
Chapter XIV

Professional to Manufacturing Mode Due to Online University Education

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ABSTRACT

The usability of online education relates to the culture of the profession that is expected to create and deliver online education. This profession is threatened by the manufacturing mode that certain online education entails. Case studies at Washington State University, Pace University, and University of Maryland, Baltimore County, support the hypothesis that successful online degree programs introduce manufacturing characteristics into the academy. Furthermore, the case studies support the claim that university administrations rely on boundary manipulation to move the faculty into positions that the faculty would otherwise refuse to accept. An analogy to health care reinforces the conclusions about the impact of mechanization on the professions.

INTRODUCTION

Usability means “capable of being used.” Much has been published about particular technical or methodological features, such as synchronous versus asynchronous communication or student-student feedback versus student-teacher feedback. However, studies have shown that usability is more a function of the

environment in which an online program is introduced than it is of any particular technical features of the online program itself. This concern for the environment must include a concern for the organization in which the online program is housed. This paper addresses online educational programs as regards the university profession. Sociological and administrative issues are addressed as they relate to the adoption of online education and the impact on the culture of the academy.

Attention is increasingly being drawn to organization-wide issues as regards the success or failure of online education (Rada, 2001). The Sloan Foundation in the United States has moved from funding asynchronous learning experiments that demonstrate some new tool used in a few classrooms to requiring that funded projects demonstrate widespread organizational change. A special issue of *Interactive Learning Environments* focuses on organizational change. The guest editor Betty Collis emphasized that sociological factors are more important than technical factors in the adoption of online education (Collis & Ring, 1999).

Two of the prominent organizational forms in modern society are the professional and the manufacturing. Universities are one example of the professional form. Automobile factories are one example of the manufacturing organization.

The hypothesis is advanced that online education is facilitating the move of teaching at universities from the professional mode to the manufacturing mode. A derivative hypothesis is that the way that administrators effect change is through manipulation of the boundaries in the organization. The cultural turmoil for faculty is significant whether they win the local battles to keep the old boundaries or not.

PROFESSIONAL VERSUS MACHINE MODE

Various taxonomies of organizational types have been espoused (Mintzberg, 1979). Two notable types are the “professional organization” and the “manufacturing organization.”

The manufacturing organization generates its own standards. Its technical staff designs the work standards for its operators, and its line managers enforce them. The machine organization has highly specialized, routine operating tasks; formalized procedures in the operating core; and a proliferation of rules, regulations, and formalized communication throughout the organization.

While the university is a professional organization, introducing online education creates occasions for specialization and mechanization that introduce manufacturing features to the university. How is this change introduced?

Like the manufacturing organization, the professional organization is an inflexible structure. Change in the professional bureaucracy does not come from new administrators taking office with major reforms. Instead, change arrives by the slow process of changing the professionals—changing who can enter the profession, what they learn in its professional schools (norms as well as skills and knowledge), and thereafter how willing they are to upgrade their skills. The professional administration

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