

Professors' Transition to Online Instruction

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A new generation of graduate student is seeking access to educational leadership degrees without using the traditional pathways to the knowledge base and experiences required for the master's degree and administrative certification. Potential students are drawn to the convenience of completing coursework online to receive certification. The online format removes the difficulties of attending a traditional 3-hour class, driving to a campus location, and "giving up" one or more nights a week in an already heavily committed schedule. Most of these learners and potential higher education can-

didates are full-time teachers with numerous responsibilities for young children. In addition, many of them are required to attend and supervise night activities at school as a function of their employment. And, many of them live a considerable distance from a university campus. It is not surprising that the attainment of a master's degree with administrative certification has been completely out of reach for many teachers and public school employees. Many qualified candidates for higher education training programs find it difficult to incorporate the demands of their lives into the programs' traditional constraints.

These constraints may have inadvertently deprived public schools of some potentially outstanding leaders especially if they live in more rural areas.

Web-based and online delivery systems of instruction have opened a new avenue of access to potential students in educational leadership training programs throughout the United States (Dabbagh, 2005). Many schools of higher education have begun to utilize these media in their master's and doctoral programs, often not from personal choice but because of external influence. The Web-based approach, in addition to online instruction, often includes a given number of traditional instructor led face-to-face classroom meetings which assist students in accessing and understanding the expectations of the class. However, these required face-to-face classroom sessions still present the same constraints of the traditional preparation program; namely, the student must adjust his or her schedule in order to be physically present in class even though the number may be reduced. Subsequently, students faced with travel costs, home demands, and other constraints have fueled the demand for totally-online instruction in master's level coursework.

Sam Houston State University began offering a Web-enhanced master's level administrative course online that included a limited num-



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ber of face-to-face classes. This course was used for approximately 8 years and was well accepted by the faculty, if they were not asked to teach the course. Only those professors who were comfortable with the online environment willingly accepted the assignment. No additional effort was made to advance online offerings resulting in full acceptance of the initial course by the faculty. However, the faculty was alert to any further mention of online course work or even the mere suggestion that faculty would be asked to learn how to teach in this environment. Needless to say, there was a quiet, underlying discussion among faculty that did not surface to the dean or the chair.

By 2005, the university's expectations increased for implementing fully developed online degrees. The classes and degree programs were perceived in a number of interesting ways by veteran professors and created perceptual barriers for considering online course development. The notion that master's level students could receive the quality or instructional rigor from an online experience as opposed to the tradition curriculum was viewed as doubtful. There was a strong feeling that the department was acquiescing to the desires of students at the expense of the learning they would receive in a traditional setting. The concern that the professor was being replaced by technology was also verbalized, as well as the strong feeling that the computer online experience could never take the place of meeting in a traditional classroom with an experienced professor of educational administration. One professor referred to it as a "questionable instructional approach," and stated that the inventions of the past, including radio, television, video, and digital programs had not replaced the professor and the computer would not either. Little did that individual

understand that the professor would not be replaced, but the medium of instruction certainly might change.

An additional perceptual barrier to online implementation was individual professors' beliefs about the technological skills needed to write and implement a course. Some professors did not have basic technical skills to teach online and were not interested in investing the time and energy to learn. They further were not motivated to change their delivery styles in order to accommodate technology. A strong sense of "this is the way we have always done it and it was successful" prevailed. As a result, the online classes were initially developed and taught by two assistant professors and one clinical professor who were all relatively new to the department.

In total, six online sections were offered in the master's program, representing the entry-level courses for the completion of a degree. The response from the students in the field was overwhelming. All of the classes were filled almost immediately, and the demand for future online classes increased daily. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to describe the transitions experienced by the professors as their thinking evolved about instructional preparation from traditional face-to-face delivery to an online model of instruction. The transitions experienced by the professors address the changes to their instructional approach and to their thinking that were vital in order to design and teach the classes in an online format.

OVERVIEW

One professor, participating in the development of a new online course, had taught the entry level master's level course for many years, and the other professor was beginning his first semester of

teaching at the university level. The experienced professor had created a set of activities over time that proved to be very successful in promoting student thinking as well as moving students into cognitive dissonance (Atherton, 2003). As a result, she had successfully created an environment in which students learned a tremendous amount while producing authentic assessments that provided evidence of the intended learning. Confident that these strategies would work equally well online, she began loading the activities into the online software. From that process, she discovered a number of differences that altered her view of teaching and learning, that began with arranging the course activities into learning segments and extending through the selection of strategies and assessments throughout the entire course. For example, each collaborative activity requiring students to discuss a concept in depth and then develop specific school applications required the professor to write the questions prior to the discussion, arrange the collaborative sessions in the software, and then include a discussion board session to conduct effective follow-up. The activity generated the intended expectations, but required considerably more time and preparation than such an activity in the traditional classroom. The differences between these two instructional delivery methods led to significant changes in the professors' approach to thinking about instruction. The new professor was not only challenged with developing his first graduate class, but also stunned to discover that his first exposure to graduate classes would be in an online environment.

COURSE PREPARATION

The first change in the professors' instructional delivery was in course preparation. Traditionally, a syllabus

was created, supplemental materials prepared, and then printed for distribution to the class; however, preparation for an online class required a completely different thinking and preparation process. In the traditional classroom, most materials, including a syllabus containing timelines, rubrics, grading scales and other supporting documents, were prepared ahead of time and any changes to be made for the coming week were easily created through word processing and copying. Online instruction requires a different preparation mentality that is often not anticipated by teaching professionals. Rather than simple word processing preparation, the professor must not only prepare the information ahead of time, but also must think through where to load the information in the software, how to tie the information with other sections of the software, and where to locate notifications of directions and changes for the students. Adding each course document or assignment required several keystrokes, coupled with careful planning to be sure that each document was tied to the correct week and section of the software. The time associated with such planning was at least 50% more than had previously been required for the traditional face-to-face course. Each of the professors averaged approximately 10 to 15 minutes per activity or document to appropriately load and integrate the course materials. As they worked through the semester, both professors discovered that managing, grading, and recording a single paper for each of the students in their classes required a number of keystrokes and much more time manipulating the software than when using the traditional grade book. Reading and providing feedback for papers required more time due to the program manipulations necessary to access and save the

document, use the editing features in Microsoft Word to create feedback, and then return the work to the student. Again, the professors noticed a considerable difference in time expenditures. Both professors acknowledge that the time factor will improve with experience; however, there is definitely a difference when employing software for the primary instructional delivery mechanism. The differences in course preparation necessary to adequately facilitate the courses led to the recognition that communicating with students would be dramatically different and would require different ways of thinking about communication on the part of the professors.

COMMUNICATION

Communication emerged as a second significant change not anticipated by the professors. In the traditional class, it was easy to prepare communication and to deliver it during class, accompanied by question and answer sessions to ensure that students understood. Almost immediately, both professors realized that the online format required that attention be given to the communication sequences at least one week ahead of delivery by attaching them to the announcement board in the software. It was easy to make errors and confuse the students, because written instructions without verbal explanations can lead to many different interpretations. Considerable thought about what was written and to what it referred was needed to avoid student confusion. Student questions in the traditional class that could be clarified with simple question-and-answer sessions now had to be answered through e-mail, requiring the professor to respond to 15 different people rather than just one or two in a traditional classroom. Careful attention was given to preparing

responses in such a way that they could be written one time without creating additional problems for both the students and the professors.

Both professors suddenly realized that all of the verbal explanations for students in the traditional face-to-face class would now have to be written in order to appear in the online environment. Faced with figuring out how to move this critical information online, the professors launched into writing several documents that provided these explanations in narrative and in question/answer formats. Even though frustrated with the time it took to do this work, they began to notice the number of gaps that existed in the explanations in the face-to-face arena that often created confusion. Being forced to write that information down, they observed where the gaps existed and knew better how to provide clarity for both the online and the traditional class. These realizations prompted the creation of weekly announcements that further created connections to the course information, processes, and assignments that students would be responsible for completing. The professors found themselves musing frequently about the ease at which these connections were made for the students in the face-to-face setting and how time-consuming they were in the online environment. They also discovered how difficult it was to implement in the online environment the last minute "instructional brainstorms" that are frequently created just before the face-to-face session.

The first-year professor experienced a somewhat different situation that created similar feelings of discomfort. Expecting to teach in a traditional environment, the sudden change to online was disconcerting. All of the teaching skills that he had taken for granted were now

seemingly obsolete. The requirement of learning and preparing for a new course, while at the same time mastering a new and unfamiliar method of delivery, was overwhelming. The new professor not only had to master the material but also learn an instructional computer program very quickly. The frustration of focusing on the delivery method rather than the material and students created a conflict and served as the basis for his displeasure. Communicating the intricacies of a new class to students in an unfamiliar environment took an enormous amount of his time and effort. As mentioned before, the start-up communication for the class took hours and required volumes of informational e-mails to students. The start-up time for the students was equally intense, and at least 1 to 2 weeks of instruction were sacrificed in allowing students to access the online program and discover the hardware requirements necessary to effectively participate. In the absence of the face-to-face environment, the professor felt an immediate disconnect with the students in the class. The lack of this natural connection with students supported by face-to-face communication made the delivery of material feel foreign and frustrating.

TRUST

A third change that emerged in the development of the online class for each professor was how to generate trust within the first week of regular face-to-face classes. The one-dimensional nature of the computer delayed if not crippled the development of trust between the students and professors by as much as 3 or 4 weeks into the semester. In the traditional classroom, the professors created trust through consistent statements of purpose, clear expectations, follow-through with assign-

ments, and genuine concern for the students, coupled with body language signaling support. Without the visual contact, students were unable to determine the professor's body language, interpret facial expressions, or see the reactions of peers in the class. It was interesting to realize the extent to which professors relied on the group dynamics in the classroom to assist in creating a trusting environment. Removing this group face-to-face dynamic and accepting the different group dynamic developed in the online environment forced the professors to search for new avenues to develop trusting relationships with students. This was achieved through carefully and thoughtfully written e-mails, as well as high availability for telephone conversations.

The venue supporting the development of personal dynamics that emerge in the traditional face-to-face class was the interactions achieved in the virtual classroom. Even though limited, this venue allowed interactions among the class and professors, coupled with live, visual presentations that somewhat simulated the traditional classroom. These interactions forced students to interact in a "real time" mode that provided experiences upon which they could determine if the professor could be trusted, and subsequently to begin allowing personal vulnerability and participating in a learning community that was different. The virtual environment, which was intuitive and somewhat natural to the professors, was also daunting because they could not see the students or feel their disquiet. The professors found the virtual classroom very intense and more tiring than the interactive live classroom, but it was only through the virtual classroom that they established some measures of rapport and trust. Even though the virtual classroom in many ways

reflected aspects of the traditional classroom to the professors, they both confessed that the virtual became important because it represented the closest connection to the traditional classroom experience. It was in this discovery that both professors realized the level of their personal resistance, their total lack of understanding of preparing an online class, and the personal learning ahead of them. The simple verbalization of this awareness was very cathartic.

ACTIVITIES CONVERSION

The professors were faced with converting extremely effective activities in the traditional classroom into effective online activities. Each of these activities required revision, looking first at the intent of the activity and then at the delivery mode. For all activities, with exception of two, modifications were required in order to elicit the same or at least similar responses generated from students in the traditional environment. Once again, professors were faced with a considerable time investment to create the changes. The professors had to examine the intended cognition expected in the traditional environment to determine if the activity would achieve the same thing in the one-dimensional setting. For example, in the traditional classroom, it was easy to determine how students were progressing in an activity through follow-up questions, body language, inquiries, etc.; yet, in the online environment none of these traditional signals were available all at once to the professor. They could only interpret student progress through what was written in the discussion board activities or written in the live setting of instant messaging in the virtual classroom (all Blackboard software options). Now they were faced with carefully reviewing and interpreting what

was written in order to assess comprehension. This process was extremely slow and time consuming. In addition, several wonderful activities used in the traditional classroom were dropped because the document management would be extremely cumbersome and would become more of a distraction than a benefit. Both professors realized somewhere mid-course that new activities were absolutely mandatory, and that the same rigor could be achieved; they just had to approach the course differently.

MENTAL MODELS

Creating *cognitive dissonance* for graduate students first entering the program is crucial because of the years of practice that shape their beliefs about education. Students' mental models (Yero, 2002) regarding teacher /administrator interactions shaped by their beliefs requires learning situations that confront those beliefs and stimulate alternative views. Through years of practice, the experienced professor developed a number of activities that enabled students to name these beliefs and begin to reshape their mental models and eventually modify at least some of their practice. Adjusting these activities to the online environment became nearly impossible because the professor did not anticipate what changes had to be made to the activities in order for the students to receive the full impact. Additionally, the professor failed to realize how important it was to see the students' responses and reactions. The lack of these vital responses did not deter their inclusion in the course; however, they did alter how the activities would be used in the future. Because these activities are so terribly important to the process, this is an area that will require considerable thought and revision.

CONCLUSIONS

As a result of this experience, both professors noticed and acknowledged the personal resistance to the changes that evolved. It led them to realize how easy it is to become discouraged when you have been so successful with previous strategies and are now faced with changing that process and learning new ways to facilitate those strategies. Our new students demanded online courses because of the convenience and accessibility. The professors could no longer rely on a skill set that was comfortable, but were faced with learning many new ways of teaching.

It is often very difficult for experienced professors to alter the traditional thinking processes required to be successful in online teaching unless the cognitive shifts have been included in the training. Most professors derive great pleasure from watching students learn and making cognitive shifts toward new beliefs and skills. Using the one-dimensional mode of the computer was not as rewarding as the interactive traditional classroom. This was due in part to not knowing or understanding how to create the same level of learning for students in the new environment.

After the beginning of classes and the professors clarified course expectations and explained the weekly format, a surprising evolution began to occur. Even though the professors had never seen the students in the class, they began to experience a dynamic relationship developing among students and professors. The virtual classroom aspect of the online program was crucial in promoting this development. The ability to relate in "real" time through the virtual environment with the students accelerated the feelings of connectedness that were missing in the start-up phase of the course. In addition, the professors' weekly commitment to pos-

itive, supportive, and timely feedback to students served as the basis for the development of trust and eventual relationships. The formation of trusting relationships that are crucial to a healthy learning environment had to be meticulously crafted over a period of weeks. Both professors were amazed and delighted that the students were able to master the material in a trusting, albeit new and different, learning environment.

Even though professors are given time to prepare online courses, they must be provided the training and materials to facilitate the change in thinking about instruction in the online environment. The medium is different and requires vastly different instructional strategies. In the midst of the course, both professors discovered that they were feeling a range of emotions regarding changing what they had always done. The introduction of totally online instruction has changed the university experience for both students and professors. It has changed the environment of work, the manner in which instruction is delivered, and the way students learn. The change that university professors face with the online experience is very similar to the changes that high school teachers have been asked to make in public school reform efforts. They believe they have been successful with a method of teaching and changing to more effective strategies is very difficult. Both professors mused during this learning opportunity that it was important to practice the stages of change they both teach to aspiring administrators.

As both professors prepare for future online courses, they have delved deeper into adult learning theory to design ways of transmitting instruction online that facilitates learning in new and more appropriate ways for the online

environment. They suggest the following considerations before online courses are designed and implemented.

- Review adult learning theory and think about how those principles might apply to the online environment
- Review one's personal teaching style and consider what might change when instruction is transferred to the online environment.
- Understand the capabilities of the software that will be used, and find training courses that provide in-depth understanding and application.
- Seek other professionals who have experience using the software to find strategies that work well and effectively engage students.
- Examine all activities planned for implementation to determine if

they will easily convert to the online environment.

- Use as many interactive strategies as possible. As in the traditional classroom, the students can assume the lead while the professor is an active participant.
- Utilize the rich resources of the Web to support the syllabus.
- Be open to changing instructional style. The online environment requires different strategies; however, the rigor and impact can be just as effective. The thinking has to be different.
- Review personal time management skills regarding software requirements, instructional strategies, and document grading and handling.
- Ensure that online course loads do not exceed 15 students per class and that the professor has adequate time to effectively deliver online.

The online environment is here to stay in the graduate and undergraduate levels of college instruction. The nature of the technology and the benefits that it brings to the university will create rapid support by administration and lightening speed adaptation by students. As teachers in the K-12 environment are encouraged to do, be open and be a learner.

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CONSIDERATIONS TO BE MADE BEFORE ONLINE COURSES ARE DESIGNED AND IMPLEMENTED.

- REVIEW ADULT LEARNING THEORY
- REVIEW ONE'S PERSONAL TEACHING STYLE
- UNDERSTAND THE CAPABILITIES OF THE SOFTWARE
- SEEK OTHER PROFESSIONALS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCE
- EXAMINE ALL ACTIVITIES
- USE AS MANY INTERACTIVE STRATEGIES AS POSSIBLE
- UTILIZE RICH RESOURCES
- BE OPEN TO CHANGING INSTRUCTIONAL STYLE
- REVIEW PERSONAL TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS
- ENSURE THAT ONLINE COURSE LOADS ARE "ADEQUATE"

—STEVEN BUSH AND SHIRLEY JOHNSON