

Chapter 81

Online Instructors as Distance Education Experts

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ABSTRACT

An expert is a person with content knowledge and professional skills in a field. Are online teachers distance education experts? What are the main behavioral, cognitive, and emotional characteristics of distance education instructors? What competencies should online instructors possess in order to be distance education experts? In this chapter, the researcher examines National Educational Technology Standards for teachers, National Standards for Quality Online Teaching, and empirical research on teachers' roles and competencies to seek a definition for online instructors as distance education experts. Several issues related to online teachers' competencies and technology standards are discussed. Future research studies are recommended.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has prospered rapidly in the past decade. According to Harris (2013), the total number of college students for distance education in California has doubled from 328,372 in year 2005-2006 to 643,255 in year 2011-2012. The total online enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions with students taking at least one online course has progressed from 1,602,970 in 2002 to 7,126,549 in 2012 in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2014). New technology has surfaced as distance education blooms. Thach and Murphy (1995) generated a list of distance education technologies as follows: asynchronous computer conferencing, audio-conferencing, audiotapes, audio-graphics, cable television, computer disk/CD, correspondence materials, desktop videoconferencing, laser disc, one-way satellite/microwave, radio, satellite/microwave with keypad, synchronous computer conferencing, two-way satellite/microwave, videoconferencing, videotape, and voice-mail. Beldarrain (2006) reported that distance educators can use Imeem™, InstaColl™, and Writeboard™ to increase real-time collaboration between learners in asynchronous courses besides wikis, blogs, or podcasts to enhance interaction. Sloan, Shea, and Lewis (2010) have identified traditional online tools as emails, discussion forums, chat; newer Web

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0783-3.ch081

2.0 tools as Wikis, Wimba, Blogs, Twitter; and more advanced Web 2.0 tools as audio/video Podcasts, Screen Capture technology, Simulation, Virtual world for distance learning. The evolution of these emerging technologies and the prosperity of online courses have impacted online instructors' teaching methods and challenged their technology competencies in distance teaching.

Without certain technology competency, online instructors may face barriers during the instruction. In fact, numerous studies have identified barriers to online teaching (e.g., An & Reigeluth, 2012; Bates, 2011; Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012; Rashid & Rashid, 2011; Su, 2009). In *2011 Outlook for Online Learning and Distance Education*, Bates (2011) reported seven systemic barriers to online teaching: faculty resistance to online learning, teachers' lack of training, lack of institutional ambition for the use of technology for teaching, lack of adequate costing methods, lack of system-wide provision for distance education programs, poor quality offerings, and lack of data about quality assurance processes or learning outcome. Lloyd, Byrne, and McCoy (2012) also discovered four major barriers that would negatively impact faculty engagement in online education:

1. **Interpersonal Barriers** (i.e., teachers' lack of personal relationship with students, impersonal atmosphere created, impact of interpersonal barriers on course quality, lack of visual cues from students, and lack of social interaction within the class),
2. **Institutional Policy Barriers** (i.e., the lack of policies or standards for online courses, lack of control over property rights, lack of faculty involvement in course decision making, and the value of online work toward promotion and tenure),
3. **Training And Technology Barriers** (i.e., inadequate instructor training, inadequate technology support, frequent technology failures, and rapidly changing software or delivery systems), and
4. **Cost/Benefit Analysis Barriers** (i.e., increased workload, increased time commitment, inadequate time for student/assignment grading and feedback, and inadequate compensation for instruction).

These barriers seem to trigger a question. What prerequisite knowledge and skills should online instructors possess in order to cope with challenges and to overcome barriers in distance education? The purpose of this chapter was to derive a definition for online instructors as distance education experts by examining educational technology standards as well as research studies on teachers' roles and competencies for online teaching.

BACKGROUND

Technology plays an important role in distance education. Technology standards are used to regulate the competencies for teachers, students, and administrators in online environment. Technology standards establish what teachers should know and be able to do with technology. Technology standards can be used as a framework to plan technology-based activities and lessons for students. Technology standards can also be used as a tool to develop assessment to evaluate both teachers' and students' technology competencies. What exactly do online instructors need to know to meet diverse, mobile and technology-savvy generation? In the following, the national educational technology standards as well as the national standards for quality online teaching were investigated followed by the studies of the roles and competencies for online instructors.

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