Living and Learning with Technology:
Faculty as Reflective Practitioners in the Online Classroom

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined the experiences of 11 faculty members who have been involved in online instruction. The goal was to explore how assuming the role of adult learners in developing online courses contributed to their becoming critically reflective about their instructional practices. Faculty interviews revealed engagement in critical reflection and were used to suggest strategies for faculty development that could further support such perspectives and practice.

Purpose and Theoretical Framework

Brookfield (1995) has proposed that the professional development of faculty members is enhanced by their becoming reflective practitioners, and Lawler and King (2000) have argued that faculty development initiatives will be most successful when they address faculty as adult learners, providing them with opportunities to reflect on their practice. Online teaching presents a unique opportunity to observe how faculty become critically reflective adult learners as they take on the new challenges inherent with designing and delivering their academic content online. For those concerned with professional development, there are lessons to be learned from adopters of online teaching for enhancing faculty development. Online teaching presents new challenges for faculty, who as adult learners respond to new problems, reinterpret teaching goals, and learn new teaching strategies. Faculty, who successfully adopt online teaching and learning navigate this experience, particularly if they are the first to do so in their academic community, must become what Schon (1987) calls "critically reflective practitioners."

This study examined the experiences of such faculty who have been involved in online instruction to explore how assuming the role of learners in developing online courses contributed to their becoming critically reflective about their instructional practices. A number of studies have examined and documented specific challenges that faculty involved in online instruction face (e.g., Berg, 2002; Fox, 2001; Maid, 2003; Schrum, 2000; Walhaus, 2000) and the literature on the mechanics and strategies to lead online classes is growing rapidly (e.g., Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Hill, Raven, & Han, 2002; Jeris & Poppie, 2002). One particularly relevant case study (King, 2003/2001) approaches reflective practice in faculty development as it explores how a faculty member created an iterative process of developing strategies for effective online teaching and suggested areas of further research. However, the research to date has not focused on faculty adopters of online instruction as adult learners whose struggles with online instruction could provide a vehicle for encouraging them to become more critically reflective about their role as teachers. In practice, one faculty development initiative has developed pilot collaboratives of faculty learning to use technology within institutions of higher education (AAHE's TLT Group). However, the current research focuses more specifically on the role of reflective practice in the experiences of early adopter faculty and provides an opportunity to expand the theoretical and conceptual base of faculty development informed by this perspective.

Research Questions: The research questions explored in this study includes: 1) How did the faculty respondents learn what they needed to learn in order to offer their online (or web-enhanced) course?; 2) How did faculty respondents adapt their instruction as the

online course progressed, and what led them to make modifications?; 3) How did faculty members' perceptions of their role as instructor change as a result of online teaching, and to what extent did online teaching experiences lead them to change their teaching in a traditional face-to-face context?

Research Design and Analysis: This qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with 11 faculty members experienced in online instruction. The interviews were semi-structured, in that the two interviewers used a list of predetermined questions but were free to use follow-up questions to explore issues raised by the respondents (Creswell, 2003). Ten of the 11 interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The respondent in the remaining interview would not agree to being taped but did consent to the interviewer's taking notes as he responded. Categories were developed based on constant comparison of responses, and the process of open coding was used to identify themes among them (Creswell, 2003). The reliability of the analysis was assessed through the use of multiple coders to determine inter-rater reliability, and validity was examined using member checking (Creswell, 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002).

Data Collection: The 11 faculty members were identified by university administrators as early adopters of online or web-enhanced instruction, 10 had been involved in online or web-enhanced instruction for more than three years. The online teaching of four of the respondents was at the undergraduate level only but with adult students, one participant had taught both undergraduate and graduate students online, and the other participants had taught only graduate students online. Nine interviews were conducted in person, and two were conducted by telephone. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed, and the transcribed responses and the notes from the other interview were coded. The experiences of these early adopters of online instruction were analyzed for possible implications for creating faculty development programs. Progressively it became evident that the findings may be used to determine how to effectively encourage faculty to become critically reflective problem solvers as they become involved in online instruction.

Findings: While the interviewees were very explicit and specific regarding the delivery of their online courses, significant themes emerged from their perceptions of their own learning and practice. Going beyond their application of the technology and content delivery, these faculty demonstrated several characteristics of reflective practice as they went from early adopters to more experienced users of online instruction. The findings illustrate that the faculty respondents had several strategies for learning what they needed to know to deliver a course online. These strategies grew out of their past teaching experiences, their motivation to try something new, and their interest in expanding their own teaching capabilities for the enhancement of their students' learning. As their experience with online learning increased, faculty began to think differently about how content is delivered and the implications for student learning. These faculty began to create strategies for modifying and enhancing their procedures, processes, and thinking. Based on their reflections of what went wrong, not what went right, what was missing from their own professional needs as a teacher, and their observations about their students' engagement in the learning. Faculty's perceptions of their role as instructors did change over time creating new challenges for them as they contemplated the best approach for themselves and their students. However, faculty differed in the degree to which their experiences with online teachings prompted them to reflect on their role as instructor. The following two quotations are from highly reflective respondents:

Reflective Respondent #1: What I decided to do was turn this into an electronic seminar, and this was very threatening to the students. It was more threatening perhaps than anything else that we did and still remains threatening. I pointed out to them that if they were attending Oxford or Cambridge at least fifteen years ago, they would not be coming to class every week and listening to a professor lecture, but rather they would be meeting individually or in small groups. They would have been given readings. They would have been given writing assignments. They would have written seminar papers. They would be expected to meet on a regular basis and present the entire paper and then submit to the criticism of either the professor or their colleagues and that this was time honored approach to teaching and learning that in my mind would make everyone a better problem solver.

Reflective Respondent #2: It's just that if you decide that this [online} is the way it's going to be delivered or one of the ways it's going to be delivered, there's going to be some compromise. And I think that even from faculty sometimes, I'll go on the computer and the computer won't be working, it's like, oh my gosh, what am I going to do? Well, I'd hope you have a variety of different things you could do. And don't get so lost in, gosh, I had these great pictures on my Power Point slides than this had happened to me, what am I going to do? Well, I guess I'm going to have to find an alternative way of doing that. It's certainly taught me to have other methods of doing it or even having backup methods. You know having pictures in an overhead or something like that. But if, you know, power went out I guess you'd be done. But I think having those skills as a teacher, as an educator, should go right across online stuff.

Other respondents were much less reflective.

Unreflective Respondent #1: I thought I was going to be one of those people who was going to step in and that I would be doing one [online course] every summer for the rest of my career. But, it's not working out that way. Just the structure that you have for the traditional [course] can be useful for carrying it over the online courses. It's not that different. But my suspicions are that courses that are less dependent on lecture might be more successful than the traditional lecture courses.

Unreflective Respondent #2: [Traditional and online instruction] are the same because everything that you mentioned is done in both. They're different in that you have to structure everything for the online environment. . . . So you have to reinterpret what you're doing, when you're doing it online so that all those kind of cues come through. . . . The technology is a big difference because everything you do is online and you have to know how to send email, you have to know how to attach assignments, you have to work with whatever course management system you're using.

While several of the faculty expressed surprise at the outcomes of their online teaching, they also acknowledged grief over many of the changes necessitated by this different learning environment.

Grief respondent #1: I fear, and I choose that word deliberately, that, that impact [of face-to-face relationships] is going to become less and less as the generation that has been brought up on video games and using computers, begins to become the

majority of our students, I think, and [that] is a loss and I would like to prevent it.
That kind of human interaction will become less valued.

Grief respondent #2: I thought I was going to be one of those people that was going to step
in and that I would be doing one [online course] every summer for the rest of my
career. But it's not working out that way...That adrenaline rush or that feeling of
satisfaction is a good chunk of why I do the traditional stuff and what I get out of it.
And that experience is not as frequent with the online...

Implications: Observations from the faculty's experience with online teaching resonate with critical reflective practice. The lived experiences of faculty who ventured into online instruction with little formal institutional support or development provide a clear picture of processes faculty encounter as they learn, design, deliver and negotiate for successful academic outcomes. Faculty involved with online teaching may be reflecting critically on their practice and use this reflection to either enhance their online teaching or making decisions to abandon it. Using these findings along with the literature of faculty development which states that professional development needs to be more than individual workshops and skill based training (Cranton & King, 2003: King & Lawler, 2003). It is clear that new faculty development initiatives need to include strategies to facilitate critical reflection in a contextual environment.

Some strategies for introducing and supporting this critical reflection include faculty orientation to online teaching and learning through modeling, support, and troubleshooting. Examples of such strategies can include: (1) Group and individual analysis of scenarios that present examples of content and online design for evaluation; (2) Small group mock-up design of an online class; (3) Small group discussion of online class scenarios that illustrate difficulties and develop possible solutions; (4) Examples and encouragement of instructors to keep personally reflective teaching journals; (5) Online support groups through confidential email distribution lists or password protected web-based threaded discussions; (6) Optional but available personal consultation sessions where faculty can meet with an online learning specialist to look at class design and interaction to ask questions, to identify and solve problems, or evaluate course design and dynamics.

Strategies such as these offer ways to use this research about the experience of early adopters of online teaching and how they learned to design and lead online courses. By cultivating critically reflective practice, instructors have the potential for gaining a lifelong learning perspective that will support ongoing, self-directed professional development. Faculty development initiatives that support such professional growth can bring new power and direction to teaching and learning in higher education.

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