

PT3 Implementation Grant Year 1 Report on Participant Perceptions

Presented to

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Introduction

A key purpose of evaluation this year is to provide information to the project directors and other stakeholders which will help them to meet program goals for this year and in the next two years with other groups. This project relies on the willingness and ability of many people to learn new skills and change the way they have traditionally taught. In order to shed light on how participants are thinking and feeling about their association with the PT3 program in this early stage, we interviewed 31 instructors, Tech TAs, and the program staff. The results of those interviews are reported here. We will also use those data for constructing surveys at year-end so that we may report changes over time. Presented below are the methods by which the data were elicited and compiled, the themes that emerged through interviews, and recommendations for future action. The project directors should review these suggestions and make (or not) any changes they believe are warranted. This report becomes part of the evaluation record.

Method

Interviewees included all instructors (faculty, adjunct, and graduate) and Tech TAs for 4411, 4321, 4311, 3023, 3013, and the Master's Plus program. Michael Meloth, Cinthia Salinas, Doug Kirby, and Pamela Ford were also interviewed.

Interview questions focused on understanding of the program's goals, specific integration goals, and importance of technology skills for students. (Attached is a copy of the interview schedule.) Interviewees were also asked if there were any other issues they wanted to talk about. Not all questions were addressed to or answered by all interviewees; the project staff and Dr. Ford's interviews were necessarily distinct from the other participants, following a looser protocol or even completely open ended. Three graduate students, Jeffrey Hovermill, Cathy Miller, and Kathy Bunch, conducted all but one interview. Responses for all interviews and miscellaneous information were compiled, then read by Lecia Barker and each of the three interviewers. We discussed emerging themes and recorded the number of times a theme arose.

These themes are organized below in general categories; it is important to keep in mind, however, that these categories often overlap and/or implicate other categories. In particular, strong relationships were evident between the following pairs: "Importance of Technology Skills" and "The Value of Technology for Education"; "Understanding of Project Goals and Course Integration Goals" and "Standards, Technology Goals, and PT3."

Interview Results

Importance Of Technology Skills, Integration For Future Teachers

Of the nineteen instructors who addressed this question, twelve believe technology skills are moderately to very important for pre-service teachers, four believe the importance of this knowledge depends on how technology is used, and three either didn't know or had mixed feelings. None of those interviewed showed evidence of technophobia.

Seven interviewees claimed that knowing technology or using it wisely will lead to better practice as a teacher. For example: "Technology makes education more entertaining. That's important because entertainment is so important in our society"; "the more teachers that can make informed decisions, the better they are going to be"; "technology is not essential but it enhances the course . . . technology is highly important when used appropriately"; "technology is massively important in order to meet state standards and as a part of professional development."

Four respondents stated the importance of technology only in terms of student ability to land jobs: "The students who don't learn the technology are closing doors for themselves while other students who know the technology will get the jobs"; "technology is extremely important in order to interview well and get good jobs"; "once students are in the real world, they'll be more competitive in their fields." However, most interviewees expressed more sophisticated thinking about the integration of technology into teaching.

Some interviewees are cautious or even skeptical about the value of technology for teaching: "If technology can't be used toward better student understanding, it is superfluous"; "too often it is used as a babysitter and not used effectively"; "I don't know of any research that says technology is effective in improving learning"; "it's more for organization and management than for students . . . I question the cognitive benefits due to the level of abstraction necessary for kids younger than third grade." These divergent opinions may stem from various understandings of the value of technology integration.

The Value Of Technology For Education

Several interviewees expressed either a lack of understanding as to why they should integrate or a desire for learning about or exploring the research on the value of technology in education. "I haven't read the stuff that it's increasing learning and making better teachers"; "there are not enough conversations about the purposes of integration." Three people explicitly stated that they did not understand what technology integration means.

Further, ten people expressed a desire for increased thoughtfulness in the program; seven suggested that the technology was being pushed ahead of the content. "The tech support is usually focused on the tech component, not the content component"; "adding on for technology's sake is not good . . . there are lots of bad programs out there."

Some interviewees are very excited about learning software and integrating the technology. "It's like a game. It's fun." In fact, one person said, "I thought I'd be the last person to participate in the technology . . . I'm finding that it can really be useful to me." What's missing from these

positive statements is their reasoning, which was not always probed (some people were in a big hurry).

Understanding Of Project Goals And Course Integration Goals

One of our questions was “What are the goals of the PT3 grant as you understand them?” Fifteen people gave answers that were restatements of the grant’s goals. Several of these simply reiterated the program name (i.e., to prepare future teachers to use technology). Without further explanation, it’s hard to tell whether those persons knew what that meant. Thirteen people gave what we consider to be unreasonable answers to this question. For example: “To integrate technology standards into the teacher education program. The goal is to have students know them and bring faculty up to speed in these areas”; “to put technology into other courses so that they don’t have to have courses on technology only”; “to introduce and integrate technology into the Ed School”; “to get everybody up to par with technology changes.” These answers are somewhat off the mark and exhibit a lack of understanding of the goals as expressed in the grant.

A few people answered that they didn’t really know or didn’t understand the program. “They’re too big to get out in one statement.” Another responded with laughter, then said, “well, it’s rather unclear.” “There’s no coherent plan or rationale for breaking it down or for the ‘why’ of the little things.” One person replied, “I have no idea” and had nothing to add, even when probed.

We also asked about technology goals in instructors’ own teaching. Only seven of the 25 instructors expressed their integration goals in terms of student outcomes, while 18 expressed their integration goals in terms of what kind of software/hardware they would use. These 18 instructors express the goal of the program differently from the goals as expressed in the proposal; in other words, they express the integration goals as those activities which the proposal describes as “means,” rather than those which the proposal states as “ends.” (To avoid identifying those instructors, no quotes will be presented for the larger group.) Examples of the minority’s comments, which showed greater alignment with the wording in the grant, are “to teach students how to critique software,” “how to be critical of web sites,” and “to increase communication and understanding through online discussions.”

Roles/Responsibilities Of Participants And Their Relationship To Each Other

Tension was apparent in terms of beliefs about how grant participants with different roles and responsibilities should interact and what they should be doing. For example, five instructors were not sure what the role of the Tech TAs is. Also, two of the Tech TAs stated explicitly that their role is to push the technology, making no statements about the nature of the course or the instructors’ desires. “It is very important for the TAs to be proactive and push the instructors to do it” and “we are pushing technology.” In comparing what Tech TAs think they’re supposed to do with what instructors think their role is, sometimes there is an incompatibility or mixed understanding.

In response to “what is your role?” another Tech TA said “to help instructors with their technology needs.” Yet not all the instructors are knowledgeable enough either with basic skills or about integration to know what they need help with. For instance, some instructors are quite nervous about their basic skills and think their role is to integrate technology into their courses:

“I’m not trained well enough to integrate technology effectively” and “I know less than others in my group about technology.” Further, some want no help because as mentioned earlier, they do not understand why they should be integrating or are skeptical about the value of technology in teaching.

To some degree, the incompatibility in perception of roles may be due to differences in opinion about the needs of pre-service teachers. For example, a Tech TA said, “Students are more concerned with keeping up to date and in touch with the technological world” while an instructor said, “if the students learn lots of technology while in college, and then when they become teachers there’s only one computer in the building for example, then it shouldn’t be a primary focus of the student’s education.”

In addition to confusion about roles, there are also tensions related to how the project is being managed. Instructors feel that they know how to teach their content areas, yet many feel that the program is a top-down approach, in which they are being told they have to do things to which they are not committed (and in some cases, told by people who display limited understanding of their needs). Three people suggested that involving the instructors as equal planners and decision makers would improve the program. Several interviewees had had some negative experiences with other grant participants. “I’m concerned about professionalism, collaboration, communication, and patronizing affiliated with PT3.”

Some participants would like to know about the goals of other courses and instructors so they can gather ideas. “I like the weekly meetings. They help in forming connections, but I’d still like to find out more about what others are doing.” One person asked for a list of participants.

Standards, Technology Goals, And PT3

As is probably clear from some of the quotes presented here, there is some confusion about the relationship of the grant program to standards. In fact, eight interviewees expressed either confusion or concern over this issue; some of these stated explicitly that the grant should help them to understand how to meet standards. “There needs to be an understanding of the interplay between the state standards and the PT3 grant . . . the PT3 grant is not directly connected to the state standards but people need to understand the connections.” Others expressed confusion between the grant’s goals, the dean’s goals, and the overall technology goals.

Time, Reward, Training, and Support

Three instructors asked for in-class support, saying “the Tech TAs are not available for the courses and it would be nice to have the support there” and “you’ve got to consider the learning curves of instructors. They want to be comfortable and knowledgeable before leading class. It would be better if the TAs instructed the first time.”

Related to in-class support is the skills training needed to get up to speed. Five instructors expressed a desire for better training for themselves. Two would like to see instructional guides about what is available and how to use it. As might be expected, interviewees expressed varying attitudes about when and how they’d like to get training. For example, “more up-front support would be valuable” and “I would like to have seen more [training] in the summer, not at the start of the semester” versus “I would like to see more instructional guides to assist learning particular

technology skills, like how to use the data projector or how to create a web site” versus “I’d like to see more systematic opportunities for learning and sharing over time. The Tech Bytes are not sufficient” and “There were no written artifacts from the workshops. They were sort of effective as exposure, but now what?” versus “The Tech Bytes are really helpful.”

Eight instructors said that learning the technology was a major time commitment, that they did not have enough time, or that the time demand was simply unrealistic. “We need more up-front support and more opportunities for learning. Meetings and communications alone are very time consuming.” “I have to balance time with technology learning and all of my other responsibilities.” Some of the Tech TAs feel too much time is required to do what is demanded of them: “<Instructor> is over-demanding and <his/her> expectations versus the time required are not realistic, especially when the number of other instructors and students are considered.”

Related to this objection to time commitment is an objection to lack of reward¹: “Instructors’ time must be spent on this and should be compensated for.” “I feel that I’m being asked to do a lot with technology with no increase in pay.” “Technology is a huge time commitment with no bonuses.” “All of this technology work requires time and faculty should be rewarded.” “Work with technology often requires a trade-off between time that could be spent for other things.”

For some, involvement in the program is a reward in itself. “I like the opportunity and the work and am excited about it.” “It’s a motivator and I’m excited about the possibilities. Teaching styles vary widely and meeting these are often difficult.” “A side benefit of the project is my increased technology knowledge and its effect on other aspects of my career.”

Recommendations

Improved Communication System

Several of the issues and concerns expressed by PT3 participants are related to communication or a lack of understanding. Clarifying the goals of the program, the purposes of integrating technology into teaching, the roles and responsibilities of participants, etc., would eliminate misconceptions and unpleasant interactions. Also, if participants have a better sense of their role and its connection to goal achievement, they may be better equipped to contribute as well as more committed. Here are some concrete ideas:

- Describe the program in an easy-to-read format (i.e., bullet points) and distribute this on paper² in participants’ mail boxes. Include the program’s goals, the expected roles and responsibilities of each participant (or job category), the relation of the program to standards, etc.
- Arrange for a series of informal colloquia in which issues about integrating technology into teaching are raised. Lure people with food. Here you could present Nick’s 4-point scheme, research on beneficial and detrimental uses of technology in classrooms, issues of classroom management related to technology, etc. Invite some high profile guest

¹ Be aware that the time/reward theme is very common across campus, according to ATLAS research.

² People draw conclusions from the medium chosen for communicating with them, which is, of course, socially and situationally variable. In the case of the PT3 program, email is the standard and therefore will not elicit extra interest or curiosity. Paper is recommended to imply importance and permanence.

speakers. Perhaps ask those who have good reasons and deeper understanding of the purpose of integration to articulate these reasons and then share them with their peers at a presentation. Tech TAs could conduct literature reviews in their assigned content areas and present them at colloquia and/or at team meetings.

- Install a team approach for different course groups. Each course is different; that group of instructors may be best positioned to determine what is sensible for their courses, given their teaching goals and desired student outcomes. They can plan how it will be integrated into the course materials and activities and implement with the help of the Tech TAs. This is an especially strong recommendation in relation to the Pro-Seminar courses.
- Send out a newsletter. Highlight research on the role of technology in education in relation to specific content areas. Present case studies and success stories of how people both here and in other places have successfully integrated technology, at both postsecondary and K-12 levels.
- Make sure the Tech TAs can describe the “big picture” to instructors and explain how the small steps help them to achieve goals. This is a difficult task and perhaps requires that the Tech TAs take a mini course covering the research and various integration methods. If they themselves understand the big picture, perhaps it will be easier for them to communicate it and to make judgments about the needs of various courses and instructors. Help Tech TAs see themselves as “collaborators,” making it very clear what this means. This may help them to overcome the perception that they are “pushing” the technology ahead of content.

Pro-Seminar as a Special Case

The Pro-Seminar group has concerns specific to their course content, and therefore is singled out in this paragraph. Because the content of Pro-Seminar is not particular to subject areas, but to other types of social issues, the type of technology instruction or integration relevant to this course is more difficult to identify. Not surprisingly, this group expressed more confusion than any other with reference to every question asked. They also had more concerns. “We are being taught to teach additional content, not tools for developing content” and “methods courses are a better fit.” Also pointed out was the fact that two-thirds of their students do not pursue teaching certification. Given that the Pro-Seminar series is focused on raising future teachers’ awareness of a variety of social issues that will affect their teaching, perhaps the most sensible integration of technology is to raise student awareness of the U.S. as a technological society as well as to explore research on educational technology.

PT3 Interview Questions, September-October, 2000

What is your affiliation with the PT3 program?

What are the goals of the PT3 grant program as you understand them?

How important do you feel technology skills are for the students in your course, in particular, and for teacher education, in general? Why?

What are your technology integration goals for the course you teach, if any? (Please note that these may be small steps or large. What is it you hope to accomplish?)

What other issues do you feel are important for us to know in order to better understand your involvement with this project?