

Chapter 13

Sharing Insights: Teachers' Problems and Accomplishments in their Online Day-to-Day Teaching

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case presents an analysis of the postings of a group of online teachers from a Mexican public university as they confront the challenges and rewards of their day-to-day teaching activities. They commented on their problems and accomplishments in a discussion forum during one semester. The problems included academic-administrative issues, difficulties of students in the appropriation of the platforms and the self-regulation of their learning, time management, negotiation and penalization of tasks delayed and other pedagogical concerns to the lack of institutional support. The findings suggest that the problems that online teachers face share specific characteristics and, according to the teachers, are mostly due to the pedagogical relationship being technologically mediated. Through the analysis, the author hopes to illustrate the complex technological, organizational and cultural issues that accompany online teaching and learning, and how the institution and the individual teachers dealt with them.

BACKGROUND

Online teaching and learning, especially in developing countries, creates the opportunity to reach more students who otherwise might not be able to access higher education. However, the requirements for successful online teaching and learning involve complex technological, organizational and cultural issues that are sometimes difficult to

address. The case presented in this chapter deals with the day-to-day online activities of a group of teachers from a Mexican public university. The teachers discussed their daily experiences related to their online teaching during one semester, using a discussion forum. The analyses were carried out in three phases, following the institution's academic calendar. The teachers were teaching in six different undergraduate programs, using three different platforms. The results suggested that the problems encountered by the teachers were

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surprisingly similar regardless of the discipline of the course being taught, and despite the wide range of disciplines: from engineering to sociology and they had common problems from phase to phase. The teachers discussed their concerns and accomplishments, evidencing a high level of commitment towards online learning throughout the semester. Unfortunately, even five years after the study period, institutional and administrative problems remain.

The Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC) is a Mexican state-wide public university founded in 1957 (Piñera, 2006). It is a multi-campus university that performs teaching and research activities at all levels (technical, bachelor, master and doctorate degrees), and it hosted 24,408 students working towards 65 degrees in 2004. At that time, the university had 976 full-time teachers, 97 half-time teachers and 2,917 lecturers according to the UABC Commission of Planning (UABC, 2003). The university is managed with a president appointed for a four-year term by a governing body.

The UABC has been recognized at the national level for its efforts in continually improving its services. The need for Mexican institutions of higher education to respond to the globalization pressures began in earnest in 1993 after the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed (Aboites, 1999). The federal government established norms to certify the quality of the higher education programs following recommendations posed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in relation to all higher education teaching personnel (UNESCO, 1997). Recently, the International Organization for Standardization in Mexico certified that the university was offering high quality managerial and academic laboratory services (ISO 9001: 2000, Gaceta UABC, 2007, p. 3). In addition, two national accreditation bodies have positively evaluated the study programs, including the ones that participated in this case (UABC, 2008, p.89): The Committee for the

Accreditation of Higher Education (COPAES for its initials in Spanish, COPAES, 2009) and the Inter-institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES, for its initials in Spanish, CIEES, 2005).

SETTING THE STAGE

The World Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO, 1998) was instrumental in setting the pace of development of higher education at the global, regional and national levels. The document emphasizes the necessity to offer continuous access to education to all members of society “by creating new learning environments ranging from distance education facilities to complete virtual higher education institutions and systems, capable of bridging distances and developing high-quality systems of education, thus serving social and economic advancement and democratization as well as other priorities of society” (UNESCO, 2002, p. 88). In Mexico, the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education, ANUIES for its initials in Spanish, endorses online teaching and learning in higher education (ANUIES, 1999). Due to the increasing demand for higher education, ANUIES is developing a virtual university system to complement the present system (Ruiz, 1997; ANUIES, 2002). These international and national policies have begun to affect state universities and are currently influencing budgets and universities’ priorities (Rodríguez, 2002).

The UABC institutional policy regarding online courses is not consistent. On the one hand, through the official documents and policies, the UABC promotes online teaching and motivates teachers to deliver their courses entirely or partially online (UABC, 2000). The strategic planning document for 1998-2002 included a new Program of Distance Education which indicated that the institution considered among its priorities the use of ICT in regular courses. Management

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