

Expectations, Challenges and Suggestions for Faculty Teaching Online Courses in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Research on online education has predominantly focused on issues related to student attraction, attrition, retention, and motivation, among others. Little attention has been paid to online instructors and yet, the quality of online education requires educators who understand the expectations of online instruction. Using an online survey, this study examined the expectations and challenges for online instructors and the suggestions for improving online instruction. Based on the data collected from seventeen faculty who teach online courses at four mid-western universities in the US, facilitation, instructor presence, and technical support stood out prominently among the expectations. The major challenges for online instructors were: large class sizes, academic dishonesty, lack of connection with students, too many emails, and lack of student self-discipline. The study recommends viable professional development for online instructors as a pre-requisite to teaching online courses.

KEYWORDS

Faculty Reflections, Online Instruction, Online Teachers, Teaching Challenges, Teaching Expectations, Teaching Online

INTRODUCTION

The demand for online classes is growing almost exponentially. However, this growth may be coming at the expense of quality, if suitable pedagogical practices are not adopted or adjusted. Teaching online courses brings both advantages as well as challenges that require careful and focused introspection. In this study we focus on the challenges facing online instructors and how to best address them. While we recognize the advantages of teaching, we also note that the migration from traditional, F2F courses, to the online format presents a plethora of challenges, many of which are not encountered in the F2F classroom setting. It is, therefore, imperative that we draw attention to these challenges in order to make online instruction more efficient and effective. These challenges include, for example, student academic readiness (or lack thereof); self-discipline; computer technology skills;

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time-zone differences. In addition, the switch to online instruction requires development of more inclusive pedagogical approaches that capture different learning styles. It is, therefore, crucial that instructors be fully equipped with the knowledge and ability either to pre-empt these challenges or to resolve them, should they arise. Presently, however, most instructors are not sufficiently equipped to effectively address the challenges with this knowledge. This study is, therefore, relevant not only to the less experienced online teachers but also to the more experienced and, even more so, to those who plan to move their courses from F2F to the online format. More specifically, this study seeks to: 1) examine the expectations of online teachers; 2) assess the challenges online teachers face, and 3) propose ways of addressing the challenges in order to best meet the expectations of online teaching.

The Nature and Extent of The Problem

This section examines the current state of online teaching, the different formats of online instruction and the nature of the expectations and challenges each pose. Central to this study is the fact that student enrollment in online education continues to increase, with more and more “traditional” F2F classes being converted to online formats. Yet the expectations of online teachers remain vague and inconsistent. As a result, not only do the new and less experienced online instructors face many challenges but even the ‘veterans’.

Based on 2015 Survey of Online Learning the analysis of enrollment data from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Allen, Seaman, Poulin, and Straut (2016) found the year-to-year increase in online education enrollment to be 3.9%. In the same study, they found that in public institutions, about 72.7% of the students were enrolled in undergraduate and 38.7% were enrolled in graduate online programs. A survey of online learners by Caraher and Kurt (2011) indicated that about 71% were attracted by the flexibility of online classes; 68% were drawn by the opportunity for professional adults to take classes while working full-time; and 48% thought virtual learning offered a broader range of classes than traditional face-to-face (F2F) settings. In addition, the Open Education Database (OEDb, 2018) identified the following attractors: low costs of learning, comfort (no class sessions), greater ability to concentrate, opportunities for career advancement while working, avoiding commuting (especially during adverse weather), and improvement of computer skills.

E-learning varies across a large spectrum but there are two main forms available, namely: 1) blended teaching, and 2) completely web-based (online) teaching. Blended courses are a hybrid form of delivery whereby part of the assessments, lecture notes, or grades are shared through e-learning platforms, while other activities are completed face-to-face (Barry & Runyan, 1995; Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Parker, Lenhart & Moore, 2011). Currently, online and blended or hybrid learning are the fastest-growing modes of instruction (Gleason & Greenhow, 2017).

In an entirely web-based environment, all the materials (assessments, feedback, etc.) are delivered through an institutional Learning Management System (LMS) (Franks, 2002; Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Thus, there is an increasing dependence on the use of various LMS to support student learning, (Alstete & Beutell, 2004; Franks, 2002). As has been noted, this trend is driven by increasing demands for flexibility and the need for an education that fits the student lifestyles. Faculty interest in the instructional use of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) and institutional operating cost reduction strategies have also contributed to this tremendous growth (Instructional-Technology-Council, 2010; Ruth, 2012). Furthermore, the cost of paying for face-to-face (F2F) classroom training far exceeds that of distance learning (Barry & Runyan, 1995; Nguyen, 2015).

The increase in demand for online education has resulted in many colleges offering online courses. In turn, the demand for online courses has created a need for more online instructors. Many schools have responded to the situation by automatically assigning F2F instructors to teach online classes. However, while some of these instructors have formal training in teaching online courses, many do not (Kolowich, 2013). Therefore, given the high rate of growth in online instruction, it is imperative to, on the one hand, clearly delineate the expectations of online teaching and, on the other

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