

# The Impact of Industry Expert Adjuncts on Students' Course Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

As a reality of modern higher education, the use of adjunct instructors to teach courses is a common practice, often viewed through institutional constraints. This paper uses a different lens to examine the experiences of students in courses taught by adjunct instructors who are primarily employed in industry. It explores the affordances these instructors bring into the classroom including timely knowledge and skills from outside the academic institution. This work is a methodological pilot in a longer design-based project studying industry expert adjuncts as college teachers by analyzing their impact through students' perceptions of their experiences.

## KEYWORDS

Adjunct Instructors, Industry Experts, Learning Environments

## INTRODUCTION

The issues related to the use of adjunct instructors in higher education, as evinced in discussions of the financial, logistical, or organizational impacts, are often defined by the necessity of their use and the constraints of their positions as itinerant labor (Casto, 2017; Evans, 2018; Pankin & Weiss, 2011; Swartzlander, Garcia, Sweeney, Dayton, Hunter, Stoll, Meija, Bob, Hahn & Hoffman, 2006). Discussions of the effects on student success of having adjunct instructors have thus far provided conflicting messages. Existing studies on the impact of adjuncts on student success have produced findings ranging from positive to negative results, and even finding no significant differences across instructors (Figlio, 2013; Flaherty, 2013a, 2013b; Harris, 2017; Keller, 2015; Ran & Xu, 2017, Smith 2010). These findings provide an unclear portrait for those at the institution tasked to support, collaborate with, and manage adjunct instructors.

Although important, the administrative decisions regarding the use of adjunct instructors are not the focus of this study. This work begins with the existence of the phenomenon as the baseline. The institutional context for this research is one where adjunct instructors are already in use, with no plans to limit or end the practice. Given that reality, this work contributes to better understanding how to improve adjuncts' effectiveness in the classroom by exploring their impact when teaching courses related to their professional work. This paper shares student perspectives on their experiences in these types of courses with industry professionals as adjunct instructors.

This study is the first in an ongoing, design-based research and curriculum development project focused on how to support the needs of *industry expert adjuncts*. Industry expert adjuncts are adjunct instructors with full time employment in a non-academic position who enter academia with the intent to instruct and mentor students within their particular industries. Understanding students' beliefs about how and what they learned during their course taught by an industry expert adjunct provides

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useful feedback for revising aspects of instructional design like classroom culture and experiential learning, as well as out-of-class issues such as outreach and marketing to prospective students. How students feel about the technical skills that they gained is an essential piece of the overall portrait of their experience; however, those skills should be something students gain with any instructor, hence the focus on those aspects specific to courses with industry expert adjuncts. Where the difference lies, is in the application of knowledge by different instructors. Through this process, students learn when and where the instructor applies their professional expertise in the context of typical industry workflows. This gives students the opportunity to refine their knowledge toward authentic situations they may encounter in their future work.

Admittedly, industry-related skills can be developed and maintained by full-time faculty members at the institution who teach similar courses to the industry expert adjuncts. However, full-time faculty instructors do not benefit from the timely and situated nature that those working full-time in the industry experience. Industry expert adjuncts are constantly reinforcing and updating their knowledge in the professional context. While full-time faculty members who are employed by the institution and work as instructors may have recent industry experience, the focus of their work at the institution has shifted and potentially lessens the quality of the knowledge that they bring to the course with respect to current industry expectations. This example of how knowledge can become less useful over time occurs when the underlying understanding is no longer timely in its appropriateness and applicability. The belief here is that the industry expert adjunct can provide a timely perspective on professional work environments, which students replied was a valued aspect of their participation in these courses. The research team sees value in students having classroom experiences with both types of instructors, full-time academics and industry expert adjuncts, as they bring complementary skill sets and expand the growth and preparation of students as they work toward their degrees.

This paper uses a qualitative approach to develop methods for understanding the experiences of students in courses taught by part-time adjunct instructors by analyzing data collected through students' feedback on surveys and in semi-structured video interviews. The primary question for this study is: *what are undergraduate students' experiences in courses taught by industry expert adjuncts?* The intent of this paper is to better understand how students feel about their interactions with these instructors and courses. This formative study contributes to understanding how to address the needs of industry professionals and their students with the intention of creating more effective classroom practices. An underlying belief here is that leveraging the benefits of using industry expert adjuncts can be better accomplished through understanding their impact both inside and outside of the classroom. This work explores the impact of taking a course with these adjuncts on students' beliefs about their experiences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*If institutions offering traditional undergraduate coursework will use adjunct faculty, there must be a concomitant effort to supervise their work. Adjuncts need to know what the curricular, performance, and mentoring standards are. Students should expect adjuncts to deliver content that is overseen by full-time faculty, teach the material in an interesting and professional manner, and be available for discussion outside of class. To accomplish these goals, the university must direct resources in support of adjunct faculty.*

*Stenerson, Blanchard, Fassiotto, Hernandez & Muth, 2010*

Understanding that institutions may provide little academic support and professional development for adjunct instructors, one can put into that context the relatively small percentage of adjuncts from industry. Industry expert adjuncts can bring knowledge from their concurrent jobs into the classroom and are especially effective in courses tied to specific professions (Bettinger & Long, 2010), but there

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