

DIFFICULTIES THAT A NOVICE ONLINE INSTRUCTOR FACED

A Case Study

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Previous studies regarding online learning have focused on learner perspectives, such as student learning outcomes, their perception of or satisfaction with online learning, and so forth. Only a few studies have addressed the faculty perspective, which is one of major factors in the success of online learning. The few studies that claim that online teaching might be a burden to the faculty members are based mainly on the researchers' intuitions and reflections, without empirical evidences. Accordingly, this study explores whether online teaching is actually a burden to faculty members through the first online teaching experience of a professor at a large university in the Midwestern United States. Consequently, this study aims to help readers understand the online teaching environment by providing them with opportunities to vicariously experience the challenges faced by a novice online instructor.

ISSUE QUESTIONS

To attain the purposes of this study, the following questions are addressed:

1. What are the challenges that a novice online instructor faces when teaching her or his first online course?
2. Are such challenges in online teaching a burden to the faculty member?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE ONLINE COURSE

The online course studied was delivered in a combined synchronous and asynchronous form. Synchronous instruction was provided once per week, in a session lasting approximately 1 hour. The synchronous session started at 7 p.m. and ended around 8 p.m. All students were expected to log onto a text chat

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system and communicate or interact with each other and the professor. The professor used live, streamed audio to talk to the students and to lead discussions. The course also used asynchronous delivery, where students can watch a streamed PowerPoint-supported lecture. Additionally, students were provided with learning activities to be completed either independently or as a team activity. The design for the courses could be characterized as modular, but they are not just courses broken into a series of units. The structure is comprised of course sections that are divided into modules. Modules are divided into learning cycles.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

The case for this study is Michelle (an alias) who taught an online course for the first time. This female faculty member had never experienced online teaching until spring 2004, even though she has substantial offline teaching experience at the university level. The spring semester of 2004 was the second semester for her to teach on-campus students and the first semester to teach online students at the university.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The case was observed for five synchronous sessions in spring 2004. The observation could capture a few challenges or difficulties that the instructor faced during the synchronous session. To find the detailed challenges she faced during the synchronous sessions as well as asynchronous hours, she was interviewed twice. In the interest of multiple realities, her teaching assistant, a student, and a peer who was an exdevelopment assistant for the online courses were also interviewed. In addition, all e-mail communications through the teaching assistant's account and students' postings on the WebBoard were reviewed.

FINDINGS

During the 5 weeks of observations, the instructor always came to the chat space for the

synchronous session much earlier than the scheduled time and greeted each student by name as they entered the chat space. She usually carried on conversations with students until class began. As for the individual greeting of the instructor, one student expressed that she was very glad that the instructor seemed to have affection toward her through the instant messenger. The student also said that she tried not to miss the class in order to repay the instructor's interest in her. As an example, she had a class during her husband's birthday but delayed the birthday party in order to attend the class. She confessed that she usually missed class when she had important family affairs.

According to interviews with Michelle and her teaching assistant, one of the major difficulties that Michelle had in teaching the online class was student apathy. According to interviews with the instructor and the teaching assistant, student apathy was one of the biggest obstacles to engaging students in deeper discussion and to making students actively participate in the class activities. The instructors noticed student apathy mainly during the synchronous sessions:

I think it is really challenging sometimes to know whether they are truly there mentally as well as physically because I would imagine that there is some degree of invisibility attached to it. Not only do I not see them and hear them, it's quite possible that their name appears on my computer screen but ultimately they might be doing housework or preparing meals or caring for children. This might be a good example ... at the beginning of the class, I clarified the vague points related to the assignment and then asked students if they have any further questions. At that time, there was not any question about it. At the end of the class, a few students asked me what I already clarified.

The teaching assistant also indicated student apathy as a difficulty in online teaching, but saw it mainly in the asynchronous discussions and interactions during the week.

The nature of this online environment does not allow for face-to-face interaction ... what led this feeling the most was the lack of interaction during the week between students and the instructor.... The students rarely responded to each other's postings, even when they were posting supplemental material that might have been of interest to their fellow students.

We tried to contact some students via the instant messenger to know their position about this issue. Fortunately, one student answered the question related to this issue:

Kelly (an alias): I am taking the class at home. This can be a cause of the problem. For example, when I was taking the online class, my children had a big fight. At that time, I had to let my children stop fighting. As a result, I missed the half of the class.... In addition, my peer confessed that she watched her favorite TV show during the synchronous session. This is a big secret ... I usually used the asynchronous space when I need to post the assignments and should participate in the asynchronous team discussion.... There were so many postings in the asynchronous space. Thus, it was impossible to read and answer all of them.

The instructor and her teaching assistant perceived that students were apathetic during the synchronous work as well as the asynchronous work at the beginning of the course. In order to solve the student apathy issue and encourage active participation, the instructor started to use more realistic case studies as the topic of the synchronous session, starting in week four. The instructor believed that this method was relatively successful in getting the students to actively participate in the course:

I found that when I actually embedded some cases that I drew from different sources to highlight a reinforcer in content and get students to think more deeply about certain contents of the chapters, that worked pretty well.... I realized that I need to give the online students more stimuli or interests to encourage their active participation.... In fact, my offline students actively participated in the class even

though I did not provide them with such stimuli ... I should have figured out the characteristics of online students in advance.

During the first 3 weeks of the course, the number of student responses in the synchronous chat space was 108, 119, and 110, respectively. This number increased by 20-60 in the following synchronous sessions of the semester. This supports the instructor's perception of success in overcoming student apathy.

The instructor indicated that it was also difficult to implement multitasks, such as rapidly reading multiple messages from students, promptly typing the key points of comments, and verbally giving feedback at the same time during the synchronous sessions. Instructors in a synchronous online environment are required to have quick reading, typing, and surfing (navigating) skills and should sometimes use such skills at nearly the same time. Michelle summarized her experience as follows:

I remembered that the very first evening, I introduced myself, reviewed the syllabus, reviewed kind of general expectations, and then got them engaged a little bit in the content of the initial chapters. And then to have them think a little bit more deeply about some of that content, I posted a few questions on the chat space and there was this kind of awkward silence for a moment and I sat there wondering if I was maybe not being effective. And then with the time delay, all of the sudden the screen was just completely full. And then that was the matter of having to be really quick visually to scan the screen full of comments that multiple students had typed in. Plus at the same time to be processing that, not only from a mental standpoint but then being able to articulate verbally almost at the same time that I was kind of trying to synthesize it mentally, and then also tying in my own commentaries. So in lots of ways it is a very highly stimulating environment, but one that requires you to be pretty fast in terms of your reading, synthesizing, and internalizing skills.

Learning how to use the technologies and understanding the course framework were a

challenge and burden that Michelle faced as a novice online instructor. She had to understand how the online course was designed and become familiar with the technology and learning system used in the course to make her instruction more efficient and effective. As presented below, this was a challenge to her in preparing for the online class:

I really had to get familiar with what was this going to look like and if I were a student what would I see? What would the WebBoard be like? What would the syllabus be like? How would the course sections be broken down? What would the learning modules involve? How would the learning cycles be conducted? So that was kind of a huge project.... Consequently, the online class required me to invest additional hours in preparing it.

The instructor learned most of prerequisite skills for the online course before the course began, mainly through a tutorial for new online instructors and teaching assistants. However, the tutorial did not provide all of the answers. She came to the online program office to ask questions of either the coordinator or the development assistants quite often. In spite of these efforts, during the first synchronous session she could not remember how to go to the team chat space. In the third week of the course, however, she was able to lead the synchronous session without asking the development assistant any technical questions. Real experience seemed to be much more valuable than practice in a tutorial.

Michelle's face-to-face course met 3 hours each week. However, the online course met synchronously for only 1 hour each week. This might imply that an online class should use unique instructional approaches that are different from those in a face-to-face course. However, the instructor seems to have managed the online class with similar instructional approaches to those in her face-to-face class. In the 1-hour online class, the instructor tried to cover the same content that she addressed for 3 hours in her face-to-face class, which was challenging to her:

I find it somewhat frustrating because of the 1-hour session that we usually are limited to. And one issue has been desired to want to continue the dialogue in the main chat room and I often feel quite awkward in having to bring to closure usually at 10 after 8 or 8:15, we have even gone as late as 8:30. So, that can be a little bit challenging as well.

The instructor also indicated difficulties in measuring student outcomes in the online environment. The course had two exams: a midterm and a final. These exams were intended to evaluate how much of the content of the course students had learned. In the online environment; however, it was not easy to administer an exam since students can easily access course materials and textbooks at home. She pointed out this difficulty:

Exams are going to have to be open-book, open-text, open-note in an online class because I simply cannot monitor them, the students in their home environments, to ensure that they are not referring to such materials, whereas in a face-to-face format I can very easily make it a closed-text exam or I can maybe make the assignments a little bit more intensive where they actually have to begin to apply and think at a slightly deeper level, because they won't have access to notes and materials which would be the case in an online format.

Finally, she indicated that online teaching involved a heavy workload overall, resulting in one of the most critical challenges in teaching the course:

I do think that the workload is heavier in an online course because, without face-to-face contact as in a typical face-to-face lecture/discussion type of course, I found myself spending considerable time trying to make connections with students by responding to all of their individual emails and postings, even to those that went into the teaching assistant account which were forwarded to me. The online class required me to have much more asynchronous individual contact with students than those in the face-to-face class. Not seeing each other had students have much more questions. The

invisible aspect of an online environment seems to yield much more questions and curiosity.

The teaching assistant also indicated that the heavier workload in the online environment seemed to be a big burden to Michelle, as follows:

She had great excitement and enthusiasm after the first night but now I would say she is exhausted with it.... She told me that she was glad the semester was coming to an end.... She was looking forward to the burden of this class to be over, so that she could resume her writing.

Although online learning has many benefits, Michelle, a novice online instructor, seemed to consider online teaching to be a big burden that requires a heavy workload as well as flexibility.

REFLECTION

This study delineates the first online teaching experience of an instructor at a large university in the Midwestern United States. According to the findings, online teaching generated some challenges for the instructor, and such challenges did indeed cause her to consider online teaching burdensome.

First, the instructor experienced difficulties in communicating with and interacting with students. In addition, because she experienced student apathy during the synchronous sessions, she had to create new teaching materials to facilitate students' interaction and participation. Her experiences illustrate what many scholars have contended: that interactive communication and facilitation are critical factors in accomplishing successful online teaching (e.g., Moore, 1989; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Williams, 2003). Therefore, an online instructor, particularly a novice instructor, should be aware of the importance of communication and interaction with students and thus prepare for enhanced facilitation during the course planning. Pairing experienced online instruc-

tors with novice online instructors would be an effective strategy to advise about what works and does not work for effective communication and interaction (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). In addition, exposing novice online instructors to a variety of case studies would be another strategy to help them to establish more effective communication and interaction.

A second challenge was becoming accustomed to the technology and to the unique necessity of multitasking skills during synchronous sessions. As the study subject's experience indicated, online instructors need to have certain technology-related competencies. Even though Michelle thoroughly completed the tutorial developed for new instructors and teaching assistants, she needed real practice (i.e., actual synchronous sessions) to get used to the technology and environment. In this vein, it is also meaningful to establish a faculty development laboratory as a place to try out and practice the technology, as Barker and Dickson (1994) suggest.

The instructor also expressed difficulties in organizing the 1-hour synchronous sessions and measuring student outcomes. To overcome these problems, the instructor needs to use different teaching strategies and to develop alternative assessments, such as portfolios, projects, and problem-solving activities. When an instructor teaches a 1-hour session as well as a 3-hour session on the same topic, it is certain that the instructor will use different strategies to attain the same learning outcome. We need to pay attention to the argument that the role of instructors should shift from a sage on the stage to a guide on the side in order to design and manage an online course effectively (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Ultimately, the challenges that this new online instructor faced made her think that online teaching involved a heavy workload, and such challenges and consequent heavy workload made her exhausted with online teaching. As a result, the instructor seemed to have a more negative than positive impression about online teaching. Apparently, online

teaching was a burden to this new online instructor.

If the new online instructor had had training regarding the pedagogical issues of online teaching and vicarious experiences through experienced online instructors, she could have been better prepared and had a different impression about online teaching. This implies that training for online instructors should be designed with more focus on the pedagogical issues of online teaching and on vicarious experiences with the actual online teaching rather than on technical issues.

Many instructors think that teaching online is merely a change of environment and apply the same methods from traditional classroom teaching to the online teaching environment, especially in the design, development, and delivery of content. As this study shows, however, it is evident that instructor roles and teaching strategies are different in online environments compared to the traditional classroom environment. Online instructors should develop not only their technical skills, but also the appropriate teaching strategies for an online environment, in order to minimize the challenges that they face. Online instructors cannot be expected to know these strategies

intuitively or automatically (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Institutions offering online courses and hiring inexperienced online instructors should provide them with appropriate training and extensive support so that the instructors can better understand the new teaching environment and design and deliver more effective online courses.

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