

**EVALUATION OF AN INTERNET-DELIVERED  
INTRODUCTORY SOCIAL WORK COURSE**

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**OCTOBER 2002**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This evaluation was supported by a grant from the Research and Information Committee, Canadian Association of University Continuing Education (CAUCE), Simon Fraser University.

The development of the material for the on-line SW 100 course was supported by a grant from the University of Regina.

Many people assisted with the development of the SW 100 course and with this study. In particular, we would like to thank the following individuals for their participation and assistance:

Myra Zubot-Mitchell, Centre for Continuing Education, University of Regina

Brenda Hackl, Centre for Continuing Education, University of Regina

Monelle McKay, BSW student, Prince Albert Community Education Centre, Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

This project focused on an evaluation of an innovative new introductory social work course (Social Work 100: Introduction to Social Welfare and Social Work) delivered using information and communication technologies (ICT). The first offering of this course, delivered in the Winter 2002 term, was available to all students admitted to the University of Regina Faculty of Social Work, students in other Faculties, practicing social workers and other human service workers interested in additional knowledge. The course was also be available to any other persons with access to a computer who wished to participate and who met the admission criteria of the University of Regina. The Internet was the vehicle for course distribution using WebCT as the course software, making it among the first professional social work courses in Canada available on-line. This study represents a preliminary step in assessing internet delivery of a social work course by comparing it to the same course taught in a traditional face to face classroom to assess the similarities and differences in student outcomes, student satisfaction and instructor variables.

## **II. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

This study addressed the following objectives:

- 1) to compare students' views of this internet method of distance delivery to the views of students who have completed the same course delivered by face to face method of instruction;
- 2) to compare the two groups of students on outcome variables related to achievement in course assignments;
- 3) to document the experiences of the instructors delivering an internet-based course;
- 4) to contribute to the growing literature on assessing the effectiveness of using internet-based delivery of university level courses in social work.

### III. RESEARCH QUESTION

How does an introductory undergraduate social work course delivered totally through ICT compare to the same course delivered through a traditional face-to-face pedagogy on the dimensions of learning achievement and student and instructor satisfaction?

### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last ten years, and particularly in the last five, post-secondary education has seen an explosion of courses using the internet for delivery of part or all of the course material, communication and research. Most recently, institutions have gone beyond experimentation and are delivering whole programs and degrees by electronic means. (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Most of the literature reviewed contends that the newer information and communication technologies (ICT) are but traditional distance education using updated technology. There is no consensus, however, in the literature on whether distance education, and specifically distance education using the ICT, is as effective as traditional face to face teaching. A number of recent reviews of the literature have attempted to assess technology assisted distance education and these reviews have, themselves, been subjected to debate.

Russell (1999) reported on 355 research reports, summaries and papers from 1928 to 1999, which showed no significant difference, on a variety of measures, between technologies for distance education and traditional classroom teaching methodologies. Starting in the 1990s, the studies included a large number of projects using computer-mediated technologies<sup>1</sup>. A companion web-site, "Significant Difference", lists abstracts from studies completed between 1991 and 2001 which suggest that technology mediated instruction is more effective than conventional methods of instruction on various outcome measures of knowledge increase, performance on examinations, professional socialization and student satisfaction<sup>2</sup>.

Phipps and Merisotis (1999), in a project commissioned by the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, also reviewed a broad

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://nova.teleeducation.nb.ca/nosignificantdifference/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://nova.teleeducation.nb.ca/significantdifference>.

array of articles to determine the overall quality of the analysis, to identify gaps in the research, and to highlight the implications for future research. They limited their review to articles published in the 1990s that addressed the use of technology. They noted significant gaps in the research, which, they argue, did not account for important variables such as different learning styles of students. Overall, they concluded that the research suggests that distance education is just as effective as traditional delivery of education if the research is conducted properly.

Brown and Wack (1999) are critical of the validity of the issues raised by Phipps and Merisotis (1999) and contend that these authors are "raising the bar" for research impossibly high for this area of inquiry - "the messy world of teaching and learning". They conclude that, "...efforts to compare distance and conventional courses and programs are problematic, especially as distance and campus programs and populations are increasingly integrated" (p. 4).

To take this a step further, some writers such as Burbules and Callister (n.d.) stress that "today the distinction between 'distance education' and regular instruction - even the relevance of distance and other spatiotemporal markers as the key distinction between different types of teaching or different categories of student - is beginning to disappear" (p. 1). They predict that in the near future most courses will make use of the internet and many will integrate on and off campus students in the same courses. They argue that the issues are subtle and analyses of the new technologies of education need to take a "finer-grained" view of which technologies have educational potential for which students, for which subject matter, and for which purposes.

As part of a large Europe-wide series of projects and evaluations of computer mediated communication (CMC), Ruotsalainen and Pulkkinen (1999) examined CMC in teaching and learning in the fields of health, education and welfare using a number of case studies. This project, SCHEMA (Social Cohesion through Higher Education in Marginal Areas), was supported by the European Commission. Out of these examinations they conclude "students are in general quite satisfied and motivated to study in learning environments implemented by means of CMC" (p. 23). They present some ideas on evaluating the usability of CMC for teaching and learning and suggest a triangle of evaluative interests: students, instructors and learning outcomes and a triangle

of elements to evaluate: pedagogical functions, social organization and appropriate technology. Critical issues emerging from their case studies include:

- Student prior ICT skills
- Differences in learning cultures
- Training of instructors in on-line learning
- Support for peer collaboration
- Appropriate technology and support for instructors

Another case-based study that used observation, interview and document review cautioned against emphasizing only the virtues of computer-mediated distance education and suggests that most of the articles about distance education are written for practitioners and that only the positive opportunities are presented (Hara & Kling, 2000). Hara and Kling stress the necessity to examine the complexity of the medium and to examine "students' periodic distressing experiences (such as frustration, anxiety and confusion) ... due to communication breakdowns and technical difficulties" (p. 2). This view is reiterated by Reeves (1997) who cautions both against assuming that a technological innovation is effective because many people believe it is and against reducing evaluation to "a numbers game wherein the value of CBE [computer-based education] is represented by 1) the amount of money spent on hardware and software, 2) the ratio of students to computers, or 3) the amount of time students have access to CBE within a school day, week, month or year" (p. 2).

The debate over appropriate use of technology to deliver university courses is also apparent in social work programs, however, there is relatively little research literature that examines effectiveness of internet delivered courses on a variety of student outcomes. Most would agree that more research is needed to assess both the positive and negative effects of using technology in social work education (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000) and that a particularly important question is the extent to which technology assisted learning helps students to acquire social work practice skills (Quam, 1999). Related to this is a concern that students are less able to develop critical thinking skills in technology-mediated classes and that students may tend, instead, to passively assimilate knowledge instead of challenging and working through it to make it their own (Burge,

1988; Garrison, 1993; Lauzon, 1992). This and other issues are highlighted by Kreuger and Stretch:

Much better data are needed to assess how students adapt to temporal and spatial distance, relate to the emerging physical and spatial aspects of learning off site, manage access to sometimes costly equipment, and adapt to individual differences in reception of electronic messages (2000, p. 110).

This exploratory study addresses some of the issues raised in the literature and, in particular, focuses on the general areas of: 1) learning outcomes, 2) student attitudes and satisfaction, 3) development of critical thinking skills, and 4) instructor views on course delivery method.

## **V. THE SOCIAL WORK 100 COURSE**

The Social Work 100 course consisted of specific modules that covered a range of introductory material in social work. Each module addressed a specific component (see Appendix A for a brief description of each module) and were organized so that each module was covered over one week for the duration of the 13 week semester. For example, the on-line course was organized so that the content of the module was covered over a seven-day period from Wednesday to Tuesday. Along with the weekly content, the on-line students were assigned to a particular group that was responsible for answering specific Bulletin Board assignment questions and posting their responses to a bulletin board. Students were also required to complete a journal entry assignment that was designed to have them critically reflect on the material covered in each module. Another course component included guiding questions that highlighted the key learning from the assigned text and web readings. These guiding questions were also provided to assist students in studying for the final examination.

Social Work 100 was also offered in a face-to-face traditional classroom format to permit comparison with the views of students taking the course on-line. As closely as possible it followed the same format as the on-line version of the course in content, process and assignments. The students in the face to face course were given a course syllabus at the first meeting which laid out the structure of the course including the goals,

objectives, topics for each week, readings, web sites, assignments and reflective questions. All components were the same as those given to the on-line students. Each class meeting was held once a week for three hours and started with a brief review of the previous week's topic and a check to determine if there were any difficulties or questions. The instructor then introduced the topic for the current week and covered the same material as presented in written format to the on-line students in an interactive lecture style. This was followed by the class breaking into small groups of six to eight students, with each group assigned a different reflective question covering the previously assigned reading and/or the lecture. After about 20 minutes the entire class convened to share their questions and their group's responses. Further class discussion was held if the students or instructor had additional comments and if there was time.

## **VI. METHODS**

In order to address the specific research question and to gain more in depth knowledge of students' experiences with internet-delivered social work courses, we used a multi-method approach to collecting information. On most aspects, we compared the internet students' experiences with the views of those students who were completing the same class in a face-to-face format on campus in Regina. Survey data was collected from both classes in January and April 2002 with follow-up interviews with students and instructors completed in May and June 2002.

### **A. STUDENT SURVEY**

Questionnaires were distributed to both groups of students at the beginning of the term in January 2002 and then again at the conclusion of the course in April. The on-campus students were given time in class to complete the questionnaire while the on-line students completed the questionnaires on-line and emailed them to the researcher using an anonymous e-mail system. A total of 29 Regina students and 25 on-line students completed the course. The following table summarizes the number of students who participated in the study. For the Regina class this represents a participation rate of 86% on the first questionnaire and 69% on the second questionnaire. For the on-line students,

the participation rate in the survey was 100% on the first questionnaire and 72% on the second questionnaire.

Student survey: number of participants

	Questionnaire #1	Questionnaire #2
Regina (in-class) students	25	20
On-Line students	25	18

## B. INTERVIEWS

### 1. *Exit interviews* (n=9)

We were interested to know the views of the students who dropped the internet course and in particular whether their decision to drop the course related to the internet delivery method. We conducted exit interviews with these students by telephone and asked the following questions:

- a. Why did you choose to drop the course?
- b. What was your experience with the on-line format of the course? (probe: did this relate to the reason for dropping?)
- c. Would you consider registering in another on-line social work course? Or any other on-line course? Why or why not?

### 2. *Follow up interviews with on-line students* (n=8)

In order to gain more in-depth comments from the on-line students, we invited those who completed the final questionnaire to participate in a follow-up interview to answer the following questions:

- a. Please think about your overall experience with the SW 100 online course and comment on:
  - your best experience?
  - your worst experience?
- b. Approximately how many traditional face-to-face courses have you taken? How would you compare this online experience with your experience of traditional face-to-face course delivery?
- c. Will you tell me about your learning environment? (Probe for the advantages and disadvantages of their space. If it were an option, would they change anything in their environment?)

- d. How did you organize your time? (probe: try to get at comments about when they actually did the work – i.e. time of day/day of week, etc.)
- e. How well did the way of communicating with other on-line students work for you? (i.e. probe for the methods that worked well – was it email, bulletin board, etc. – what did they think of both the level and quality of the interaction with other students) How did this compare to interacting with other students in a face-to-face class?
- f. (ask the same questions as above in relation to communicating with the instructors)
- g. One of the issues that is sometimes raised about on-line university courses is that they do not allow for the same development of critical thinking skills as what students develop in a face-to-face class. What are your thoughts on this?
- h. In terms of the course content, can you tell me what you learned about social welfare and social work? (Explore the various modules and the assignments. Discuss what contributed to the learning and what, if anything hindered the learning process.)
- i. Social Work is work with people. Given this focus, what do you see as the strengths and the limitations of taking social work courses online?
- j. Any other comments you want to make?

### 3. *Instructor interviews* (n=2)

A final set of interviews involved the two instructors who were responsible for delivering the SW100 course. Both instructors shared the teaching of the on-line course while one of the instructors was also responsible for the face-to-face delivery of SW 100. We were interested to hear their views and experiences of delivering the internet based course.

- a. How would you describe your overall experience with the SW 100 online course?
- b. In your experience, what are the strengths of online delivery?
- c. Do you have any concerns? (Probe for specifics such as best and worst experiences if their comments are general.)
- d. How would you describe the difference between instructing online as compared with instructing face-to-face? (Depending on their responses, ask about student learning, and about differences regarding instructor preparation, and any need for additional training.)
- e. How would you describe your interactions with the students? Their interactions with each other?
- f. What suggestions do you have for improving the course? (If necessary, ask about teaching another course online. Would they do so? If yes, would they want to see any changes?)
- g. Do you think that more social work courses should be delivered online? Explore their answers in terms of the kind of courses and the specific nature of delivery, for example would face-to-face components be combined with technology?

### C. CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BULLETIN BOARD POSTINGS

A final method that we used in this study involved an assessment of the extent to which students showed evidence of critical thinking skills throughout the course. In order to do this we used the bulletin board postings to questions posed in four modules as the basis on which to make this assessment. The following modules were selected for the analyses:

Module 1 - Introduction

Module 3 - Social Policy

Module 6 - Aboriginal People as Consumers

Module 7 - Women as Consumers.

We used the four critical thinking skills developed by Bullen (1997) as our guide for this assessment. Bullen's definitions of positive and negative indicators for determining each of the critical thinking skills (1997, pp. 107-112) and the use of categories of low, medium and high skill were used to determine individual student scores. In addition, his overall definition of critical thinking, "thinking that is reasonable and reflective and focused on what to believe or do" guided the analysis (pp. 112-113). As he maintains in an article that discusses the study, "the criteria of reasonableness, reflection, and focus on beliefs or actions were always applied regardless of the individual thinking skills identified" (Bullen, 1998, p. 8).

The following four general areas were adapted from Bullen's (1997) work and applied to the student Bulletin Board postings for selected modules.

#### 1. Clarification

Description: The attempt to appraise and understand the exact nature of the problem, issue or dilemma. This includes attempting to understand different points of view on an issue. The analysis included considering the following questions:

Does the student appear to have a correct understanding of the question, issue, or problem?

If not, is appropriate and sufficient clarification sought?

## 2. Assessing Evidence

Description: In order to establish a sound basis for inferences, the evidence used to support those inferences must be assessed. This involves judging the credibility of sources of information and making and judging the credibility of observations. The analysis included considering the following question:  
Does the student assess properly the evidence on which to base decisions, opinions, or conclusions?

## 3. Making and judging inferences

Description: Inductive and deductive inferences and value judgements are involved in making a decision about what to believe or do. Critical thinking involves the ability to judge the soundness of inferences and to make good inferences. Using evidence to support arguments is included in this category. The analysis included considering the following questions:  
Does the student make valid inferences?  
Does the student judge correctly the inferences made by others?

## 4. Using appropriate strategies and tactics

Description: Critical thinking is not a matter of following steps or procedures but some strategies or heuristics can be useful in guiding thinking. The analysis included considering the following questions:  
Does the student appear to be using appropriate strategies and/or heuristics in order to solve the problem, resolve the dilemma, or reach a decision in an effective and orderly manner?

The bulletin board comments made by each student were evaluated on a scale of 0 –2 points for each of these four skill areas with responses to each question thus having a potential total score of 8 points. The specific score for each of the four areas was based on the following general operational definitions:

0 = the student does not demonstrate evidence of using the skill

1= the student demonstrates some evidence of using the skill

2= the student demonstrates consistent evidence of using the skill

## VII. FINDINGS

We begin the analysis with a summary of the profile of students who participated in the study. The comparative analyses includes summaries of students' view on course components, technical issues, interaction with other SW 100 students, interaction with the instructors, an assessment of their learning environment, and an analysis of the development of critical thinking skills. Finally, we present a summary of students' views on their level of motivation throughout the course, whether other commitments interfered with them completing the course work, and their views on whether they would take another internet course. For ease of presentation, we refer to the face-to-face class as the "Regina" students and the students completing SW 100 on the internet as the "On-line" students.

### A. STUDENT PROFILE

The following description of the student participants in this study are based on Tables A1 through A8 which appear in Appendix B.

#### a. Age Distribution

The Regina students tended to be younger with 84% of them between the ages of 18 and 26 years compared to 60% of on-line students in this same age category. 16% of Regina students were between the ages of 27 and 45 years compared to 40% of on-line students.

#### b. Current Program

Slightly more than one-half (56%) of the Regina students compared to one-third (32%) of the on-line students indicated they were qualifying students, or, in other words, were interested in pursuing the Bachelor of Social Work but were not yet officially admitted to the program.

#### c. Completed Social Work Courses

Given the previous information, it is not surprising that the majority of both the Regina students (88%) and the on-line students (50%) had not completed any other social work courses. Approximately one-quarter of the on-line students (27%), however, indicated they had completed almost one semester of social work courses.

#### d. Current Registration in Social Work and Other Courses

The pattern of registration in other social work courses concurrent with SW 100 was similar for both the Regina and on-line students. Approximately one-third of both groups indicated they were not registered in other social work courses; 44% of Regina students and 20% of on-line students were taking one other social work course, while 20% of Regina students and one-third (32%) of on-line students were taking two to four social work courses in addition to SW 100.

The distribution of those taking other non-social work courses concurrent with SW 100 was also similar for both Regina and on-line students. About one-third of both Regina and on-line students were registered in four other non social work courses while taking SW 100.

#### e. Where Students Live

Students identified the Faculty of Social Work location closest to their place of residence with the options being Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert. While we expected that all of the Regina students would indicate Regina as the closest Faculty of Social Work location to where they live, the majority of the on-line students (64%) also indicated Regina as the Faculty location closest to where they live. These students indicated they lived in Regina, Moose Jaw or Yorkton.

#### f. Internet and Correspondence Courses

Students were asked if they had ever taken university courses via the Internet or correspondence (see Table A9). On-line students are more likely to have taken both an internet and a correspondence course.

Table A9

Students indicating they have taken a university internet or correspondence course by location

	Regina %	On-line %
Internet	4 (n=1)	20 (n=5)
Correspondence	8 (n=2)	40 (n=10)

g. Children Under 18 and People in Household

Students identified the number of children under 18 that lived with them and the number of other people in the household (see Table A10 and Table A11). 65% of Regina students had no children under 18 with them compared to 50% of on-line students.

About one-third (30%) of Regina students had 1 to 3 children with them while 45% of on-line students indicated the same number of children living with them. There were also some differences in the proportion of students who indicated there were other people living in their household. One-quarter of the Regina students indicated they lived alone while almost one-half (47%) of the on-line students indicated at least one other person living in their household.

Table A10

Number of Children Under 18 by Location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
0	65	50
1	25	6
2	5	22
3 or more	5	23
	100	100

Table A11

Number of Other People in Household by Location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
0	25	--
1	20	47
2	15	6
3	5	29
4	30	6
5 or more	5	12
	100	100

h. Paid and Unpaid Work

While about one-half of both Regina and on-line students indicated they were working in paid employment there were some differences between the two groups (see

Table A12). A higher proportion of the on-line students were working full-time while a higher proportion of Regina students were working part-time. We were also interested in identifying the non-paid work that students were involved in while taking classes (see Table A13). A higher proportion of on-line students (44% compared to 15%) cited child care responsibilities while a higher proportion of Regina students indicated they were involved in volunteer work.

Table A12

Paid Work by Location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Full-time	5	22
Part-time	45	33
No paid employment	40	22
Other	10	22
	100	100

Table A13

Non-paid Work by Location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Housework	80	83
Responsible for children	15	44
Responsible for other family	15	22
Responsible for seniors	10	5
Volunteer Work	65	44
Unpaid work-other	20	10

## B. VIEWS ON SW100 COURSE COMPONENTS

### a. Overall Satisfaction with the Course

A total of 38 students provided responses on their overall satisfaction with the SW100 course (see Table B1). The on-line students were almost unanimous in their

overall satisfaction with the SW 100 course (94%) compared to about two-thirds of the Regina students who were similarly satisfied (65%).

Table B1

Overall satisfaction with SW100 by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Satisfied	15	44
Satisfied	50	50
Dissatisfied	30	6
Very Dissatisfied	5	--
	100	100

b. Views on Course Components

Students provided feedback regarding specific course components including clarity of the presentation of the weekly material, helpfulness of the assigned text and web readings, usefulness of the guiding questions, usefulness of the bulletin board assignments (on-line students only), and the helpfulness of the journal entry assignments. The responses are detailed in Table B2 through Table B7. Although we did not ask the Regina students about their assessment of the bulletin board assignments, in retrospect, we could have created a similar rating of this factor by asking them about their experiences in the in-class small group discussions.

Overall, students appeared to be satisfied with most of the course components with the on-line students being somewhat more positive than the Regina students on the clarity of presentation of the weekly material and the helpfulness of the required text readings. All of the on-line students were satisfied or very satisfied with the assigned web readings while less than one-half (45%) of the Regina students were satisfied with this assignment.

Table B2

Weekly material clearly presented by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Clear	5	56
Clear	75	44
Unclear	20	--
	100	100

Table B3

Helpfulness of required text readings by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Helpful	30	78
Somewhat Helpful	60	22
Not Helpful at All	5	--
Undecided	5	--
	100	100

Table B4

Satisfaction with assigned web readings by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Satisfied	--	28
Satisfied	45	72
Dissatisfied	35	--
Very Dissatisfied	5	--
Undecided	15	--
	100	100

Table B5

Usefulness of guiding questions by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Useful	35	50
Somewhat Useful	65	50
	100	100

Table B6

Helpfulness of bulletin boards by location (on-line only)

	On-line (n=18) %
Very Helpful	56
Somewhat Helpful	33
Undecided	11
	100

Table B7

Helpfulness of journal entry assignments by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Helpful	30	39
Somewhat Helpful	55	44
Not Helpful at All	15	6
Undecided	--	11
	100	100

### C. TECHNICAL ISSUES

#### a. Satisfaction with WebCT and technical support (on-line only)

On-line students provided feedback regarding the use of the WebCT product for course delivery (Table C1) and the helpfulness of technical support provided to them throughout the course (Table C2). Students were quite satisfied with the WebCT program and, for those who required technical support, were generally satisfied with the assistance they received. The fact that almost one-half (44%) of the on-line students did not use any support speaks to the clarity and ease of use of WebCT as well as the fact that students were required to conduct self-screening preparation on-line prior to beginning the course. This preparation was designed to assist students to confirm they had the required facility with computer technology to easily access the technical aspects of the course.

Table C1

Satisfaction with overall use of WebCT (on-line only)

	On-line (n=18) %
Very Satisfied	44
Satisfied	56
	100

Table C2

Helpfulness of technical support (on-line only)

	On-line (n=18) %
Very Helpful	28
Helpful	22
Not Helpful at All	6
Did Not Use Any Support	44
	100

b. Connecting to web sites

Both groups of students provided feedback on how successful they were in connecting to web sites used for the course. Only one-half (47%) of Regina students indicated they were very successful or successful compared to all of the on-line students who said they were successful in connecting to the required web sites. The dissatisfaction of the Regina students with attempts to connect to the web sites could have been due to the delivery format of web material to the Regina students. Web site addresses were emailed as links to the these students and attempts to access through the links often failed. On-line students, on the other hand, accessed the web sites directly using the web site addresses. Detailed results are provided in Table C3.

Students in both groups elaborated on some of their responses regarding use of the technology. Overall, the on-line students found the technology to be very user friendly and non-intimidating. They indicated they enjoyed the convenience of the course and generally found that it was easy to move around throughout the modules on the web. One comment, however, was that some students found that the content of the

Bulletin Boards took longer to load as the course progressed throughout the semester. This could be explained by students inadvertently selecting the “read all” messages rather than the quicker method of selecting the method of “read unread” messages.

The Regina students were less positive about their experiences with the technology. Many had problems accessing the web readings as they indicated the sites were not always available. Students also indicated they found that some web sites had too much material and they were unsure of what to look for when they accessed the site.

Table C3

Success in connecting to web sites by location

	Regina (n=19) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Successful	5	44
Successful	42	56
Not Successful	37	--
Very Unsuccessful	10	--
Undecided	5	--
	100	100

#### D. INTERACTION WITH OTHER SW100 STUDENTS

##### a. Importance of Interaction

The students were asked to identify the level of importance for interacting with other SW100 students. The Regina and on-line students had similar responses with approximately 45% indicating interaction with other students was very important and 11% indicating interaction was not important at all. Table D1 provides a breakdown of the results.

Table D1

Interacting with other SW100 students by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Important	45	44
Somewhat Important	45	44
Not Important at All	10	11
	100	100

b. Extent of Interaction

The Regina students were asked to identify the level of interaction with other SW100 students both in and out of class while on-line students were asked to identify the level of interaction with other SW100 students in class. It was noted that future surveys should ask on-line students to indicate out of class interaction because some on-line students commented this interaction did occur. Student responses are provided in Table D2 and Table D3. The Regina students tended to indicate more interaction with students in class than did the on-line students (50% compared to 33%).

Table D2

Interacting with students in class by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
A Lot	50	33
Occasionally	50	67
	100	100

Table D3

Interacting with students outside class by location (Regina only)

	Regina (n=20) %
Occasionally	55
Not at All	45
	100

c. Getting to Know Other Students

Students were asked to indicate how well they got to know other students in their SW100 class (see Table D4). One-fifth (20%) of Regina students indicated they got to know other students very well compared to 6% of on-line students who had similar views.

Table D4

Getting to know other SW100 students by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Well	20	6
Slightly	70	72
Not Well at All	10	22
	100	100

d. Satisfaction with Interaction

Respondents were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with their level of interaction with other SW100 students (see Table D5). 75% of Regina students indicated they were somewhat satisfied compared to 67% of on-line students with similar views.

Table D5

Satisfaction with SW100 student interaction by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Satisfied	25	17
Somewhat Satisfied	75	67
Dissatisfied	--	11
Undecided	--	6
	100	100

Students from both groups elaborated on their responses regarding interaction with other students in either the Regina classroom or the internet class. The on-line students commented that they found other students willing to share their views and that the discussions (via Bulletin Board) were lengthy and full of different perspectives. One student commented that they were not looking to find a lot of interaction in the internet class so it was seen as a bonus when this interaction did occur. Others commented they would liked to have had at least one face to face meeting with other internet students and that having a live chat line would help with the interaction. Others felt the on-line interaction was not the same level of conversation or debate that they experience in their classroom discussions.

Some Regina students commented they believed that the classroom interaction is important for development of communication skills as social workers and that they enjoyed the participation and group discussion in class. Others, however, felt there was too much discussion and because they were always in the same group discussion each week they did not get to know most students in the class. The instructor of the Regina class noted that the decision to have the in-class students participate in the same small group each week was done to be comparable with the on-line method of assigning students to the same study group throughout the term.

**E. INTERACTION WITH INSTRUCTORS**

a. Extent of Interaction

The students were asked to identify the level of interaction they had with the instructor (see Table E1 through E4) with Regina students asked to identify the interaction both in and outside the class. The Regina students were also asked to identify if they had assistance from the instructor outside of class and the method of contact that was used (e.g. telephone). The findings suggest that the on-line students tended to indicate more interaction with the instructor than the Regina students. One-half of the on-line students indicated they had a lot of interaction with the instructor compared to one-quarter of the Regina students who felt the same way.

Table E1  
Interaction with instructor in class by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
A Lot	25	50
Seldom	50	50
Hardly at All	25	--
	100	100

Table E2

Interaction with instructor outside class by location (Regina only)

	Regina (n=20) %
Seldom	20
Hardly at All	35
Never	45
	100

Table E3

Contacted Instructor for Assistance Outside Class by Location (Regina only)

	Regina (n=20) %
Yes	35
No	65
	100

Table E4

Method of contact by location (Regina only)

	Regina (n=20) (%)
Telephone	5
Email	24
Face-to-Face	20

b. Sufficiency of Interaction

The students were asked to identify if the amount of interaction they had with the instructor was sufficient (see Table E5). The majority of both Regina and on-line students felt the contact with instructors was sufficient (85% compared to 94%).

Table E5

Sufficiency of interaction by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Sufficient	5	44
Sufficient	80	50
Not Sufficient	15	6
	100	100

c. Satisfaction with Instructor Responses

Students were asked to comment on the clarity of the instructors' responses and the on-line students were also asked to identify their level of satisfaction with the promptness of the instructor's responses (see Table E6 and Table E7). 70% of Regina students found the clarity of response very clear or clear compared to 96% of on-line students who felt similarly positive. The majority (89%) of the on-line students were also very satisfied or satisfied with the promptness of the instructor's responses. In the follow-up interviews with the on-line students, most commented they felt that instructor responses were prompt and helpful.

Table E6

Clarity of instructors' responses by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Clear	5	67
Clear	65	28
Unclear	20	6
Very Unclear	10	--
	100	100

Table E7

Satisfaction with promptness of instructor's responses by location (on-line only)

	On-line (n=18) %
Very Satisfied	50
Satisfied	39
Dissatisfied	6
Very Dissatisfied	6
	100

d. Instructors' Knowledge

Students were asked to identify their level of satisfaction with their instructor's course knowledge (see Table E8). 70% of Regina students were very satisfied or satisfied with their perceptions of the instructor's knowledge compared to 100% of on-line students who were similarly satisfied.

Table E8

Satisfaction with instructors' knowledge by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Very Satisfied	15	67
Satisfied	55	33
Dissatisfied	15	--
Very Dissatisfied	15	--
	100	100

**F. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

a. Accessibility to Computer

Students were asked to identify the level of accessibility they had to a computer (see Table F1). Slightly more than one-half (56%) of Regina students indicated they had sole access to a computer compared to 61% of on-line students who had their own computer.

Table F1

Access to computer by location

	Regina (n=18) %	On-line (n=18) %
Only Person Using	56	61
Shared with One Other	11	22
Shared with > One	28	17
Did Not Have Computer	6	--
	100	100

b. Access Capability

Respondents were asked to identify the type of communication connection they had for their computer (see Table F2). 84% of Regina students indicated they had a high-speed connection compared to 67% of on-line students. 5% of Regina students had dial-up access compared to 33% of on-line students. Some noted that on-line students who live in rural areas may be limited to dial-up access (rather than high speed connection).

Table F2

Computer accessibility by location

	Regina (n=19) %	On-line (n=18) %
At Home High-Speed	84	67
At Home Dial-Up	5	33
Computer Lab/Facility	5	--
Other	5	--
	100	100

General comments offered about the learning environment from the on-line students highlighted their satisfaction with the convenience of taking a class on-line. The freedom and flexibility of this method of delivery was cited as a convenience particularly for those students who had responsibilities for child care. Some commented that the on-line course worked better than they had expected and that the weekly interactions that were built into the course helped to keep them focused. Others, however, felt they had to go on-line too many times during the week and some cited the added expense of additional internet time plus paper for downloading as a burden.

## G. ASSESSMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

We were interested in trying to provide some assessment of whether students had developed critical thinking skills in the on-line course. When we asked this question of on-line students in the follow-up interviews they were divided on their views about whether these skills can be developed and enhanced in an on-line course. Some felt strongly that face-to-face classes were better for developing critical thinking skills while other students either said there was no difference between the two delivery methods or the on-line course was better for developing these skills. On this latter point, several students commented that they had time to think about their responses in the on-line course, the assignments promoted the development of critical thinking skills and that posting to the Bulletin Board allowed them to get feedback from other students and the instructors in a positive way.

The analysis of the bulletin board postings using the method previously described in this report is summarized in Table G1.

Table G1

Average of ratings of critical thinking skills

Skill	Module #1 (n=24)	Module #3 (n=23)	Module #6 (n=24)	Module #7 (n=18)
Clarification (Total score = 4)	2.9	1.3	2.4	2.7
Assessing evidence (Total score = 4)	1.7	1.0	1.7	2.8
Making & judging inferences (Total score = 4)	1.5	0.9	1.6	2.3
Using appropriate strategies (Total score = 4)	1.3	0.4	2.1	2.2
Total Score (Highest score=16)	7.3	3.7	7.9	10.0

We want to emphasize that this method of assessing these skills is relatively crude and has some limitations. For example, we did not measure the level of skill of each student when they started the course so we cannot make any judgments about any level of change in skills throughout the course. We did not rate the Regina class on their critical thinking skills so we cannot make any statements comparing the two groups of students. We believe, however, that this provides us with at least some beginning information to address the issue of critical skill development in an on-line course. In three of the four modules we examined, student responses would fall below the 50% grade (based on a total possible score of 16 for each module) with a total average score for all four modules ranging from 3.7 to 10.0.

#### H. OTHER FACTORS

##### a. Level of Motivation

Students were asked to indicate their level of motivation at the beginning of the class and then indicate if the level of motivation had changed (see Table G1 and Table G2). Approximately one-half of both Regina and on-line students indicated they were highly motivated at the beginning of the course (50% compared to 53%). Only five percent of Regina students indicated their level of motivation increased throughout the course compared to about one-fifth (18%) of on-line students who felt the same way. For both groups, however, almost one-third also indicated their level of motivation decreased throughout the semester.

Table G1

Level of motivation at beginning by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=17) %
Highly Motivated	50	53
Somewhat Motivated	45	47
Not Motivated	5	--
	100	100

Table G2

Level of motivation changed by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=18) %
Increased	5	18
Stayed the Same	65	53
Decreased	30	29
	100	100

b. Degree of Self-Discipline

There is not much difference between the two student groups with 85% of Regina students and 94% of the on-line students indicating they were very or somewhat self-disciplined in their approach to their course work.

Table G3

Degree of self-discipline by location

	Regina (n=20) %	On-line (n=17) %
Very Self-disciplined	25	59
Somewhat Self-disciplined	60	35
Not Self-disciplined	15	6
	100	100

c. Other Commitments that Interfered with completing the course

Students provided input into the responsibilities they had outside of the SW100 class that may have interfered with their ability to complete the course (see Table G4). Almost two-thirds of the Regina students (62%) indicated that taking other university courses was the most important commitment for them, while paid work (35%) and other university courses (29%) were cited as important commitments for on-line students.

Table G4

Most important commitment that interfered by location

	Regina (n=16) %	On-line (n=17) %
Responsibility for Others	19	23
Paid Work	19	35
Other University Courses	62	29
No Interference	--	6
Other	--	6
	100	100

d. Would Take Different Delivery Methods (Regina only)

The Regina students were asked to indicate their interest in taking various types course deliver methods (see Table G5). All would take face-to-face classes, about one-quarter would take internet delivered or correspondence courses and very few would definitely take SCN (televised) courses. Some students also indicated that ‘maybe’ they would take courses delivered by some of these distance methods, however, this would depend on which course was offered in any particular format.

Table G5

Students indicating they would take different course delivery methods (Regina only)

Course type	Yes %	Maybe %
Face-to-face (n=19)	100	--
Internet delivery (n=18)	17	50
SCN (n=17)	6	41
Correspondence (n=18)	22	33

e. Would recommend the SW 100 on-line course

The on-line students were asked for their views about whether they would recommend this on-line course to other students and whether they would consider registering in other on-line courses in the future. On the first point, students provided positive comments on the course content with the view that they would recommend the course to other students because the material was a good basis for social work courses, it helped them to understand social work theory and they found the Canadian content to be

relevant. On the issue of the delivery method, some students would highly recommend the course because of the convenience of the on-line delivery with the suggestion that the implementation of live chats would strengthen the course. Others, however, said they would not recommend the course to those students who prefer learning through verbal reinforcement.

Some students said they would consider taking another on-line class because of the convenience and because they found this course to be equivalent to other classes they had completed. Other students said they would not take another on-line course because they prefer the verbal interaction with other students that they can only get in the classroom setting.

#### **I. VIEWS OF STUDENTS WHO DROPPED THE ON-LINE COURSE**

A total of nine students dropped the SW100 on-line course early in the semester and we were able to interview each one of them to find out their reasons for dropping. Five students dropped the course due to personal circumstances that included medical, family or employment related reasons. Three students did not have easy access to a computer and found that it was difficult to keep up with the course and one student decided the format was not suitable for their own learning style. All of the students who commented about their views on the course were very positive with comments indicating they felt the course was very well organized, was easy to navigate through the various modules, and that the discussions were interesting. Finally, we asked this group of students whether they would consider taking an internet course in the future. All but one student indicated they would but three of these qualified this by saying that they would need better access to a computer and further development of their computer skills before they would register in another internet course.

#### **J. INSTRUCTOR VIEWS**

The following summarizes the views and experiences of the two instructors who delivered the SW 100 course on-line. Both instructors indicated that they experienced a heavy workload in delivering the course on-line. One instructor was experienced in teaching on-line courses and she indicated that her workload included assisting the other instructor (new to the process) in many of the technological issues related to delivering an

on-line course. Overall, though, she found the SW 100 to be a good experience and particularly noted the fact that many students were mothers who seemed to relate to the material. The newer instructor cited several issues that she had to learn to teach the on-line course: developing familiarity with the computer technology (WebCT software) and immersing herself in the content, given that she was not the person who developed the course modules. On the technology issue, she indicated the many challenges of working from several different computers and ensuring that the material she needed was readily available on different machines.

Both instructors cited several strengths of on-line university courses. They noted that it was helpful to those students who need to remain in their own communities to complete courses and also helped with those who need to complete the work on their own time. The on-line students also seemed to be more familiar with web sources of information and more comfortable in accessing this information. Another strength is that students are exposed to issues that are happening throughout the province because students are coming from a variety of geographic locations. This has the potential to expose students to the complexity of the delivery of social programs in areas other than their own locale.

On the other hand, both instructors also cited some drawbacks, particularly related to the lack of depth of student interaction in the on-line course. One instructor indicated she found it difficult to assess whether the on-line students were benefiting from as much interaction as the classroom students and the other instructor (who taught the on-line course only) made several comments throughout the interview related to her concern about the superficiality of the interaction among students. On this latter point, this instructor commented that a lack of face-to-face contact with students caused her to think constantly about how she was framing her comments back to students. When comments occur only in written form there is the possibility for misinterpretation and she cautioned that this may lead to less in depth analysis of issues than what can be covered in a face-to-face classroom situation.

It is useful to comment on some issues that arose in the face-to-face delivery of SW 100. Some issues included the difficulty of exactly following the written lecture material and lack of computer access for some students. For most weeks the module

lectures were too long to fit into the time available so some material was not covered. Additionally, the instructor was used to enhancing the material with guests from the practice community who would bring more “life” to a particular topic and using short or partial videos. A video was shown once, but no guest was invited in. In order to make the on-line and face-to-face offerings of the course as comparable as possible the web readings were assigned to both groups. Some students in the classroom group found accessing the web onerous as they did not have easy access to computers with an internet connection. Additionally, they did not have the convenience available to the on-line groups of bringing up the web pages by clicking on a link; instead they had to type in the web address. Students were given the option of submitting their assignments by e-mail and about three of them did so consistently. More often than in other face to face courses, they communicated with the instructor by e-mail rather than in person or by phone. Overall, the instructor who was involved in both modalities of teaching, found the experience teaching on-line versus in a classroom very different. There was more individual interaction with the on-line students, though she felt the communication was more meaningful with the classroom students as the non-verbal cues conveyed more meaning. She also noted that the student demographics were different; the on-line students tended to be older.

Both instructors offered several suggestions for ways in which to improve the on-line course. Some modules required re-writing to be more relevant (i.e., The Children’s Module), a reduction in the number of web sites would be recommended, there would be some changes in the timing of the assignments, and there would be a mid-term exam which would help to alleviate some of the stress that arose out of the final exam. Finally, one instructor echoed the comments of students when she recommended that at least one face-to-face visit with the on-line students should be planned. This would be done about mid point through the course and would help to develop more interaction with and knowledge of the students enrolled in the on-line course.

We were also interested in the instructors’ views on whether more social work courses should be delivered using on-line technology. Both indicated this should only be done with discretion. They noted that face to face communication is essential in educating social workers so the skills based courses would not be amenable to on-line

delivery. Those courses which that be developed appropriately with on-line technology would be those that are more information based and both suggested that courses such as research methods and statistics may fit with this method of delivery. Neither instructor was in favour of the entire social work program being delivered using web based technology.

## **VIII. SUMMARY AND EMERGENT ISSUES**

In this final section, we summarize the findings by returning to the original objectives of this exploratory study. We discuss the comparison of satisfaction levels between the on-line students and those who completed the course in a traditional classroom setting, we compare the outcomes of the two student groups, we summarize major points from the instructors' perspectives, and finally, we conclude by raising some issues for future course offerings and emerging research issues related to assessing effectiveness of web-based delivery of university level social work courses.

### **A. STUDENT SATISFACTION**

Generally, the on-line students appeared to be satisfied with most components of the course. They found the course to be well organized with material clearly presented and delivered so that they were able to stay on track throughout the semester. The Regina students were less satisfied with the course and this could be due to the factors that were previously described in the findings. In particular, this group of students appeared to have great difficulty in accessing the required web sites throughout the course. While the on-line students were satisfied, they offered a number of cautionary comments regarding web based courses. Most would see the value in having some courses on-line as this gives them greater flexibility and freedom to complete their undergraduate social work degree. Most, however, also commented that they would not want to see all of the social work courses delivered using web technology. They commented that the development of communication skills is essential to the practice of social work and these skills cannot be adequately developed through the interaction that occurs only through computer-assisted learning.

## **B. STUDENT OUTCOMES**

The instructor who taught both the on-line and face-to-face course was asked to provide information regarding the student outcomes (grades) for both groups. She indicated that the overall class average was slightly higher for the on-line students (79.2%) than for the Regina student group (75.3%). Although the difference was negligible the instructor commented that this could have been due, in part, to the fact that the on-line students may have received more attention throughout the term. Given that this was the first offering of the SW100 course on-line it will be important to continue to follow student outcomes in future course offerings.

## **C. INSTRUCTOR VIEWS**

The two instructors were relatively positive about their experience in teaching a course using the WebCT software although they also cited a number of issues that arose from their experiences. The issue of the workload is one that they commented on, with particular reference to the differences in interacting with students only in written form. They echoed the views of on-line students in their comments about the lack of face-to-face interaction with students as a deterrent to developing in depth discussion of the many issues that arise throughout a course of this nature. They also are of the view that some, but not all, social work courses may be appropriate for delivery over the internet. Their concerns are similar to those of the students; communication and interaction on a face to face basis are essential for developing skills among beginning social workers.

## **D. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE COURSES**

Some issues arise related to the future development of on-line courses in social work programs. The first is related to the point about which courses and how many in a program are delivered on-line. This is an issue that is currently being debated in many social work programs across Canada and is one that will continue to be debated as many universities push for more delivery using internet technology. We would be well advised to plan carefully regarding the types of courses that are most suitable to this method of delivery. The second issue relates to a specific suggestion about improving those courses that are web-based. Students and instructors commented on the lack of interaction throughout the course with one suggestion that at least one face to face meeting be held

with students and that the course includes the ability to have live chats. Incorporating both of these suggestions should be considered in future offerings of social work courses on-line.

#### **E. EMERGING RESEARCH ISSUES**

Finally, this study was exploratory so the findings should be viewed as only tentative at this point. We would encourage ongoing research into the effectiveness of web based social work courses using designs that allow for comparison across different methods of delivery. The important issue of development of critical thinking skills is one that is often cited as a drawback to web based courses and while we attempted to address this in this study, our methods were relatively crude. We would urge a continued examination of this factor with emphasis on using methods that will also permit an assessment of the extent to which students develop these skills in a web based course.

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## **APPENDIX A: SW 100 WEEKLY MODULES**

Module	Week
Module 0: Introduction	January 9 – January 15
Module 1: Introduction to Canadian Social Welfare	January 16 – January 22
Module 2: The Profession of Social Work	January 23 – January 29
Module 3: Introduction to Social Policy	January 30 – February 5
Module 4: Service Delivery System	February 6 – February 12
Module 5: Contemporary Issues	February 13 – February 19
MID TERM BREAK	February 20 – February 26
Module 6: First Nations & Aboriginal Peoples	February 27 – March 5
Module 7: Women as Consumers	March 6 – March 12
Module 8: Children	March 13 – March 19
Module 9: Youth	March 20 – March 26
Module 10: Seniors	March 27 – April 2
Module 11: Wrap-up and Synthesis	April 3 – April 10

The following provides a description of the topic and learning goals for each of the modules:

**Module 1: Introduction to Canadian Social Welfare**

- Identify how personal problems are connected to public issues;
- Understand the basics of Canada’s parliamentary system and how it relates to social welfare;
- Understand some of Saskatchewan’s political and social history;
- Understand the relationship between Canadian and Saskatchewan political contexts and current social welfare programs;
- Provide a definition of social welfare;
- Identify some of the contributions made by Canadian pioneers to the development of social welfare

## **Module 2: The Profession of Social Work**

- Describe why social work is a profession
- Understand the scope of the profession of social work
- Have a greater awareness of your own attitudes about social work as well as some of the attitudes about social work held by the public
- Understand the value base of social work including the role of the Code of Ethics
- Briefly describe the various social sciences on which social work theory is based
- List some areas in which social workers practice

## **Module 3: Introduction to Social Policy**

- What we mean when we talk about “social policy;”
- Why values are important to the development of or when discussing social policy;
- How political ideologies influence social welfare; and,
- The relationship between “social policy” and “social welfare”.

## **Module 4: The Service Delivery System**

- The differences between social services delivered by the government (public sector), the voluntary sector, and the private sector;
- The programs delivered by each sector;
- The strengths and weaknesses of each of these approaches;
- Ethical issues related to service delivery;
- The significance of “informal helpers”.
- The “consumer movement”.

## **Module 5: Contemporary Issues**

- Identify some of the major issues that affect people and their social well-being
- Have a greater understanding of how we all are or can be recipients of social welfare at some time during our lives
- Identify how issues affect people at different stages in their life
- Understand how societal structures and attitudes marginalize certain groups of people

## **Module 6: First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples**

- some of the historical and social Issues facing Aboriginal people in Canada and Saskatchewan
- some of the specific health, disabilities, educational and income issues facing Aboriginal people today
- how these issues relate to the social welfare system and the practice of social work

## **Module 7: Women as Consumers**

- The difference between an individual and a structural perspective
- The life stages and family arrangements that contribute to women's economic vulnerability
- How women experience the issues of poverty, disabilities, health, and education

## **Module 8: Children**

- The experiences of vulnerable children in Canada with respect to poverty, education, health, and disabilities

## **Module 9: Youth**

- Issues that place Saskatchewan youth at risk

## **Module 10: Seniors**

- Identify some of the major issues that affect people in later life
- Identify the major roles of social workers who work with seniors
- Have a greater understanding of your own views and values related to seniors

**APPENDIX B: TABLES A1 TO A8**

Student Profile Information

Table A1  
Age Category by Location

	Regina (n=25) %	On-line (n=25) %
18-23	72	40
24-26	12	20
27-30	4	8
31-35	4	12
36-45	8	20
	100	100

Table A2  
Current Program by Location

	Regina (n=25) %	On-line (n=25) %
Social Work Qualifying	56	32
BSW	16	44
Other	28	24
	100	100

Table A3  
Completed Social Work Courses by Location

	Regina (n=25) %	On-line (n=22) %
0	88	50
2	4	9
4-6	--	27
7-13	8	14
	100	100

Table A5  
Current Social Work Courses by Location

	Regina (n=25) %	On-line (n=25) %
0	36	40
1	44	20
2-4	20	32
5	--	8
	100	100

Table A6  
Other Current Courses by Location

	Regina (n=25) %	On-line (n=24) %
0	12	12
1-2	12	21
3	20	17
4	36	37
5	20	12
	100	100

Table A7  
Closest Faculty of Social Work Location by Location

	Regina (n=25) %	On-line (n=24) %
Regina	100	84
Saskatoon	--	4
Prince Albert	--	12
	100	100

Table A8  
Closest City To Where Living by Location

	Regina (n=25) %	On-line (n=25) %
Regina	96	20
Saskatoon	--	4
Prince Albert	--	8
Moose Jaw	4	12
Esterhazy	--	8
Shellbrook	--	4
Wynyard	--	4
Victoria, BC	--	4
Yorkton	--	32
Medicine Hat, AB	--	4
	100	100