Chapter 6
Navigating the Lack of Face Time:
The Instructor Role in the Online Classroom

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The online classroom provides instructors with the ultimate challenge of replicating a face-to-face setting without having actual face time. Both new and experienced online instructors struggle with limited communication and personal connections in the online classroom. Teaching online is missing the visual cues of confused facial expressions and raised hands to signal the need for elaboration or clarification. Additionally, instructors rarely meet their online students or get to know who they are as individuals. In attempting to navigate the differences caused by this lack of personal contact, online instructors take on expanded and new responsibilities, including orienting students to online learning, communicating with students, monitoring student progress, creating community, managing the online course, and providing feedback. This chapter explores the unique challenge of teaching online and how online instructors address their responsibilities with these challenges in mind. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with 23 online instructors from two community colleges, the analysis described below includes insight from instructors from disciplines ranging from Math and Chemistry to English and Humanities with a range of experience in online instruction including first semester online instructors and 10 year veterans.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Online courses have been rapidly increasing across institutes of higher education across the United States. This growth has been particularly large in community colleges, which are more likely to offer online courses than other postsecondary institutions (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Expanded online offerings have increased demand for online instructors and exposed more instructors to the experience of teaching online.

This chapter explores the shift from the face-to-face classroom to the online environment. This study is part of a larger study on online education in community colleges in the Virginia Community College System.[1] The analysis here draws on course observations and interviews with 23 online instructors from two community colleges teaching a range of courses from Chemistry and Math to English and Humanities. All of the faculty interviewed volunteered to teach online and had at least one year of experience in the online environment at the time of interviews. In fact, experience ranged from one year to 13 with an average of 5 years of experience teaching online. Regardless of their level of experience, instructors reported a continual effort to make adjustments for the online environment. Newer instructors were faced with the largest list of adjustments and were often struggling with how to apply elements of their face-to-face course to the online environment as they were also learning to navigate the online platform and adjust to email communication. While dealing with a smaller set of adjustments, more experienced instructors were still adapting and updating, particularly around creating community and opportunities for interaction that they found lacking in the online environment. For many, this included learning new technologies and experimenting with new types of assignments.

Both of the community colleges provided some level of support for both newer and more experienced instructors in this process. Professional development opportunities were available at both colleges including access to an online instructional course, training for the online platform (Blackboard) and other technologies available through the college, and on-demand assistance with technological tools. One key difference between the two institutions is that one college required that all online instructors take the online instructional course prior to teaching online. Even though the course was a new offering, the college required that more experienced online instructors take the course as well. Some of the instructors at the institution that did not mandate this professional development did take the course, which was offered at the state level, but most had not.

Overall, the implementation of promising practices ranged dramatically across the course instructors including only two to three stellar examples of online instruction that addressed most of the elements discussed here. While this chapter focuses on the strategies actually used, particularly promising practices, some instructors

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