

Testing the Mettle of Instructional Effectiveness in Distance Education

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Abstract

Amidst the excitement of incorporating innovative technologies for teaching at a distance, there are very few research studies that highlight the trial and error experiences, the glitches of actual change processes, or document the instructor's recovery strategies for a technology-mediated course that did not go as well, as expected. Indeed, it takes sheer guts to admit that there are underlying student frustrations and dissatisfactions, although the overall course may appear successful in achieving stated objectives and institutional goals. This interactive session will focus on the implications for continuous quality improvement in online instruction, through the reality of trial and error.

INTRODUCTION

Recent comments from online course evaluations by students across various courses included the following list of common frustrations: lack of online feedback from facilitators, technological problems, time-consuming activities, large volume of emails, information overload, inactive links to websites, lack of immediate support, disinterest in group projects, ambiguity of online instructions, and changes in course requirements. As instructors grapple with this type of feedback, some may become angry that their professional competence is being criticized; some may be paralyzed by fear of overwhelming student expectations and loss of control, while others question their future in the distance-teaching environment.

What type of formal/informal support is provided for instructors as they face challenges in the distance-teaching environment? How common are frustrating experiences and are they indirectly influenced by the number of years in teaching? What forums exist for these shared experiences and recovery processes? Are faculty mentored in adapting their teaching styles and roles to meet diverse online learning expectations? Beyond attending a workshop or two, what is required of any instructor to ensure successful distance learning outcomes and relationships?

Hara and Kling [1] suggest that discussion of the problems with Web-based distance education has been a taboo topic, for various reasons including political ones. Their ethnographic case study of student experiences [2] has paved the way for discussions and controversy about appropriate expectations for distance education courses, and ways to improve such offerings.

The focus of the interactive conference session will be the discussion of this taboo topic, in terms of shared experiences and expectations of the learning curve for instructors in distance teaching. Particular references will be made to the trial and errors in the online teaching environment. The session will be approached as an appreciative inquiry, based on interactions between participants and facilitator regarding suggestions for improving instructional effectiveness. It is anticipated that participants will also develop a practical checklist for contingency planning in the distance teaching-learning process.

This paper offers a snapshot of the conceptual framework being explored in an ongoing research study. The research focuses on the impact of students' frustrations on faculty's self-perception of instructional effectiveness. The primary aim of the study is to highlight instructors' perspectives of the students' experiences, and the implications for continuous quality improvement in instruction, through the reality of trial and error. One particular area of interest is to examine how students' expectations influence instructor's expectations of self, teaching task and impact in the teaching-learning relationship.

Underlying Assumption

The basic assumption is that self-perception, in terms of underlying attitudes, beliefs and values about one's performance, is significant for the effective instructor. Borich [3] proposes that there are three natural stages of concern and planning priorities in the process of professional development for an effective teacher in any environment:

- a) Focus on self - ensuring survival and well-being as one fights for one's professional life;
- b) Focus on teaching task -how best to deliver instruction through trial and error, consolidation, and exploration;
- c) Focus on impact - helping individual learners to fulfill their potential to learn.

Borich also observed that these stages are fluid and not necessarily exclusive. An instructor may move back and forth between stages, or have concerns predominantly in one area, while experiencing concerns of a lesser intensity in another area. The main implication for this study is that effective instruction is not about a right method, a right process, or a right system. Instructional effectiveness is more about flexibility in exploration and interaction, to meet learner needs and personal satisfaction in pursuit of professional excellence.

Conceptual Framework For Study

The idea for this research project emerged from critical self-reflections shared by an online faculty-member with two peer-mentors. Given feedback about emerging student frustration, anxiety and dissatisfaction, the ensuing discussions focused on faculty satisfaction with their roles, methods, overall teaching style and levels of personal effectiveness. It was this recognition of emotional discomfort in response to professional experiences that defined the essence of reflectivity. The conceptual framework for the research study was therefore influenced by Schön's classic work on the reflective practitioner [4].

Schön defines reflection as knowing-in-action; by paying attention to phenomena and surfacing one's intuitive understanding of them, by experimenting through exploratory, move testing, or hypothesis testing. Schön [5] challenges teachers to move into the center of the learning situation, into the center of their own doubts, to reflect on events that are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain. Through reflection-in-practice, the practitioner will utilize a repertoire of understandings, images and actions to reframe a troubling situation so that problem-solving actions are generated.

Methodology

The primary research question focuses on the impact of student frustrations on faculty's self-perception of instructional effectiveness. The approach to this study involves qualitative descriptions of the online teaching experience from the perspectives of instructors and students. Data will be collated from multiple sources: journal reflections of online instructors, feedback from anonymous student evaluations, informal student comments and participatory evaluation of the primary subjects - select online instructors who admit their frustrating experiences.

Several important background variables to be considered include the nature of the experience in teaching, online instruction, subject matter, field-orientation, and the teaching-learning relationship. The data collection/analysis process will be guided by the principles of reflection-in/on-action and reflection-in-practice, as each subject embarks on the journey to improve personal instructional effectiveness through trial and error.

The preliminary stage of qualitative research highlights three case studies of online instructors at varying stages of their teaching career ranging from first-time teaching experience to more seasoned teaching experiences, in transition to online instruction. Further research activities for triangulation purposes may include interviews with approximately ten online instructors and online students on issues related to their academic frustrations, success, and overall satisfaction in the teaching-learning experience at a distance.

Significance of the Study

It is anticipated that the findings generated from this research study will provide a practical framework for both new and seasoned online faculty as they experience the reality of trial and error in various online teaching initiatives. By documenting some important areas of student dissatisfaction and the challenges of online instruction, it is hoped that faculty will be engaged in ongoing critical reflection of their experiences, beyond the phase of collating student surveys and dialogue with peers. The ultimate aim of this research is to facilitate increased understanding of online instructional design and interaction processes with wider implications for faculty mentoring, training and development practices.

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