

Inquiry as a Methodology and Practice in Higher Education Online Instruction

As online education continues to grow rapidly within higher education, universities and researchers have placed an increased emphasis on understanding adult learning theory in conjunction with effective online learning environments that engage students towards higher levels of thinking, promote active student involvement, accommodate individual differences and motivate learners (Zsohar & Smith, 2008). Online teaching requires faculty members to think differently about teaching and learning, learn an array of new technological skills, and engage in ongoing professional developments for design and development of quality online instruction (Fish & Wickersham, 2009). Various course design and models continue to be evaluated to gain a deeper understanding of quality online instruction. The inquiry-based instruction and learning model promotes student learning through student-driven and instructor-guided investigations of student “centered” questions and proves to be a potent pedagogical tool in higher education (Justice, C., Rice, J., Warry, W., Inglis, S., Miller, S., Sammon, S.). This study aimed to evaluate the inquiry-based model within an online-higher education course. Graduate level students’ ideas, dispositions, attitudes and understanding of inquiry as a methodology and practice as a pedagogical tool in online higher education was assessed. This study was important because it contributed to the current and future research of understanding online best practices and inquiry-based learning in higher education.

A voluntary study project was created for graduate level students enrolled in the GDIT 819 Social Justice course. This study assessed students’ ideas, dispositions, attitudes, and understanding, of inquiry methodology and practice in online higher education prior to and following their participation in the project. All participants completed pre- and post-tests, interviews, and provided artifacts from their virtual classroom experience (i.e. discussion boards, wikis, journals) as part of the observation requirements. This research is important because it helped analyze change in graduate students’ dispositions towards inquiry as a methodology in higher education online instruction. If the current rate of higher education students enrolling in online options continues, it is estimated that there will be between 30 and 80 million online students in the world by 2025(OECD, 2001). Therefore, continued research of online higher education pedagogy and best practices is critical. This study aimed to understand the quality of instruction and learning in an inquiry based model online higher education course.