

Chapter 73

More than Changing Classrooms: Professors' Transitions to Synchronous E-Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The transition from the lecture hall to the online teaching environment requires more than a change of venue – it requires role changes as well as a shift in focus from delivering content toward designing a learning environment where students can build skills for learning and collaboration. The research described in this chapter employs a case-study method to capture the perceptions of a small cohort of university professors participating in a synchronous e-training program to prepare them for synchronous e-teaching. Participating professors possessed a range of diverse prior experiences with teaching and e-teaching, creating unique training challenges. Data include the video-recorded training sessions as well as focus group and individual interviews held one year post-training. The findings indicate that, although the intended training focus was not the primary outcome realized, this study provides some insights into planning and delivering e-training for similar transitions to synchronous online teaching for tertiary instructors.

INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of the Internet, an increasing range of teaching and learning innovations became available, offering the potential for education at every level, including tertiary education, to benefit

from what these innovations had to offer. McGreal and Elliott (2008) categorize these innovations according to their educational implications. Multimedia innovations, which include: combined text, graphics, and audio (e.g., YouTube); Voice Over Internet Protocols (VOIP's) such as Skype; and live video streaming, are seen to hold some potential to “eliminate the page-turning boredom

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of many online courses” when they are “implemented wisely” (McGreal & Elliott, 2008, p. 148). The synchronous multimedia experience was a significant component of the teaching transition for the professors in this study.

Anderson (2008) reminds that the use of the Internet for online teaching has prompted significant changes in teaching and learning approaches both because of the amount of content that is now available but also because new technologies provide new opportunities for interactions between and among the students, the content, and the instructors. In a theoretical model of the interactions afforded by the online environment, he posits that online learning can offer opportunities for increased student-to-student interaction, allowing for the creation of learning communities, the sharing of knowledge, and also the opportunities for students to learn independently. Within the online environment, the teacher can become overwhelmed with the amount of communication, but can learn to respond to students both synchronously and a-synchronously in ways that facilitate both collaboration and student independence (Anderson, 2008).

Making the transition to online teaching is prompted not only by the affordances that online teaching can offer, however but by the needs of the learners. Canadian tertiary students are requesting more online courses because of the flexibility that online learning offers – these courses are seen to more effectively accommodate adult lifestyles that include both work and study (McGreal & Anderson, 2007). It has been estimated that online learning will need to accommodate approximately 1.5 million students in the decade ahead (Pannikoeck, 2011). With the almost ubiquitous availability of information through the Internet, students are seeking ways both to personalize their learning and to make the technology affordances work for their personal benefit.

According to Hutchinson, Tin, and Cao (2008), the upcoming generation of students wants more immediacy and customization in learning, which

creates pressure on their professors both to remain technologically current and to utilize more student-centered forms of learning that include interactivity. Yet, one American study reports that less than half of tertiary students consulted thought that their instructors were effectively using technology (Smith, Salaway & Borreson Caruso, 2009, cited in MacDonald & Poniatowska, 2011). Earlier research reported by Fahy (2008) indicates that the teaching experience of the instructor does not factor as much as does the instructor’s technology expertise. Thus, how tertiary instructors make an effective transition to synchronous, online teaching is an important area for research.

CONTEXT

This research investigates the experiences of a small cohort of university professors who ventured into the territory of synchronous, online teaching that included a multiplicity of technology affordances with which they needed to become familiar in order to, in the words of McGreal and Elliott (2008) cited earlier, implement wisely. The professors volunteered to participate in a series of six synchronous e-training sessions intended to assist them with this transition to synchronous, online teaching. The professors were aware of and consented to the research that followed their progress through both the training and implementation phases.

The training was held in the target (synchronous, online) environment – a virtual learning space, which was the element of the teaching that was new for them. The professors were familiar with the Learning Management System (LMS), which was WebCT. The combination of the virtual meeting software program (Adobe Connect) for the classes and the LMS offered numerous affordances, both synchronous and a-synchronous. The virtual classroom space offered synchronicity through: a small-format video camera for all participants; a shared whiteboard space for

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