

Chapter 3

Methods

The subject of this study was MariMUSE, a virtual college operated by the Maricopa Community College District (MCCD) in Arizona. More specifically, this study examined student responses to virtual classroom activities which occurred during on-line delivery of Survey of Education (IGS 298) sections taught Thursday evenings at 7:00 P.M. and Saturday mornings at 11:30 A.M. during the Fall 1993 semester. In order to protect the privacy of students and faculty observed, all participants were referred to only by their pseudonyms. The primary instructors for the course are Avalon, Wlad and Doc.

This exploratory study employed quantitative as well as structured interview methods for data collection. In keeping with the virtual nature of the environment, student surveys and structured interviews were conducted electronically using a text-based format. Participants were also given the opportunity to elaborate or clarify statements on an on-going basis through the use of e-mail. The survey component (a copy of the survey instrument is provided in the appendix) of this study contains both qualitative and quantitative elements: The structured interview component of the data collection process addressed:

- the perceived role of the instructor in a virtual classroom;
- student perceptions of the purpose of the class;
- student perceptions of the instructors "teaching style";
- instructional content/activities students found enjoyable;
- instructional content/activities students found frustrating;
- any additional comments students choose to provide.

The survey component also included a series of demographic questions concerning:

- age;
- gender;

- full/part-time student status;
- major;
- typing speed;
- availability of computer at home; and
- age when first introduced to computers.

Planning

Planning for this study began with a series of on-line and telephone conversations between the researcher and the instructors of MariMUSE. The purpose of these discussions was to describe the intent of the study and obtain permission to observe the class. At the invitation of the instructors, the researcher was invited to initiate an additional on-line conversation with students enrolled in the course in order to acquaint them with the proposed study and secure their permission to observe. Permission to observe was granted by the students, instructors and college administrators.

All classroom observations were conducted electronically. Although the students were aware of the researcher's character (Shohin), within the virtual environment, the researcher always maintained the role of observer and never interacted with objects or responded to student questions. As students and instructors moved from place to place within the virtual environment, the researcher followed. In order to secure the content of these sessions for analysis, it was agreed that the researcher would employ a capture log in order to electronically record each instructional session in its entirety.

The demographic and structured interview questions employed by this exploratory study were designed in cooperation with the instructional staff of MariMUSE. The instructional staff also retained the right to final edit of demographic and structured interview questions prior to their distribution to students at the conclusion of the course.

Students were informed by instructors that completion of the survey instrument should be considered a class assignment. Students were also

assured by instructors that their responses would not have any bearing on their course grade. The survey instrument was distributed and retrieved electronically directly from students by the researcher in the form of email.

Analysis

The demographic data provided by students was evaluated using simple measures of range and central tendency. The five (5) questions and open ended comments section in the survey were designed to collect narrative response from student participants. These data, in conjunction with recorded class logs (a sample class log is included in the appendix), were used as the source material for qualitative analysis. For each of the five questions and comments, content was reviewed in order to identify and group common themes across data. Reviews were conducted using word and phrase searching software as well as by reading hard copy of responses to each survey question and comment. Similarly, reviews of all class logs were conducted using word and phrase searching software as well as by reading hard copy of the logs in order to identify classroom incidents which illustrated themes identified through analysis of response to the five survey questions and comments. These findings were used to answer the research question proposed for this study.