been placed in newspapers throughout the UP, and letters had gone to many of the agencies. Thus everyone was focused on the information session itself.

Let me spare you the suspense. We had over 130 (????) people come to the meeting, with 25-30 more calling in to request information. Because the expected classroom capacity was 50 students, we told everyone that this was the limit for the first class planned for August. When I say 'expected' capacity, it's because the ITV classroom at NMU had not yet been constructed, and the equipment was not yet in place. It would be fair to say that we left Marquette excited about the positive show of interest – and anxious about whether we would be ready to deliver.

Some people filled out application forms for the class that very evening, while others mailed or faxed them in. Ultimately we had 95 applicants for the first 50 spots, and we devised a standardized scoring procedure to select the top applicants. The rest were told that they could apply again for the Spring 2004 section of the course. This process reflected our decision to allow interested potential students to 'sample' a course or two before actually submitting a formal application to the MSW program.

The timetable developed for recruitment was intended to provide three advantages. First, it would give people an opportunity to 'try on' the student role again and to see if their already busy lifestyles could accommodate the stress of academic courses

and homework. Second, it gave us a chance to get to know the students, thus providing an additional piece of information potentially useful in the application review process. Finally, it extended the time during which additional people might learn about the MSW program and submit an application. Given the financial consequences to the program of each student who dropped out after being accepted, this seemed to offer a viable sequence to improve the pool of applicants and their ultimate retention.

While my focus was on recruitment efforts that summer, colleagues in the University's Broadcast Services department were busy getting us a room in Marquette for the new ITV technology. MSU offered to pay for the room remodeling and the equipment needed in the ITV classroom, but NMU ultimately decided to pay for everything themselves so they would maintain complete control over the room, its use, and its scheduling. With the first class set to begin on the last Monday evening in August, by the first of August I was making frantic phone calls to MSU and NMU broadcast staff on an almost daily basis. Ultimately the classroom was finished...the Friday before the first class, with no time for a practice session with the actual instructor. It was a nerve-wracking weekend.

As for that first instructor for that very first ITV course, the Director made it very clear that for several reasons she wanted to be the one. First, having the Director teach the first course would send a loud and clear message to many constituencies that the School considered distance education to be an important component of our work. Second, because we had decided that every full-time faculty member would teach at least one course on ITV to cement a broad sense of ownership and burden, she thought the best approach would be for her to model and experience the role. Third, she enjoyed working with new technologies, and this provided an excellent opportunity.

During the spring and early summer we had considered several different approaches to maintaining a quality-learning environment in the Marquette classroom. The ultimate decision favored the model we still employ in our distance education programs. For each course, a local knowledge expert is hired on a contractual basis to serve as a 'faculty associate.' Responsibilities include being present in the classroom for all sessions; assisting with local activities such as group discussions and assignments; grading papers; and facilitating communication between the primary campus-based instructor and the students at the distance site. Depending on the course, instructor, and faculty associate, the latter might be asked to contribute a lecture, assignment, or other resource.

During the past ten years there has been a considerable range in the relative contributions of the faculty associate, but that first summer the desire to have the first course be a great success led us to emphasize the partnership. The Director met with the faculty associate in East Lansing to work on the course together, and by the first evening of the class everything was ready. Four months of very active work on the part of many people in East Lansing and Marquette finally came to fruition, and we were off and running. It was not exactly "one great step for mankind," but it was the beginning of a decade-long effort to use technology to help provide access to the School's programs and resources.

As for the rest of the story of that first cohort in Marquette, the pent-up demand for an MSW program meant that high interest continued. We had many more applicants than we could handle and ultimately admitted as many students as the ITV classroom could handle—fifty people. For a variety of reasons (according to our exit interviews), thirteen people dropped out of the program, most in the first year. Field education was arranged in agencies throughout the UP and

coordinated by a local field coordinator who reported directly to Jo Ann McFall, following the same policies and procedures as the field program in East Lansing. Ultimately, 37 people completed all requirements for the MSW degree in the UP, graduating in May 1998. Every full-time faculty member taught one course.

While that first course was in progress, we discovered that the technology would permit us to add a second fully interactive distance site simultaneously. This meant that we could identify and bring on line a second underserved rural area, and the decision was made to determine if there was sufficient demand to do so. Conversations with the University's educational outreach staff (and of course the ITV staff) led to the selection of Gaylord in northeast lower Michigan as the targeted site. Once that decision was made, Jo Ann McFall and I began the same series of conversations, information sessions, and meetings in and around this new community. Ultimately 37 students graduated in 1998 from the program in Gaylord, with most of their courses taken using ITV, linked with the Marquette cohort and various groups of students in East Lansing.

During the subsequent five-year period, from 1998 to 2003, MSU has completed an Advanced Standing program in Saginaw, about 100 miles northeast of campus, and a second cohort is about to graduate this semester in Marquette. The latter program has benefited considerably from what we learned during the first five years, and from new instructional technologies. While still primarily ITV-based for course work, there have been several courses offered in person, and several courses offered completely on the Internet. Finally, this summer we will offer our first ITV courses in Flint as part of a primarily in-person branch campus program, and we are recruiting for new cohorts in Gaylord and Saginaw.

So what have we learned from all of this experience during the past decade? Some of the answers to this question relate to the general operation of off-campus programs using various communication and information technologies (or ICTs, the new buzz word). These lessons include:

- Regardless of the technologies involved, people are people and they vary tremendously in their capacity and willingness to be flexible, and to learn new things. No matter how fantastic the technology and how much support is provided to help people use the new technology, some people – both faculty and students – will not be happy. This is not a particularly brilliant insight, but remembering it can save you a lot of grief if you are the one trying to make things work perfectly.

- No matter how much technology you have supporting the program, general student satisfaction seems driven more by the human interface (the people and their personalities) with whom they have to deal either in person at the local site, or by phone or e-mail from main campus. The name of the game is customer service.

- In each cohort there will emerge leaders and free riders, saints and sinners. In this respect, each cohort is just like its on-campus peers.

- Personal contact between the faculty teaching on campus and the students learning at a distant site is essential. We have seen great benefits from having faculty visiting the distant site and then teaching their courses from the distant sites back to East Lansing, and we encourage this as early in each term as possible.

- Most social work educators know that it takes a lot of people to educate a social worker. At distant sites, it often takes even more people – because a smaller portion of them work full-time for the university – and they tend to be spread out over greater geographic distances. Building and nurturing these relationships – for instruction, advising,

and field education – is extremely important and tremendously time-consuming.

- There are some tensions that are more likely to occur in a distant site than they do on campus. For example, some students may wind up with their supervisors as classmates and peers. Students may see one member of a family in the agency where they are employed, and another member of that family in the agency where they are doing field education. There are no definitive guidelines for handling these and similar situations, but certainly sensitivity to the complex personal, ethical, legal, and moral issues is essential.

- Finally, regardless of how much and what type of ICTs are available to support distance education efforts, ultimately it is the human side that determines success and satisfaction. Bad technology can obviously sink a program, but good technology, even the best technology, cannot make a program on its own.

The other set of answers to the question about what has been learned is very much on the personal side. These include:

- Making a program like this work well requires a tremendous amount of time and energy for tasks not generally valued by the academic setting – networking with a wide range of constituencies, spending time at meetings and on phone calls, and so forth. Without the strong support of the director of the school, spending the time to take on these tasks would have been risky for my academic career. Even with that support, and despite the endorsement of the university for outreach efforts, taking time to do this work could have been disastrous if I had not already had tenure.

- My involvement with the distance education initiative helped me to see that I really do like keeping up with the latest developments in technology, and that I value being able to understand them well enough to consider how they might be applied in social work education and practice. A side benefit has been to keep me conversant enough with my kids to avoid the “dinosaur” label.

- There have been enormous benefits to me in terms of personal feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment from the work we have done on our distance education projects. Over the years I have had numerous conversations with students and their family members; with agency directors and field liaisons; and with people in broader constituencies in communities around the state. These conversations have brought home the impact of having an expanded *local* capacity to help people in areas which previously were dependent on whomever they could attract from outside. This is a form of empowering communities, a goal to which I had made a personal and professional commitment long ago. What I would never have predicted is that technology has been the tool through which I have been able to implement that commitment!

- Finally, looking back on the past ten years I now know that there is nothing magical about the process. It takes hard work, but developing effective distance education programs is not a Herculean task. Others can undertake it or be supervised in doing it, and I see more delegation and supervision in my future as we develop additional programs.

With the routinization of this process comes the search for new projects and initiatives for myself, something that is both exciting and scary. Come to think of it, that's what I said about distance education a decade ago.

References

- Freddolino, P.P., Reed, C.S., & Ruhala, T.G. (1983). The Traverse City Project: A portable M.S.W. program. *Journal of Continuing Social Work Education*, 2(2):15-20, 30.

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