

Chapter 12

Ready-to-Teach Online Courses: Understanding Faculty Roles and Attitudes

Pamela K. Quinn

Dallas County Community College District, USA

Diane Mason

Lamar University, USA

Kaye Shelton

Lamar University, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the roles and attitudes of experienced full-time and part-time community college faculty members teaching online courses, pre-produced by a subject matter expert, an advisory committee, and a development team. Interviews conducted with five full-time and five part-time professors were analyzed for textual and structural descriptions to understand the essence of faculty attitudes and roles toward using a ready-to-teach master course with online students. Data revealed that faculty members associated personal teaching experience with the quality of the course and that instructors were not resistant to teaching with master courses, provided the courses afforded flexibility for modifications. In addition, faculty research participants were highly satisfied in present roles because the ready-to-teach courses worked well for instructors and students while meeting the faculty members' personal and professional needs.

INTRODUCTION

Faculty roles change when teaching online courses, including when the courses were team-developed (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008; King, 1993). As online learning evolves into using more common content or master courses, the role of faculty teaching those courses moves into less content development to more course facilitation. Courses such as these have been developed by a subject matter expert, an advisory committee, and a production team (National Center for Academic Transformation, 2014).

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In addition, faculty duties have been unbundled from the traditional work of classroom instructors and from online courses developed solely by an individual faculty member (Twigg, 2003a, 2003b). In the unbundling of the faculty role, professors have not performed all the duties traditionally found in the regular classroom setting (Twigg, 2003b). In most of the online courses being offered today, faculty have still prepared the content and have handled the various roles of the classroom (Mendenhall, 2011). However, as online education continues to organize and respond to the scalability opportunities of the Internet delivery mode, more and more online content will be developed by outside providers including other educational development teams or publishers (Bonk, 2009; Kahn, 2014). Because of the range of expertise and experiences that can be brought to a group of developers, courses that are team-developed have enhanced the content and a variety of additional course materials (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). In this type of scalable delivery mode, faculty were no longer individually responsible for the creation of content (Graves & Twigg, 2006). This has transformed the faculty member into more of a course facilitator responsible for communicating with students, building learning communities, and supporting student learning (Christensen et al., 2008).

In order for administrators to facilitate change and support faculty, it has become important to understand faculty attitudes toward this change (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Bonk & Zhang, 2008). Learning what faculty members like or do not like about this new teaching role has helped administrators move programs forward as faculty and administrators create the new possibilities for the years to come (Fullan, 2007; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). Christensen, Horn, Caldera, and Soares (2011) offered advice to administrators when they pointed out that change of this type will not be exempted from the natural rules of organizational change. Deep disagreements about how to accomplish change have been anticipated. Christensen et al. (2011) suggested administrators need to use the right tools and approaches to introduce change and acknowledged that “negotiation toward radical change simply will not work” (Christensen et al., 2008, p. 226.) Therefore, working with faculty, involving them in the conversation, and understanding their concerns are steps needed for change (Shelton, 2010; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005; Song, Wang & Liu, 2011).

Although it is admittedly difficult for organizations to innovate (Fullan, 2007), those working in educational institutions need to try to find ways to embrace transformation throughout the disruptive process of change (Christensen et al, 2008). In a symposium on globalization of higher education in Irving, TX, former Secretary of State H. Clinton (personal communication, March 13, 2014) said, “Those who invest in the future and move forward will leave those who think they can save the past behind.” If administrators work to understand and support the evolving role of faculty in the digital world of team-developed courses and content, they are more likely to be better able to support online innovation since “faculty satisfaction is important for the long-term viability of a program” (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005, p. 80). Administrators need to work closely with faculty to provide the right environment, the appropriate support, and the necessary training (Conceicao, 2006; Reushle & Mitchell, 2009; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005).

BACKGROUND

Online learning has moved education to new levels in the teaching process (Christensen et al., 2011). Not only have faculty roles been changing in online learning (Wright, 2005), but the curriculum development and instructional process have also been evolving (Levin, Kater, & Wagoner, 2006; Meer, Fravel,

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