The Impact Of Online Teaching On Higher Education: The Coming Age Of The Virtual Teacher

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Abstract

The first group of participants considered ten higher education teachers who, for the most part, were not able to fully enact their teaching identity in the online classroom. These teachers encountered significant pedagogical and interpersonal constraints that limited their professional satisfaction as online educators. The second group of participants consisted of nine higher education teachers who had overcome most of the issues first encountered when teaching online, and reported finding this modality professionally fulfilling.

Keywords- Online Teaching. Higher Education, Impact, Coming Age, Virtual Teacher.

Introduction

Each group provided relevant information on the various ways in which online teaching impacts teachers' identity, as well as insight into the role played by current and emerging technologies in this process Although the overall impact of online learning on the academy has yet to be assessed, it is increasingly apparent that this impact is transformative. Given the current economics of higher education, it is likely that higher education institutions (and students) will continue to take advantage of the many benefits of studying online. From an institutional standpoint, online learning is an affordable way to increase student enrollment and revenues without having to make corresponding investments in infrastructure. In addition, by removing the need for physical presence in the classroom, online learning has the potential to make education accessible to a much larger population, while accommodating the demands of a fast-paced and global society.

Within the field of distance education itself, prior research has focused on students and instructional approaches. Issues related to teachers' experiences are generally under-researched, although the shift in roles and responsibilities experienced by online teachers does not decrease their importance in the online classroom, just as "the virtual presence of an instructor does not diminish the central role of teaching" (Garrisson & Anderson, 2001, p89). In addition, existing research on teachers' experiences has mainly focused on the identification of practical barriers.

Many of these are discussed below:

1-Perceptions of Online Learning- One of the most persistent challenges that faculty need to overcome before agreeing to teach online is the still wide-spread perception, both inside and outside academic circles, that online learning is a less worthy form of education (Seaman, 2009; Adams & Defleur, 2005). The prejudice in favor of face-to-face instruction over distance education has its roots in the early days of the field:

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"Correspondence study, which was designed to provide educational opportunities for those who were not among the elite and who could not afford full time residence at an educational institution, was looked down on as inferior education" (Gunawardena & McIssaac, 2004, p357).

This negative perception has remained attached to the field of distance learning: "Distance education has always been known for its departure from the conditions in which teaching and learning naturally take place. To some extent, distance education is a pedagogical oddity, often requiring further justification, such as the extension of educational opportunities or the encouragement of online learning" (Larreamendy & Leinhardt, p570, 2006). Recent quantitative data substantiate the persistence of such perceptions today as "Less than one-third of chief academic officers believe that their faculty accept the value and legitimacy of online education" (Allen & Seaman, 2009, p3). This Sloan Consortium report goes on to note that the situation has not changed significantly since 2002, although online learning enrollments and offerings have grown substantially.

2- Perceptions of Online Learning- One of the most persistent challenges that faculty need to overcome before agreeing to teach online is the still wide-spread perception, both inside and outside academic circles, that online learning is a less worthy form of education (Seaman, 2009; Adams & Defleur, 2005). The prejudice in favor of face-to-face instruction over distance education has its roots in the early days of the field:

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Unfortunately, the technologies available to teach online today often lack useful features that teachers need in order to teach their particular subject matter, and to deploy the pedagogies required by that subject matter. Online teachers' technological and pedagogical needs vary significantly by discipline. Unfortunately, the technologies of online learning attempt to address all these needs at once through one single product (the CMS), therefore offering a "one size fit all" solution.

The primary technological challenge faced by online education in the next ten years will be to develop the kind of technologies that teachers need in order to teach online freely and effectively. Whether or not this challenge is met is likely to have a strong impact on the quality of the education delivered online, and subsequently on the degree of skepticism with which faculty will view this modality.

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