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Perspectives on Online Teaching and Learning: A Report of Two Novice Online Educators

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Keywords

Online teaching, Novice instructors, Education, Perspectives

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Perspectives on Online Teaching and Learning: A Report of Two Novice Online Educators

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Abstract

Population growth (Broad, 1997), institutional competition (Daniel & Cox, 2002), and changing learner needs (Willis, Tucker, & Gunn, 2003) are among the issues influencing the increase in online teaching and learning. Related to this, emergent and expanding distance learning technologies have subsequently pitted “brick and mortar” against “on-line” paradigms. This has resulted in a need for research to clarify the relevance, effectiveness, restrictive and facilitative dimensions of online courses. For example, faculty are increasingly expected and encouraged to develop and teach online courses often with misperceptions about required pedagogical skills and without adequate support and preparation (Choi & Park, 2006). This qualitative study is therefore, aimed at sharing the experiences and perspectives of two novice online instructors’ operating within two colleges in the eastern US. These instructors initially shared that a key motivation for the teaching of their online courses was fear of becoming professionally out of date and of ‘giving in’ to technophobia. This paper reports on the background to--and different approaches adopted towards--developing two online courses as well as providing student perceptions of their on-line learning experience. Findings and recommendations from this research are aimed at providing an insight into some of the fundamental issues that other novice ‘online’ instructors will need to consider in developing their own technology mediated courses.

Keywords: Online teaching, novice instructors, education, perspectives.

Introduction

It is estimated that 1 in 10 faculty members and 90% of colleges use online courses (Olson & Werhan, 2005). The implementation of on-line learning is driven by population growth (Broad, 1997), institutional competition and effectiveness (Daniel & Cox, 2002), teacher shortages (Spooner, Spooner, Algozzine, and Jordan, 1998), and changing learner needs (Willis, Tucker, & Gunn, 2003); including those in rural communities (Knapczyk, Chapman, Rodes, & Chung, 2001).

Morse (2003) and Valenta, Therriault, Dieter, and Mrtek (2001) identify a number of challenges to using on-line technology. These include skill deficits and technology frustrations, including software incompatibility. Conversely, Valenta et al. argue that on-line learning and teaching accommodate richer reflective practice, offer the convenience

of determining when and where to complete tasks, and result in more information being shared among participants. Emphasizing student centeredness, Kassop (2003) contends that on-line approaches further facilitate improved writing and student interaction. Other benefits, according to Kassop, include: (a) lifelong learning, (b) immediate feedback for assessment and problem solving, (c) flexibility to accommodate community stakeholders and a developing market, (d) a community of learners where students can reflect and respond without face to face pressure, (e) technological-literacy, and (f) professional development and rejuvenation among faculty.

Novice online instructors

As a consequence of these influences, teacher education faculty are increasingly challenged to develop online courses and engage in online instruction. What motivates their interest and involvement remains varied and often interrelated. According to McKenzie, Mims, Bennett and Waugh (2000) factors influencing faculty decisions to teach online comprise the (a) Desire to get students more involved with technology; (b) Opportunity to use technology more innovatively to enhance course quality; (c) Opportunity to meet needs of students at a distance; (d) Increased flexibility in working hours and location; (e) Response to students asking for on-line educational opportunities; and (f) Chance to interact with students more frequently.

Clay (1999) contends that decreased face-to-face interaction with students; lack of time to plan and deliver on-line courses; and the inadequacy of support services also limit faculty interest. Rockwell, Scheuer, Fritz and Marx (1999) identify the amount of time it took faculty to learn and update technological skills; the inadequacy of compensation and incentives; and a heavier workload as other disincentives to teaching online. Maguire (2005) cites faculty concerns regarding a lack of standards, the threat of fewer jobs, and a decline in usage of full-time faculty as other barriers.

Traditionally instructors thrive on face to face communication which allows more opportunities to gauge student reactions, obtain feedback, and modify pedagogy. This tends to focus on delivering information (Dennen, 2005). Conrad (2005) supports this emphasis on content. Choi and Park (2006) find that their experience of online instruction was burdensome and challenged by student apathy. Further, there is a need for greater institutional support that also addresses appropriate pedagogy for novice online instructors (Choi & Park).

Satisfaction and Learning

Research on the effectiveness of on-line approaches has focused on student perceptions and satisfactions. Piotrowski and Vodanovich (2000) contend that online instruction significantly impacts on teacher education programmes by providing students with access to education without the inconvenience of traveling to campus for all classes. Beard and Harper (2004) conclude that despite students' concerns about the lack of interaction with faculty and fellow students, they were quite supportive of online instruction. Extending this discussion Braun (2008) concludes that flexibility is a key factor influencing students' preferences for online courses.

Learner satisfaction might be described as learner-reported feelings about course structure, institutional support and flexibility, and instructors and peer interaction (Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). Such satisfaction has been identified as a critical factor in determining the success of online courses (Roach & Lemasters, 2006; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; According

to Schwitzer, Ancis and Brown (2001) measuring learner satisfaction provides important information about the overall learning experience, as well as student attentiveness and effort. High levels of learner satisfaction lead to a more positive learning environment, increased motivation, and lower attrition (Stokes, 2003; Thurmond, Wambach, Connors, & Frey, 2002; Schwitzer et al). A positive relationship has been noted between satisfaction and perceived quality of online courses -- one that might continue to be a determining factor for successful online delivery (Rodriguez, Oom, & Montanez, 2008). Building on this, Swan (2001) and Debourgh (1999) identify factors connecting student satisfaction and interaction. These factors include instructor accessibility, responsiveness and promptness to student questions, student-instructor interaction, clarity in course design, and active student discussion.

Salmon (2004) builds on how online learning can support constructivist forms of engaging with content and knowledge construction. She determines a five phase process of learning for moderators and students: access and motivation, online socialization; information exchange, knowledge construction and development. In a further, study Vonderwell, Liang, and Alderman (2007) point to how asynchronous online discussions lead to enhanced engagement and the role that assessment play in that process. Jefferies and Seden (2006) in expanding the discussion extends Salmon's model from five to eight stages to include preparation, assessment, and evaluation. Further, they argue for more tutor-monitoring aimed at facilitating student development, autonomy, and responsibility, rather than instructors undertaking tutor-moderation.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study using self and case study methodology. It uses field observations and open-ended questioning aimed at sharing the experiences and perspectives of faculty and student satisfaction with online learning following two pilot projects. Through self-study we place our teaching and the perspectives and experiences of our students center stage (Chang, 2008). This approach helps to accommodate self-reflection and critical inquiry, required to understand our practices and understanding of these practices in our teaching (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). We hope to become more knowledgeable about teaching and make the changes to minimize any disabling curricula with our students—as teacher candidates. Since the study is based on two separate contexts, we collected data and considered our findings as separate cases originally. Data collection targeted the perspectives and experiences of the two co-researchers and their students in two courses. We acknowledge and embrace our inherent biases as co-researchers engaged in self-study. We note our small sample size of the study, and assert that we do not aim to make generalizations but to share their experiences as novice users of online instruction. Triangulation is achieved through multiple sources of data collection, comprising field notes, our personal experiences, participant observations, and the responses of our students to five open-ended questions. Following the identification of the initial emergent themes and findings, we address member checking by sharing the initial findings with respondents via email across both campuses. Feedback is solicited regarding the themes, the conclusions, and recommendations.

Five open-ended guiding questions provided the key means of data collection: (1) Why did you choose to do this on-line course? (2) What is your prior experience with distance or on-line courses? (3) What strategies did you find most beneficial? (4) What do you think might

help *this* course to be more effective? And (5) How might online courses be effective in preparing teachers of diverse learners?

Narratives were analyzed for emergent themes according to the Constant Comparative Model of data analysis, which combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of the emergent themes. These are identified and classified, then systematically and continuously compared. Relationships between constructs were also identified and explored. Data was developed from the responses to the interview questions, student opinions of faculty instruction, and faculty notes.

Introducing the Co-Researchers, Contexts, and Participants

The Co-Researchers

We, Joan and I, are associate professors, at different college campuses in the eastern United States. Joan brings to her campus more than 30 years of teaching in elementary, special, and teacher education. Although she has not previously taught via online, she has served as program director and instructor in a pioneering distance education program in the Caribbean. Joan asserts that her department and college are fully supportive of her initiative.

This is my [Dennis] first online course. It was taught as a hybrid. My department supported my teaching of the course for two semesters initially; with a view to determining student satisfaction and the potential for effectiveness. While, I have not as student or teacher completed an online course before, I have benefited from correspondence courses in my early professional development. I have taught in both elementary and special school sectors; been a principal of an alternative school; and also served as a project director in distance education.

Joan's campus provides educational programs in liberal arts and professional disciplines for approximately 6000 students. Unlike Joan's urban campus, mine is decidedly rural and public, catering for just over 4000 students.

The Courses and the Participants

Joan's data set covered the Summer 2008 semester, and comprised participants who completed one undergraduate special education course. The key assignments for the successful completion of the course included: two quizzes, one Examination, a reflective paper on fieldwork experiences, presentation and facilitation of an assigned topic, online discussion and a field experience of 25 hours. Fifteen of an initial seventeen participants accepted the invitation to provide feedback. Undergraduate students majoring in elementary and special education comprised this group.

My data collection set was my class of graduate students completing multicultural education. The key assignments for the successful completion of the course included an orientation session, the upload of an introductory statement and personal photograph, and participation. Other assignments were: (1) an autobiography that included guiding questions; (2) required reading and mp3 developed responses to each chapter; (3) completion of quizzes to no less than 94% mastery; and (4) music critiques and film critiques. At a final face-to-face meeting a PowerPoint summary of each student's autobiography is presented to the class.

Findings

Instructors' Perspectives-Joan

Choice

Joan identifies herself as student centered, and linked her decision to teach via online with her understanding of students' needs. As program coordinator, she shares a particular insight into their challenges and recommendations. Joan acknowledges that the teaching online contributed to her professional development. Her decision, she asserts, to engage in an on-line course stems from her belief that she would have an opportunity to use technology more innovatively; while meeting the needs of students at a distance. Getting more students involved with technology was also a goal that directly links to the preparation of teachers who are technologically savvy in the classroom.

I believe that these objectives have successfully been met as I am now very versed in many aspects of online teaching and learning. I also was able to attract students into taking this online course whilst residing in a different state or even a different country.

Experience

Having had some experience in distance learning Joan has had the opportunity to engage in managing and implementing distance learning courses with the University of Sheffield. Joan notes that she has had no prior experience with online courses "neither as a student nor as a teacher". She has however been using the Black board system as a document retrieval site for the past eight years . . . "to supplement my courses". Joan shares a desire to make courses more accessible to students.

Firstly, I had a very challenging childhood in a working class family. I've always considered myself "blessed" via my education. Although I was always a VERY committed student, I also know that my success is linked to others . . . and the opportunities they facilitated. I strive to open doors not close them for my students.

Secondly, later on, as a senior special education teacher educator, I was part of a community driven, pioneering effort that sought to develop teacher education when the state was dragging its feet. This dramatically changed my sense of advocacy for teacher candidates.

Best strategies

Joan believes that online mentorship gave her the opportunity for frequent, convenient communication between herself and the students. She describes her role as a mentor and facilitator through interpreting the environment and modeling expected behaviors. Another strategy she used was the use of weekly journals and communications that sent between mentor and student via e-mail, providing an ongoing "dialogue" which supported the relationship and offered a great deal of opportunities for timely feedback on student questions and concerns.

Supporting self-directed learning also gave the learners opportunities to pursue individualized, self-paced learning activities. Students could work at a computer at a convenient time and pace, is able to search and utilize the vast resources of the Internet research nearly any topic imaginable.

She concludes that the accessibility to course materials and student assignments and evaluative strategies were most beneficial.

Using Blackboard for assessment. The automated grading and analysis of scores and questions made it easier for me to give feedback quickly and efficiently.

Joan is excited and confident about teaching another online course; even while admitting: "it takes many hours in designing and administering . . . especially when it is offered for the first time." She plans to use this experience to make her future courses more effective. She identifies the importance of communication.

Many students may be at the beginning stages of learning how to use the Internet, and navigating the online course may overwhelm them. Some have little or no direct contact with me, so I have to keep communicating in different forums, e.g. the emails and the discussion board.

I found that my role as moderator during the online discussions allowed me a sense of presence, which I felt accommodated both my need to be in some way there even if it is virtual and their needs for my guidance.

Mastery of course content and how these relate to objectives and standards are to Joan the best way to effectively prepare candidates for diverse learners." Joan acknowledges that coming from and teaching in "an extremely diverse society" has shaped her teaching style. "I consider myself very responsive and flexible in accommodating my students."

Instructors' Perspectives-Dennis

Choice

My motivation to develop and teach this online course was my own experiences as a learner and by collaborative style of the Blackboard specialist. Her willingness to support me and teach to use Blackboard resulted in many discussions related to online courses. Prior to this I was at least skeptical about technology and education.

Often, administrators, politicians, and the business sector drive innovation without involving educators. For me the whole computer and technology thing was about money not education.

I raised the issue with my graduate students, who responded enthusiastically that technology could and should be used to benefit educators and education. From that discussion, I questioned the connection between my resistance to online instruction and my lack of related knowledge and skills. Although finding support for this resistance with key colleagues, I decided to move forward and cautiously explore how technology might be used optimally in education. Inspired by the Blackboard specialist, I subsequently developed two hybrid courses; the first GRED 516 is the object of this study, which I have been teaching traditionally since 2001. After much discussion with my department, it was agreed that I would provide a report and present a paper on the experience.

Experience

While having no prior experience with online learning, My readiness to explore the role of online teaching has been influenced by his experience with correspondence courses. As a young teacher then, going through much personal struggle, correspondence courses gave me hope, personal discipline, and a sense of achievement.

Through a former mentor and correspondence courses—from England even—I nurtured my aspiration to complete a college degree. This fed my hunger to grow. Many nights instead of going out and partying I would be at home writing papers. I couldn't afford the money or time to go to university because of other responsibilities.

Upon completion of my M.Ed, I set about developing a distance education program in Trinidad and Tobago. This was a successful and pioneering collaborative effort with the local association for special education and the teachers association,

Best strategies

For me, the use of film critiquing and related online discussions brought the highest level of instructor-student engagement and benefits. Students were required to read the appropriate chapter, complete a quiz to no less than 94% mastery, view a selected film and post responses to a given question during a specific time frame. They were encouraged to include their personal experiences. I opted to monitor the discussion and had students choose which sessions they wished to moderate. This was linked to my wanting students to show mastery of content in the process, and to link those to their personal experiences for transformative action. I was always prepared to intervene if I found the discussions getting off track.

Changes

While conscious of the amount of time expended and the paucity of incentives, I am willing to do more online courses; primarily for convenience and that of my students . . . here where we have long winters. I propose to find innovative ways to use media and film as a key strategy. These could include online film libraries, using Netflix or developing our own pool of student-developed media on related topics.

I also need more technology, related training, and access to you-tube, film, podcasts and the like. In particular, ways to utilize these media without having to be online.

Online learning for diversity

Being of an ethnic and racial minority and teaching courses in special and multicultural education, I am mindful of the importance of effectively teaching diverse learners. An important element in effective teaching in my opinion is dispositional, which I address mostly through personal interaction with students and colleagues. As such I am still searching for balance between the benefits of face-to-face interaction and online pedagogy.

I taught this online course as a hybrid where students are required to attend at least two-face-to-face meetings; primarily for building a sense of community beyond cyberspace . . . but I can see the need to build my expertise in developing online communities.

I have had students from Virginia and Trinidad seeking to enroll in my course. I know that face to face meetings will be impossible for them, so I seek to enhance my knowledge and skills on developing healthy online communities.

Students' Perspectives: The Urban Campus

Eleven of fifteen respondents shared that the course was a requirement for their program. Ten of these respondents emphasized that they also chose the course because it allowed for flexibility and convenience. The anticipated benefits from doing online learning included more time with children or partners, less conflict with work schedules, and more personal time.

Time . . . to pay bills and think about how I am doing overall. Time to have a life!" I study better on mornings and late night anyway. (Student 1)

Only three respondents claimed to having had experience with at least one previous online course. Five respondents shared negative expectations about online learning but felt that as mature students they were responsible enough to be successful.

Ten respondents claimed that the online discussions and Power-Point presentation of chapter material were most helpful. Comments included "definitely online discussions. I really loved the topics and for me in class I don't always speak up but online I spoke up, it felt good". Another respondent noted, "I think it really got us engaged in what we were learning and made us think about the subject more closely." Respondents cited that the discussions in small groups allowed for comfortable discourse among participants. Asking each respondent to take the lead each week in the discussion also gave everyone a chance to express how they interpreted the chapter." One student disagreed describing the online discussions as only "average" in terms of teaching effectiveness. She recommended more interaction, a higher quality of responses, and more face-to-face discussion. Five respondents emphasized the qualities of the professor as being significant to their learning.

I came away believing that I can do this. This increased my enthusiasm, the time I invested in my studies and in the end my sense of mastery. (Student 3)

Three others emphasized the convenience of online practice quizzes and the opportunity to link course content to fieldwork experiences.

Suggestions to improve the specific course revolved around online discussion. Six students lamented on the level and quality of participation by some. For one of them the instructor should find ways to limit 'post padding'.

. . . stress even more the importance of quality postings, and limit participation in one discussion, [when another] has begun. A person should not be able to . . . go back and create a posting in the discussion [after] they missed the deadline. (Student 3)

Other recommendations included: the use of the quizzes to facilitate mastery of content, revising the PowerPoints, selecting texts that are not wordy, and continuing to create appropriate assigned readings that are "interesting and informative." Despite these concerns and recommendation, flexibility was celebrated. "I appreciated the flexibility this course provided, and I gained a lot from my reading as well as my fieldwork." (Student 2)

Fourteen of the fifteen respondents supported the position that online learning can be effective in teacher preparation programs, although with caveats. These included course

designs that do not appear to be “busy work” quality of online discussions, and developing assignments that provoke discussion and collaboration.

One respondent emphasized the need for teaching students about using technology before they start online learning. Another student while acknowledging the convenience of online learning during Winterim and Summer sessions in particular was cautious.

I think that face to face classes can be more effective in preparing teachers . . . but undergraduates are still learning to be professional, disciplined and responsible—and as such depend on more direct instruction and guidance. (Student 4)

Thirteen participants felt that effective online courses demand ownership of learning, responsibility, discipline, time management, and engagement. One, in addressing the issue of face-to-face teaching, asserted: “People who might possibly be shy in class can feel confident in posting responses and contributing to discussions with their peers.” (Student 5)

Eight of the participants linked their understanding of effective online experiences with their level of engagement. For these respondents, caution gave way to increased interest and participation, excitement, frequency of site visits and postings as the course progressed. They attributed this to the responsiveness and amiability of the instructor, and the chat-room style of individual students on the discussion board.

Her questions for online discussions were well tied to our field experience or related assignments. Seems as if she was always there when we posed a question. (Student 5)

Students’ Perspectives: The Rural Campus

Nine of eleven respondents cited the course as an elective. The other two indicated that they completed the course since it was recommended by their academic advisors. Overall seven respondents shared that the flexibility and convenience of online study were major factors in their choice.

I am the main breadwinner and so the more time I can avoid being on that road—especially for the winter/spring the better for me. Completing studies meant I had to buy an expensive computer, get cable, and become familiar with TaskStream and Blackboard. I might as well benefit from that by not having to go to class FIVE days a week. (Student 7)

For another, saving on gas was the critical thing as she lived some 50 minutes away. Other factors that were shared included being at home at “least one more day. I am there for when my kids arrive home from school”. Other reasons given for choosing the online course included learning about others. “Diversity is an intriguing subject to me. I feel that learning about different cultures help to build a sense of identity as well as awareness of the world we live in.” (Student 3)

Three students linked the course to issues of “social justice” and “appropriate teaching” in terms of helping them (as future teachers) to be more culturally competent.

Responses revealed that although students were confident in their ability to complete the online course, they anticipated challenges. This reflected their notion that online learning was primarily:

. . . you, the textbook, and prof"; "independent and passive"; "online learning equals distance learning equals to distant professor" [LOL]; and "convenient but long and late nights of reading and more reading followed by tests and a paper." (Student 2)

Other anticipated challenges included: "little to no interaction between professor and students" (4); "difficulties understanding the assignments and the lack of immediate clarification or feedback" (2) and "assignments that are "boring . . . paper and test type." (Student 7)

In terms of strategies that students considered most effective, participants identified the range and appropriateness of assignments and the sense of being a community along with increasing confidence. Participants seemed particularly pleased with the assignments.

I was a bit concerned at first having a number of assignments to complete even before we met for our first face to face meeting . . . to introduce ourselves and upload picture, to view "Multicultural History of the US" and respond on the discussion board and 'Crash', to read the first chapter' and respond to those explorative questions. Wow!! However through the icebreakers and discussions at our first face to face session we became a community. [Laughing]. (Student 3)

Assignments were perceived as relating directly to the "course objectives and the curriculum."

It incorporated a variety of learning opportunities; watching films, listening to other points of view from classmates, reading the text, and reflecting upon our own cultural backgrounds. I also appreciated the face-to-face sessions so that we were not just strangers interacting online. (Student 10)

Six students underscored the use of film, used to facilitate reflection and links to course themes.

The films were very well chosen and the issues associated with them were well connected to the text. I also liked how Dr . . . kinda stayed in the background and left the discussion mostly among us. Matter of fact once or twice when he shared a comment . . . it kinda ended the discussion. (Student 2)

And to another:

I probably would not have watched those films. They opened my eyes to diverse issues and . . . made you really think. (Student 7)

Online discussions also proved to be a popular factor in students' perceptions of what helped the course to be effective according to eight participants. Eight cited the discussion board and how the online discussion was moderated. One especially liked the discussion moderation being assigned to students: "I think that the responses given in the discussion

board between students was of a higher quality than would have been given in class or if moderated by a professor." (Student 8)

The role of the autobiographical assignment was also highly valued; "as was creating a PowerPoint presentation of my own cultural identity was the most influential and effective strategy." (Student 1)

Eight participants focused on strategies to improve the quality of the online discussions as key to improving the effectiveness of the course. Three students stressed that the films and film discussions should be more closely connected to the text.

I enjoyed and was able to learn a lot linking the film to the text and to my personal experience. I would have gained more if the emphasis was on the text rather than my experience. (Student 8)

Five participants targeted the quality of the online discussion itself. The guidelines for the online discussions "should be clearer in emphasizing the quality of participation rather than quantity" one suggested. For another, she needed more rigorous guidelines to ensure quality contributions.

I liked how you allowed students to moderate the discussion. I felt freer to share my opinions and a couple times I had to remind myself that you are out there monitoring as you said. (Student 5)

Actually when you did add a comment . . .it seemed more like summaries . . . a compliment with a hint that it was time to move on. From the discussion at the culminating experience, I gathered that you meant these to be prompts. (Student 2)

This position was avidly supported.

I had concerns regarding the rubric used to evaluate our responses. While some discussants were academically AND emotionally engaged, others just rephrased our statements or went off on tangents. (Student 7)

The majority of responses to question five on preparing teachers of diverse learners targeted the need for students to be prepared for online courses and cited the need for the college to afford "part online experiences" in sophomore or even freshman years. Two other students spoke about students having "time management" skills and "a sense of maturity" as key to their success. Other suggestions included: (1) that specific units or modules should be only made accessible on completion of prior required work; (2) face-to-face meetings should be made mandatory for all online courses that address diversity issues; (3) make available "at least one course online from each program area" (Student 7); and (4) "allowing more optional assignments." (Student 3)

Discussion

Reflecting on the overall experience of online teaching, we [Joan and i] found it an important and rewarding experience. Joan describes it as "stimulating . . . somewhat convenient but exhausting". We also found agreement that time management was the

unexpected challenge. Joan acknowledges that the process of course delivery was much more demanding than she had expected.

Once the course started it was an on-going set of adjustments to students' needs and frustrations. I had anticipated that it would be initially a lot of work to set up an online course but I was surprised at how much time and energy was spent in actual delivery.

I did not feel as overwhelmed with course delivery; thanks to my support specialist and the fact that I was completing the course as a hybrid (Reynard, 2007).

We also celebrated the success of the discussion board and the sense of community they experienced. However, this was not enough to stop us from missing the personal interaction with students that we enjoyed in our traditional classes. Joan asserted that her role as moderator was critical, particularly as it was an undergraduate class (Salmon, 2000). This contrasted with my approach, which involved monitoring rather than moderating, with students serving as discussion moderators (Jefferies & Seden, 2006).

From the students' perspective—they were prepared to face the anticipated challenges in exchange for flexibility. This afforded more time with family, avoiding traffic, limiting expenses for gas, and facilitating more personal time (Braun, 2008; Beard, 2004; Payne & Johnson). This flexibility existed despite the limited number of students [only seven of 26] having had prior online learning experience and the negative expectations of some respondents. Experiences and perspectives were influenced by: (1) a readiness for independent learning; (2) perceptions of the meaningfulness of the course; (3) previous online experiences (Beard, 2004); (4) perception of and confidence with technology (Piotrowski & Vodanovich, 2000); (5) the availability of technological support services (Duncan, 2005); and (6) the accessibility of the instructor.

Regarding elements of the course students found most effective, all claimed that they accomplished content mastery with little distress, having more time and less pressure to review course materials. They also asserted that their attitudes and sense of confidence were enhanced with the opportunities afforded to use technology and to reflect on issues (Duncan, 2005). Online discussions, the appropriateness of assignments, flexibility and opportunities to enhance time management skills, and reflective opportunities were most highly considered as contributing to their sense of course satisfaction and effectiveness. This supports the position of Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2003) that it is neither the technology nor the media per se but how it is used or perceived to be useful that determines its effectiveness or appropriateness. Reflective opportunities included responses and discussions to guiding questions linked to the chapters in essential texts, or to the autobiographies; and captured media (Andrews, 1997) as video-clips and, in the case of the New York campus, music and excerpts from feature films.

Students valued the PowerPoints pertaining to essential readings, which served as review opportunities. Slightly less helpful at the urban campus was the role of quizzes. For rural students the cumulative quizzes--which could be completed using multiple attempts within a specific time, to no less than 94% mastery—were well received (Kassop, 2003).

Conclusions and Recommendations

We agree that our motivation as novice online instructors was related to: (1) meeting the needs of students from a distance; (2) having greater flexibility in working hours; and (3) enhancing course quality (McKenzie, Mims, Bennett & Waugh, 2000). We share concerns about becoming technophobic and attested to using online teaching as a means of professional development and confidence building. Convenience and flexibility also played critical roles in their decisions to teach these online courses.

Neither of us found the online experiences “burdensome” (Choi & Park, 2006). As Joan, I attribute my “frustratingly positive experiences” to the wavering levels of engagement by and with students. Coming from working class families, we see education as often elusive to students because of time and convenience. As such as well we share a common sense of mission about making learning accessible to all learners. Without a personal sense of mission, faculty might be at risk of feeling that they are merely pawns in the administration’s agenda to address the needs of students as consumers and not faculty as facilitators (Cox, 2006). We agree however that it is important to provide thorough professional development and technological support for novice online instructors (Choi & Park).

Joan’s main concern is that online teaching will demand even more time to attend professional development courses and to familiarize herself with software and new initiatives. For me, the challenge is convincing colleagues that it is not the technology but how we use it, along with our own dispositions that ultimately determine the effectiveness of these initiatives. At least one of my colleagues is being decidedly cautious about online learning, particularly as this applies to courses like multicultural education and special education. Reasons cited included cheating on tests and a concern about how you would model or measure appropriate professional dispositions. I am also wary of being manipulated by college administrators who want online learning for primarily economic reasons; not driven by quality or equity in pedagogy but anti-faculty interests.

We are both very sobered about the challenges of effective online learning now more than ever. Nevertheless we look forward to teaching these courses again and others. As novice online instructors, we accept the need for course revision. These will address: (1) easier course navigation; (2) better linking of course objectives to materials, pedagogy, and assignments; (3) to limit conflicts in assignment deadlines; (3) allow students more the options as per assignments; and (4) addressing the quality of online asynchronous discussions. The latter was the most common area of concern across both campuses and included issues related to how questions were phrased, to elicit linking content mastery to experiences, as well as to the quality of responses given. These recommendations are supported by Vonderwell, Liang, and Alderman (2007) and stress the importance of maximizing student engagement and enhancing assessment of online discussions.

Recommendations for the general improvement of online courses centered on finding ways to: enhance the readiness of students—inclusive of technological and personal factors; improve the quality and quantity of engagement by students; determine the need for more face to face sessions for courses related to diversity; and enhance evaluation strategies; and user friendliness of the course sites.

The co-researchers acknowledge the differences in their sense of confidence, comfort with risk taking, the academic levels of the participants (undergraduate/graduate) and in the

pilot courses (special and multicultural education). Differences were manifested in the range of strategies used and the types of assignments given. These relate to the co-researchers experience, their perceptions of their technological competence, availability of technological support, and the time commitment required (Duncan, 2005).

Future research might include mixed methodology and a larger sample size. The co-researchers are particularly interested in (1) comparing hybrid and fully online instruction; (2) exploring student engagement and community building via asynchronous online discussion, and; (3) exploring the relationship between novice online faculty experiences, their philosophies of teaching, the quality of support services, and student satisfaction across campuses. This study across two campuses with faculty new to online teaching allowed for collaboration that remains grounded in effective student centered teaching, and reflective practice that extends to the core of teacher education, be this traditional or online.

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