

Six Barriers Causing Educators to Resist Teaching Online, and How Institutions Can Break Them

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INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the South Dakota Alliance for Distance Education, partnered with the U.S. Department of Education's Star Schools Initiative, to host a 2-day workshop. This event, also known as the "conclave," allowed leading experts in the

field of distance education, to discuss some of the barriers preventing online learning from gaining widespread prestige and acceptance from the academic community. One of the topics discussed at this workshop was the results gathered from an extensive evaluation process in which members of the conclave interviewed educators to assess their attitudes toward teaching online. Their findings reveal that educators feel significant apprehension about teaching in an online learning environment. This article will explore six of the major reasons educators resist teaching online, and propose solutions for overcoming each barrier.



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BARRIER 1: SALARY

It requires a major investment of time and energy for an instructor to create an engaging distance learning course, but for many faculty, moving a course from the traditional classroom into an electronic medium is considered part of the standard workload (Bower, 2001). However, translating a face-to-face class into an engaging online course requires pedagogical training that is inherently different from that of teachers who perform in a live classroom (Bower,

2001). Therefore, distance educators possess a unique set of knowledge, skills, and abilities that institutions should recognize by offering appropriate compensation, and providing low cost incentives such as awards and recognition. By valuing the role of online teachers, administrators will increase standards and performance in the field of distance education (Gold, 2001).

BARRIER 2: PROMOTION AND TENURE

According to Bower (2001), distance education classes are more time consuming to prepare than traditional courses, while instructional and operational costs are generally lower, yet faculty still receive less. In addition, time spent in developing distance learning courses is time not spent on other professional activities, which may be needed to be successful in the tenure process. This issue is particularly important for faculty at research universities who face high expectations in research and publication (Bower, 2001). When faculty members make contributions toward distance learning initiatives, their efforts should help them earn tenure rather than interfere with their duties and be a source of stress. The field of distance education should support individuals interested in learning about technical innovation and online pedagogy. In doing so, administrators attract leaders to the field of distance education who can then share their knowledge and expertise. This degree of commitment and contribution should help educators achieve promotion and tenure rather than work against them.

BARRIER 3: WORKLOAD

One of the reasons for expanding distance learning, and the use of technology, is to increase productivity and student enrollment. However, to maintain a high-quality learning environment, distance education courses should have no more than 25 stu-

dents per classroom (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001). Research suggests that intimate classroom discussions increase critical thinking, reflection, and interaction among learners (Goodyear et al., 2001). If institutions abide by this principle, administrators will need to hire more distance educators to keep up with the growing demand for online courses. The question remains, how many courses should a single educator be expected to handle? As mentioned, the role of an online instructor is different from a traditional classroom teacher; additional responsibilities include but are not limited to content facilitator, technologist, designer, manager/administrator, process facilitator, adviser/counselor, assessor, and researcher (Goodyear et al., 2001). Staying abreast of the latest technology and applying educational strategies effectively in an online learning environment requires a tremendous amount of time and effort. The problem is, if institutions provide faculty with release time to prepare their distance learning courses, they may need to demonstrate increased productivity through other means, such as increasing the student-faculty ratio (Bower, 2001). Research suggests that increasing class sizes so that fewer teachers would need to be hired and trained compromises quality of the learning experience (Lee, Paulus, Lobo, Phipps, Wyatt, Myers, & Mixer, 2010). By implementing team teaching, offering subscriptions to distance education journals, and providing time to attend training workshops and conferences, educators will be more efficient when it comes to designing courses, and thus require less release time to prepare.

BARRIER 4: TRAINING

Teachers must have the actual experience of online learning before they can be expected to be online teachers; otherwise, they simply map traditional practices onto the new medium (Gold, 2001; Lee et al.,

2010). By training educators in an online learning environment how to integrate technology with pedagogical teaching strategies, they not only experience distance education as an end user, but they learn how to effectively design a digital curriculum.

In-service programs must offer convincing, no-nonsense, and ongoing training that deals with how to teach at a distance, not merely how to manipulate new instructional technology (Beaudoin, 1990). Specific content areas might include methods to establish and maintain effective communication, increasing interaction among students, strategies for encouraging individual and group motivation, planning and managing organizational details, developing an awareness of the time demands of distance delivered courses, techniques for adding visual components and audio, and how to access and integrate information from various sources (Bonk & Dennen, 2002; Gold, 2001).

In a 2001 study, Gold investigated a 2-week faculty development pedagogical training course aimed at preparing teach-

ers on how to operate effectively within an online educational environment. Before the workshop started, he conducted a survey to see what kind of training their institutions previously offered. Table 1 presents results from his questionnaire.

These data, along with the feedback gathered from the South Dakota Alliance for Distance Education, reveal an overwhelming desire for more training by educators. Faculty also express a need for more technical support and staff development in the areas of technical innovation and pedagogy.

In addition, Bonk and Dennen (2002) assert that a national system of teacher training emphasizing distance education should be considered, and mandatory training in theory and practice should be instituted as a condition of employment for new and continuing faculty. The myth that teaching from a distance is easier and requires less involvement from the teacher must be dispelled. As previously mentioned, teaching from a distance requires a set of knowledge, skills, and abilities inherently different from those used in a tradi-

Table 1. Workshop Participants Training Experience and Needs

Survey Questions	No	Yes	Yes, Face-to-Face	Yes, Online	Yes, Either Type of Delivery
Does your institution have a formal training program in technology and online course development?	74.4%	25.6%			
Have you ever taken a course in technology and online course development?	65.8%	34.2%			
Do you want to take a course in technology and online course development?	2.6%	na	5.1%	30.8%	61.5%
Does your institution have a formal training program in teaching online?	94.9%	5.1%			
Have you ever taken a course in teaching online?	76.9%	23.1%			
Do you want to take a course in teaching online?	5.3%	na	0%	31.6%	63.2%

tional classroom; by giving teachers the tools they need to perform successfully in a distance learning environment, the field of distance education will attract and retain talented professionals. It is precisely in the design and delivery of these new learning modes where the participation of competent and committed faculty is most critical (Beaudoin, 1990).

BARRIER 5: INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Personal interaction with students is one of the most gratifying aspects of teaching (Gold, 2001). For some, the lack of direct interpersonal contact with both students and faculty is an issue (Berge, 1998). In addition, the physical absence of the teacher makes it difficult to gauge the clarity of communication and understanding (Gold, 2001).

Online instructors have to be more outgoing, positive, and responsive to gain respect from their students (Gold, 2001). Mason identifies the three fundamental roles of a distance educator as organizational, social, and intellectual (1991). The organizational role involves setting the agenda, defining learning objectives, establishing a timetable, and explaining rules and procedures. Essentially, teachers must lay the groundwork for the discussion to begin. Their main social role is to create a friendly environment for the students. Good teachers often send out welcome messages, use a personal tone, and send prompt feedback with specific examples and references. Another important social role is modeling good intellectual behavior. Finally, the teacher must become the facilitator of the students' understanding. The teacher should focus on crucial points of discussions, ask questions, probe student responses, synthesize and summarize points, and help develop themes that link to the readings and class resources (Gold, 2001). Research suggests that these practices provide learners with a more sat-

isfying learning experience and they feel more connected to their online teacher than they do in a face-to-face classroom (Oliver & Herrington, 2000).

Besides increasing the interaction between the teacher and student, it is also important to promote a community of practice among faculty (Bawane & Spector, 2009). Approaches to promote a community of practice for faculty include: involving them in developing courseware; permitting them to preview, purchase, and evaluate materials; engage them in pilot projects to test alternative delivery systems; and expose them to case studies of successful distance education activities. Their input can be encouraged through social networking, live and virtual meetings, committee work, and mentorship programs (Beaudoin, 1990; Bower, 2001).

One of the most critical aspects of an online course is introductions (Gold, 2001). Both the instructor and student should identify themselves within the discussion forum. By establishing a caring online presence and taking an interest in the students, this creates a positive atmosphere and a sense of student trust in the class (Bawane & Spector, 2009). The goals of these introductory posts are to exchange ideas, share information, and create a social environment where students feel comfortable interacting with each other. Another way to increase interaction among students is to encourage the exchange of informal conversation. A study of 80 college undergraduates found that this produced higher more complex levels of student participation (Ahern, Peck, & Laycock, 1992). These findings suggest that when online instructors are more informal and spontaneous in their commenting, students become more interactive with each other, compared to conditions where the instructor simply poses formal topic-centered statements or questions. Bonk and Dennen (2002) agree that the more teacher-centered the envi-

ronment, the less student exploration, engagement, and interaction.

BARRIER 6: QUALITY

According to Bonk and Dennen (2004), many educators are still skeptical about the effectiveness of courses delivered from a distance, claiming that they are poor attempts to replace the teacher with technology, and offer students an easier way to earn credits without having to demonstrate mastery of learning outcomes. Even though these are myths, they could become a reality if distance educators do not strive toward continuously learning, evaluating, and improving their practices. The phenomenon of syllabism is an ever-present threat to the success of distance learning outcomes (Beaudoin, 1990). Syllabism is the tendency for students to focus only on what is prescribed in the syllabus. The outcomes may be a series of assignments that satisfy course requirements, but which result in very little learning. Students thus develop perfunctory answers to questions based solely on self-contained knowledge of the material, in which case the teacher is simply paid to check that the rules of the exercise are adequately followed (Beaudoin, 1990). When professors expect learners to solely refer to their syllabus and required readings, the student fails to authentically engage with the material. Without applying new information in a realistic context and without receiving feedback on correctness, the student never receives confirmation of mastery, but rather adheres to the course outline simply to earn a grade. Gold suggests that distance education courses stress learning rather than teaching, a constructivist approach based on the principle that the key to learning is what students do, not what teachers do (2001).

According to Beaudoin (1990), instructional personnel must be adept at facilitating students' learning through particular attention to process, unlike classroom-

based teachers whose traditional role is largely confined to selecting and sharing content. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) asserts that better instructional design and standards of success will increase acceptance for e-learning both within higher education as well as the surrounding community. From a constructivist point of view, learning is a search for meaning. To make meaning, students must focus on concrete situations and understand not only the facts but also the context in which these facts are placed (Gold, 2001). In addition to being adept at both content and process, faculty must know something about the potential of technology to facilitate learning and to enhance their own effectiveness (Beaudoin, 1990; Bower, 2001).

Two leaders in online pedagogy, Oliver (2000) and Paulsen (1995), focus on how Web tools foster student articulation, collaboration, intentional learning, and goal setting. They also connect these constructivist principles to Web-based resources such as bulletin boards, asynchronous conferencing, concept mapping, and survey tools that might be employed for student debates, reflection, cooperative group situations, role-play, brainstorming, special guest appearances, collaborative learning, and online discussions. According to Bonk and Dennen (2002) all of these strategies serve to enhance the quality of online learning environments.

CONCLUSION

While individual faculty members may have their own reasons to resist participating in the latest wave of distance education, there are several reasons why faculty in general resist distance education. Faculty have specifically expressed concerns for the adequacy of institutional support, the change in interpersonal relations, and quality.

Recognition, collaboration, technical support, online sharing of pedagogical

practices, and instructional design assistance are all ways to increase faculty involvement and the adoption of web-based technologies in college teaching. Also, online educators have expressed a desire for more pedagogical tools, advice, and communities for their online teaching and learning efforts. By identifying these needs and the barriers that accompany them, professionals in the field of distance education can develop improvement strategies to overcome them.

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SIX BARRIERS AND ONLINE TEACHING

1. SALARY
2. PROMOTION AND TENURE
3. WORKLOAD
4. TRAINING
5. INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS
6. QUALITY