Effective Teaching Practices in Online HigherEducation

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Abstract

In the context of continuing growth in online higher education in the United States, students are struggling to succeed, as evidenced by lower course outcomes and lower retention rates in online courses in comparison with face-to-face courses. The problem identified for investigation is how university instructors can ensure that effective teaching and learning is happening in their online courses. The research questions were:

1. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education according to current research?
2. How do exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in higher education?
3. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education?

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand and describe the teaching practices of exemplary online faculty, and "exemplary" was defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching form a non-profit organization within the last five years. A purposeful sampling strategy identified four exemplary online instructors, who taught in different disciplines at different institutions in the United States. Data collection included a pre-interview written reflection, a semi-structured telephone interview, examination of a course syllabus and other course materials, and observation of a course. Data analysis included repeated close reading and coding of all data collected and then reducing the codes to a manageable number of themes.

Keywords- Online Teaching learning, technology; Innovative Effective Teaching, Higher Education.

Introduction

Two key themes emerged in the findings: human connection and organized structure. Exemplary online instructors seek to connect with students so students know and feel the care, support, and respect of the instructor. Exemplary online instructors also maintain a clearly structured environment that is logically organized, delivered in small chunks, and sufficiently repetitive to keep each student focused on the content. These results contribute to the body of knowledge by allowing online faculty to learn from the best online faculty. First-time online faculty as well as online faculty who seek to improve their online pedagogy may be able to enhance teaching and learning in their courses, which in turn will hopefully yield higher student satisfaction and lower attrition in online education.

Online enrollment in higher education has grown steadily during the last 15 years, and the rate of growth in online higher education enrollment in the United States currently exceeds the growth in overall higher education enrollment. From 2002 to 2011, online undergraduate enrollment grew annually at an average rate of 17.3%, while overall undergraduate enrollment increased by only 2.6% during the same period. Then from 2012 to 2013, the growth of overall undergraduate enrollment was 1.2%, and online enrollments represented 73.7% of that increase. Although enrollment in online education is increasing, online students are struggling to succeed; for example, in a 10-year longitudinal study, Tanyel and Griffin noted higher course outcomes and persistence rates for undergraduates in face-to- face classes compared to online classes. Retention in online courses in American higher education is lower than in face-to-face courses.

In addition, faculty attitudes toward the quality of online education remain conflicted. Faculty who have not taught online may express skepticism about the quality of online education in comparison to classroom education. In a 2012 survey of 4,500 faculty conducted by Babson and *Inside Higher Ed*, nearly two-thirds said they believe that the learning outcomes for an online course are inferior or somewhat inferior to those for a comparable face-to-face course. Chief academic officers in 2,800 institutions participating in theOnline Learning (formerly Sloan) Consortium's annual surveys report little change in thelast decade in faculty perception of the "value and legitimacy of online education"; 27.6% affirmed its legitimacy in 2003, reaching a high of 33.5% in 2007, but sliding backto 28% by 2014. Trends indicate a continuing increase in the importance of online programs to academic institutions in the United States; 71% of 2,800 institutions reported that "onlineeducation is critical" to their long-term strategy. As more institutions expand online offerings to meet rising student demand, more faculty are needed to teach online, and more faculty are teaching online for the first time. New online instructors would benefit from training in best practices for online course facilitation, which can help faculty feel more prepared to teach online and can improve online pedagogy, but what are those best practices?

Problem Statement:- The problem identified for investigation is how university instructors can ensure that effective teaching and learning is happening in their online courses. Online students are struggling to succeed. As online education continues to grow, more faculty are needed to teach online. Online instructors may benefit from training in best practices for online course facilitation, which can improve online pedagogy, but what are those best practices? The problem of how instructors can ensure that effective teaching and learning is occurring has been explored in current research by attempting to identify successful online teaching strategies, however, current literature reflects a void in studies of the teaching practices of exemplary online instructors. Current studies of online instructors used participants from a single university or from a single discipline; for example, although Baran et al. studied "exemplary online teachers," the participants were selected from a single university. Likewise, although Gerken and Grohnert chose "experienced" online instructors from a variety of disciplines, all participants were teaching at the same university. Although the 24 participants in Bonnel and Boehm's study represented five different schools, all were nurse educators. In addition, although some studies did include instructor participants from a variety of institutions anddisciplines, due to advances in technology over time, research in effective online teaching should be updated. For example, although York and Richardson selected their six participants from a variety of universities, their interviews with the instructors were conducted in 2007. Similarly, online education has seen significant growth and change since De Gagne and Walters, and although the 11 participants represented several institutions and disciplines, criteria for inclusion included only experience teaching online rather than demonstrated exemplary online teaching.

Relevance and Significance- This study will contribute to the research literature in online higher education by identifying the teaching strategies of exemplary online faculty. Although the rate of enrollment growth in online higher education in the United States currently exceeds the rate of growth in overall higher education enrollment, online students are struggling to succeed. Course outcomes and retentionare in online courses in American higher education are lower than in face-to-face courses. In addition, faculty attitudes toward the quality of online education in comparison to face- to-face education are conflicted. Although online students are struggling to succeed online and faculty are skeptical aboutthe quality of online education, trends indicate a continuing increase in the importance ofonline programs to academic institutions, so more faculty will be needed to teach online . New online instructors can benefit from training in effective online course facilitation, which can help faculty feel more prepared to teach online and can improve online pedagogy. Identifying the teaching strategies of

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exemplary online faculty is relevant to the current higher education landscape of increasing online course offerings, and it is significant in its potential to help online instructors ensure that they are employing effective strategies, which should enhance student learning and in turn improve retentionin online education, since students are struggling to persist in online courses.

Barriers and Issues- A key barrier was identifying national awards presented for effective online teaching that is presented regularly by non-profit organizations. Although numerous universities present annual teaching awards to their own faculty and some for-profit businesses present online teaching awards, only one non-profit organization with such anaward could be identified, the Online Learning Consortium. In addition, although the Online Learning Consortium has recognized online teaching excellence annually since 2001 by presenting the John R. Bourne Outstanding Achievement Award in Online Education and the Excellence in Online Teaching Award,and 12 persons have been recognized with these awards since 2010, some of the awardees' outstanding achievements were in administration or other areas aside from teaching expertise. Some of the awardees, therefore, are not online instructors, so the pool of potential participants was smaller than expected. Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations:- Attempting to identify the teaching strategies of exemplary online instructors assumes first that online education is a valid teaching mode that excellence in online teaching is possible, and that excellent online instructors exist. Another minor assumptionis that online instructors can learn to be more effective, which has some evidence in current research. The primary limitation is the number of online instructors who has been recognized by a non-profit organization for effective online teaching since 2010; only 12 persons were recognized with the John R. Bourne Outstanding Achievement Award in Online Education and the Excellence in Online Teaching Award from the Online. Learning Consortium and some of the awardees are not online instructors. Additional limitations included the number of online instructors willing to participate, and homogeneity in gender of the participants, since all participants were female, and in typeof institution, since most institutions were public universities. Generalizability of results is limited due to the types of institutions represented bythe exemplary instructors in the sample. Generalizability is also limited since most of theparticipants have the freedom to develop and design their own courses. Conclusions are also somewhat limited by the examination of effective online teaching from the instructor's perspective; although data collection included observations of online courses in addition to interviews with instructors, an enlightening follow-up study may be examining the teaching of exemplary online instructors from their students' perspective.

The key delimitation was the focus on online teaching award winners of only non- profit organizations. Another delimitation was that participants must have earned such an award within the last five years. Finally, award winners must be current online instructorsto qualify for participation. Identifying the best practices of effective online teaching may be accomplished byexamining the instructor's perspective of which strategies seem to work well or by examining the student's satisfaction with particular teaching strategies. Current research has attempted to identify the best practices of effective online teaching from these two perspectives, and the results of current research of effective online teaching reflected fourimportant strategies: visible engagement in course activities, timely response, prompt andconstructive feedback, and clear communication. Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI model provides a conceptual framework for this research (Miles & Huberman, 1994); learning in higher education occurs through the development of three interdependent elements (social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence), and teaching presence is the "binding element" that supports social presence and cognitive presence, which are "dependent upon the presence of a teacher".

As online education continues to grow in enrollment and as advancements in technology affect teaching and learning online, research in the most effective means of implementing online teaching presence will continue to be needed to ensure quality online education and to improve student success and retention. This study of exemplary online instructors will contribute to the literature by identifying the ways in which exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence, thus identifying the best practicesof effective online teaching.

Data Analysis- Data analysis was expected to reveal how exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in their courses and thus what are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education, answering the third research question. Guided by Creswell, data analysis was an inductive process that included repeated close reading and coding of all data collected (written participant reflections, field notes from course observations, interview transcripts, and course syllabi and materials) to identify short phrases and key concepts that described how the instructor enacted teaching presence; these codes were primarily in vivo codes, exact words used by the participants, and were noted in the margins by hand. An example ofdata coding is provided. The next step in data analysis was rereading all of the data to combine similarcodes and thus reduce the codes to a manageable number of themes. For example, the codes friendly, human element, interactive, engaging, respect, proactive, encouraging, reaching out, and warm tone were classified as the theme of human connection: demonstrating care and empathy.Two primary themes were identified with five sub-themes; these themes revealed the bestpractices of effective online teaching by demonstrating the strategies used by exemplary online instructors. Findings are presented in Chapter 4 with a detailed description of each case of effective online teaching, including verbatim illustrations from the participants. The description of each case is followed by cross-case analysis, including the themes that emerged, followed by conclusions drawn from comparison of the cases. The conclusions revealed best practices for effective online teaching. The key themes identified are contextualized with the framework from a literature review and Garrison et al.'s description of the three categories of teaching presence. Validation of findings was established through member checking. The researcher's role, potential bias, and influence during collection and analysis were managed by presenting each interview transcript and each case report to the participantsfor their review to establish credibility, and the conclusions were considered accurate bythe participants.

Following is a detailed description of each case of effective online teaching, including verbatim illustrations from the participants. The description ofeach case is followed by cross-case analysis, including the themes that emerged, followedby conclusions drawn from comparison of the cases. The conclusions revealed best practices for effective online teaching. The key themes identified are contextualized with the framework from a literature review and Garrison et al.'s description of the three categories of teaching presence. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand and describe the teaching practices of exemplary online faculty, and "exemplary" was defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching form a non-profit organization within the last five years. A purposeful sampling strategy identified four exemplary online instructors, who taught in different disciplines at different institutions in the United States. Data collection included a pre-interview written reflection, a semi- structured telephone interview, examination of a course syllabus and other course materials, and observation of a course. Data analysis included repeated close reading andcoding of all data collected and then reducing the codes to a manageable number of themes. Two key themes emerged in the findings: human connection and organized structure. Exemplary online instructors seek to connect with students so students know and feel the care, support, and respect of the instructor. Exemplary online instructors alsomaintain a clearly structured environment that is

logically organized, delivered in small chunks, and sufficiently repetitive to keep each student focused on the content. In identifying the best practices of effective online teaching demonstrated by exemplary online instructors teaching in a variety of higher education disciplines in institutions throughout the United States, these results contribute to the body of knowledge by allowing online faculty to learn from the best online faculty. First-time online faculty as well as online faculty who seek to improve their online pedagogy maybe able to enhance teaching and learning in their courses, which in turn will hopefully yield higher student satisfaction and lower attrition in online education. The strategies gleaned may also be helpful to instructional technology trainers in developing curricula toguide online instructors.

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