
Risks Associated With The Choice To Teach Online

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a case study related to the risks associated with the choice of traditional, tenure track faculty to teach online. Education offered at a distance via the World Wide Web is on the rise; so too is the demand for university faculty members who will teach those courses. While traditional academic and professional expectations remain unchanged, the new medium presents a new context in which these faculty members live, work, and balance personal and professional decisions. This study provided a multi-dimensional perspective on one college of education's faculty and administrators as they seek to negotiate this emerging environment. Interviews with faculty, administrators, and faculty peer reviewers were conducted to provide a more complete, triangulated picture of the case.

Introduction

Within academia there exists a historical tradition of teaching, research, and service, which together represent university faculty member's academic and professional expectations. Meeting these academic and professional expectations (APE) has been a part of university faculty member's lives since the earliest days of higher learning (Blackburn and Lawrence 1995; Eckel and King 2004), becoming their primary academic and professional responsibilities.

While the traditions of higher education are firmly rooted in the past, the march of time goes on. With the introduction of web-based teaching environments, a new era in teaching has dawned. The limitations of distance and communication are quickly diminishing and web delivered course work is rapidly expanding. What does this newer model of delivery mean for faculty members? In particular, given the unique risks associated with it, what will this new movement mean for faculty members working to meet academic and professional responsibilities? It is here, at the intersection of these two forces, that this case study proposes to shed light. Data was collected through interviews with faculty, administrators, and (faculty) peer reviewers as a means to develop triangulation and offer as complete a picture of the case as possible.

Review of the literature

Initial inquiry began with an investigation of whether or not teaching online took more or less time. In doing so, an attempt was being made to understand a possible connection between teaching context (online) and the research output of faculty members. This proved to be far too complicated and confounded; the issue of time, it seems, is an oversimplification. Hislop's (2001) and Visser's (2000) research supported Wolcott (1997b) and DiBaise's (2005) assertion that the twin issues of risk and reward are far more important. Each faculty member accepts (knowingly or unknowingly) a set of risks to their professional career as they enter into online teaching. These risks are mediated by institutional contexts as well as personal factors. This calls for a need to more fully understand the choices that faculty members make as they consider teaching online (Wolcott 1999, April). This case study illuminated such a process in a specific context.

It has been said that choosing to teach online is a risk/reward decision and is likened unto a sweepstakes, a sweepstakes where winning is not always guaranteed (Wolcott 1997). As universities face the demand for more online courses, and faculty members face departmental pressure to deliver or move courses online, the potential impact this choice may have on careers must be weighed. Assistant and Associate faculty members in particular must carefully consider the potential risks and rewards inherent in teaching online.

Empirical research supports the notion that teaching online involves an increased workload over teaching face to face (Conciecao-Runlee 2001, June; Gastfriend, Gowen, and Layne 2001, November; Wolcott 1997; Wolcott and Haderlie 1996). The risk in devoting more time, potentially significantly more time, to teaching,

is the impact this may have on other academic and professional responsibilities. If junior faculty member's research agenda suffers, there will be a direct and negative effect on future promotion and tenure decisions.

Finally, faculty members who teach online must consider that in general, teaching online is not a well rewarded endeavor. For instance, Wolcott (1997) found that while teaching online was a legitimized teaching activity, it was not well rewarded in terms of status among faculty work. Wolcott (1997) also found that, in institutions lacking strong commitments to distance education, teaching online was not well rewarded in terms of promotion and tenure. This stands in contrast to institutions with a greater commitment to distance education where faculty are more likely to see support and recognition of their participation in online teaching. In other words, the act of teaching online may carry with it a potential stigma in terms of how the instructor is viewed by peers and administrators which could translate into negative effects on promotion and tenure reviews. The collegiality factor was found to be a major factor in traditional promotion and tenure decisions by Mawdsley (1999).

Design and Methods

University faculty who teach online face risks as they work toward successfully meeting APE. Negotiating these depends heavily on personal faculty characteristics as well as institutional context. This study investigated this interaction at one university with the traditional Regional/Doctoral designation, specifically among Assistant and Associate faculty in a College of Education. Positioning the study in the interpretive paradigm for research (Gephart, 1999), a case study approach was used to investigate this situation. Using interviews with faculty members and administrators, in conjunction with document analysis of university policy, the researcher sought to build an understanding of what it is like to meet academic and professional expectations for Assistant and Associate faculty who teach online.

While the traditional empirical paradigm for research holds great potential for proving worth and testing for validity and reliability, the context of this study demanded that the interpretive approach be used. Generalization to the population at large is not a goal of this study. In the tradition of naturalistic generalization (Stake & Trumbull, 1982), this study provides responses from stakeholder participants in such a way as to provide the reader with the opportunity to recognize similarities and assess the applicability of the conclusions.

The purpose of the study was to provide a detailed, multi-perspective description of the case of meeting academic and professional expectations for online faculty. Interviews were conducted with stakeholders in the College of Education at The University of the Southwest (USW - a pseudonym for the participating institution). The context of this study was chosen for its potential illustration of the interaction of institutional expectations with teaching online. Given the traditional Carnegie ranking of Doctoral I or Regional University, there exists a blend of high expectations for scholarly activity (i.e. research) in conjunction with increased teaching loads. Structured interviews were conducted with four faculty members (two Assistant and two Associate), two faculty peer reviewers, and two administrators (each from the college of education and with direct supervision of faculty who teach online). Participants in these positions were selected to provide triangulation of the case. Transcripts of these interviews were coded using open and axial coding in order to develop themes and concepts as they emerged from the interviews. The study was conducted at a large, primarily residential, public university located in the southwestern United States.

Findings

Two themes emerged from the data gathered, namely that there are a set of both risks and rewards associated with teaching online, as it relates to meeting academic and professional expectations. This paper focuses on risk factors.

For study participants, the choice to teach some, or all, of their courses online carried with it several risks. Risks to teaching, research, service, and the performance reviews manifested themselves throughout the faculty interviews. As the interviews were analyzed, evidence of these risks was found as participants were asked to discuss their experience teaching online and to consider if they felt there were any disadvantages.

Teaching

It takes a lot more effort on the teacher's part...it takes so much more time with an online class than a face to face class... -Assistant professor

This was the consistent sentiment of all study participants. Without exception, faculty members and administrators who participated in this study noted that teaching online takes more time than does teaching face-to-face. An Assistant Professor stated, though she liked teaching online very much, “I find it more difficult to teach online.” Another Assistant Professor, a tenure track faculty member in his fourth year, expressed a similar sentiment by explaining, “...it takes a lot more time...a lot of work to do it well.” This aligns with previous studies, yet the question remained, what exactly is it that takes more time, and what are the risks?

When talking about increased time for teaching online, study participants noted several specific examples. According to study participants, communication was, by far, the component of teaching online that took the most time. Course design and grading were also cited as a major time consuming activities. Study participants estimated that they were required to invest more time per course in these areas than when they taught face to face.

Communication

As with any typical instructional setting, teachers face the reality that any assignments they give will require them to spend time grading. It seems however, when teaching online, there is an additional time component present. One Associate Professor with 14 years experience teaching and 11 years experience teaching primarily online, said,

Everything that you communicate to the student is through the keyboard, and it's a lot faster to talk to a whole class than it is to respond to 30 students individually...if I answer a question in class, I say it once time and I say it – which takes a lot less time than typing that response as opposed to answering individual questions via online [*sic*].

The difficulty manifests itself in the fact that written communication takes far more time than does verbal. In a face to face setting, teachers are able to answer questions verbally and in the presence of other students, thus answering the questions of other students at the same time. This efficiency of interaction is lost when students ask questions in the online environment. The individuality of the interaction precludes other students from benefiting from hearing the answer and potentially answering a question they may have.

Time alone though, does not represent an inherent risk. The real impact of the increased time commitment was discussed in light of the fact that faculty's efforts in this regard were not accounted for. Communication therefore represented a major component of the increase in time commitment when teaching online. The text-based nature of online communication, which takes longer than speaking face to face, required that faculty members spend more time than in teaching face to face.

Grading

Grading in the online environment was also cited as a more time consuming activity as compared to face to face teaching. While grading is obviously not something unique to online teaching, it was evident that something about teaching in this environment changed the nature of the activity. An Associate Professor compared the process this way: “Grading online takes longer than looking at a [physical] paper...and just grading it with paper, pencil, putting in comments [*sic*].” In the online environment, she noted that she has to modify her approach by adding typed comments about the assignment, save the document in a format that will allow the student to view them, and upload the assignment back to the student. “That takes time...just the mechanics of responding to students' work takes three of four times longer than it would in a face to face class.”

Another aspect of grading online that was cited as differing from face to face was student-to-student communication. One participant mentioned the effort it takes to monitor discussions among students. In a face to face course, teachers often use discussion as a means to assess student understanding. He described being able to look around the class and see the looks on student's faces and use these visual cues to determine if students were understanding the material. On the other hand, in the online environment, those discussions must take place in a text-based environment; “... you have to read their discussions and because they're not sitting in class, they get more assignments to show [they are understanding].”

Course Development

Course development represented another time intensive teaching activity which was cited as taking more time in the online environment. “Essentially you have to write a book” said one department administrator. An Associate Professor put it this way:

The disadvantage for me is there’s a lot of pre time that it takes to get a class completely ready, and to take everything that we would say in a lecture and communicate that to them through the written word, through readings, through assignments that are relevant and rigorous, yet...not busy work.

When courses are delivered online, there are two approaches to content production. One is the traditional correspondence style in which lectures are transcribed and put online for students to read. The other is an approach using a combination of teacher delivered content, readings, and assignments to present ideas and material. In either case, it takes time for faculty to assemble the materials and post them online for students to receive. While some instructors choose not to allow students to see the entire course from the first day of class, all of the faculty members participating in this study stated that they chose to have the entire course ready to go on the first day of class. Developing all of the reading materials, assignments, and due dates for a semester, represented a large time commitment for each participant.

Student Feedback

Finally, student feedback was identified as representing a unique risk in teaching online. While all instructional settings (face to face, online, etc...) are evaluated by students, study participants noted several issues specifically related to online courses. At the participating institution, online courses are evaluated using an online course evaluation tool. Students are sent an email with a link, and asked to anonymously log in and complete course evaluations. One of the issues at hand then, is response rate. As one Associate Professor said, “...those of us...online, we had 12 to 15 to 20 percent return rate...it made our results kind of invalid.” Response rates for online courses tend to be low according to all of the study participants. With low response rates, peer reviewers said they cannot have the same confidence in their evaluation of faculty performance. This presents a risk: annual performance reviews may not be able to use course evaluations.

In addition to low response rates, one participant noted, “...online evaluations also opens up a Pandora’s Box...students often feel that can say anything they want.” She felt this kind of freedom had led some of her students to make fairly nasty comments, saying: “...it’s like being hit in the stomach.” Closely related to this issue was student frustration with technology as a fact that several study participants related to impacting course evaluations. There seemed to be confusion among students of study participants about which issues were teacher-related problems and which were technology related problems. This confusion led to poor, even outright hostile, evaluations by students.

Clearly, teaching online represented an increased time commitment for faculty and a risk of negative student evaluations. Teaching online for these faculty members required more time invested in their teaching activities with the same credit given if they had taught online. This increased time commitment in the face of competing responsibilities represented a risk which faculty in the study faced.

Research

Research is a very important part of any faculty member’s professional life. It represents a time intensive activity and important part of the annual review of faculty performance. When asked about research, each of the study participants indicated they had trouble finding enough time to address this area of their APE. The frustration was evident during one interview when a participant stated, “I maybe spend one or two percent of my time doing research. I don’t have time. There’s not enough hours in the week.” This sentiment was shared both by faculty who taught a full load online and those who only taught part of their load via distance technology.

The end result of difficulty finding time for producing research manifests itself in the annual performance review. It is interesting to note that while finding time was described as extremely difficult, participants did not indicate that their annual performance reviews, or evaluations for promotion were greatly affected. When and where faculty found time in their schedules to participate in research activities is not clear. One participant

lamented,

...but you know, doing my one or two artifacts a year is meeting or slightly exceeding those expectations for promotion. I should be way exceeding those expectations to meet that total number that's expected when I go up for full professor...

This Associate Professor was able in the past to keep expectations for annual review, and evidently for promotion to Associate Professor; however her comments indicate that she may not feel as though she is performing to expectations for further promotion. The difficulty in finding time to conduct research was clearly a concern for study participants.

Service

The third primary area of responsibility for traditional faculty members is service. In the case of one participant, he not only taught online, but designed and developed online versions for a good deal of the core courses for an area of study. He indicated, in more than one instance, "...I have been pulled in on [projects] because I was somebody who had designed [online courses] and done a good job. You know, you design one good class and everybody likes it, then you get another one to design and teach." This participant indicated that these assignments were in addition to his other service related activities.

One of the peer reviewers offered some important insight,

Unfortunately, when administrators or others see you as having this freedom of time, then they also don't ever make a parallel like, 'We should leave you alone during certain parts of the day.' So, anytime there's a task force or a committee, 'Well, we don't have to worry about your schedule. You're free anytime.'

The idea that online faculty members have a more flexible schedule leads others to assume they can request these faculty members participate in additional service related activities. In his estimation, this was a disadvantage to teaching online, not only for himself, but for others. Participating in such service requires that more time be devoted to attending meetings and completing related tasks and was mentioned as one of the disadvantages to teaching online.

Performance Reviews

Teaching, research, and service comprise the three major APE for university faculty. Faculty performance in these areas is evaluated annually and in promotion decisions. Though they addressed each expectation individually, the performance evaluation was also on the minds of study participants. One participant received advice from a senior faculty member that teaching online could "...hurt you." After receiving such advice, the participant recalled feeling this way: "...the first semester I taught two online classes and one face to face, I was a little nervous as to whether I was going to get docked for that." Concerns about negative annual reviews were not isolated. Another participant shared her frustration with student confusion of technological issues with instructor performance issues. "[Technology] problems don't belong to me; [they] belong to the university." She went on to share her fear that technology problems have led to very poor student evaluation ratings, which she fears will ultimately lead to poor evaluations of her performance. Confessing that she has had poor performance evaluation ratings, she believes they were due to teaching online. When asked, "Do you feel that [a lack of time for research has] impacted your annual review in the past?" "Yes..." she said. "...it has...when I don't put the time into what I need to do for my research load, it affects my ability to go up for promotion ..." Beyond the risks to individual expectations, participants expressed additional concerns about the performance review. With no policy in place to recognize their changing commitments and responsibilities, they were left to wonder about their success in performance evaluation.

Administrative Perspective

In the view of participating administrators in the college of education at the study institution, teaching online also carried with it several risks. These risks reflected the general categories of teaching and institutional support. It should be pointed out that while the faculty perspective was limited to four participants, administrators' views extend to the whole of faculty members in the college of education. In other words, when questions were asked of administrators, specific faculty members were not named; their answers reflected all faculty in their department.

Teaching

In the area of teaching, administrative concerns aligned with faculty comments. The most often discussed issue was, again, time. One administrator noted, “You know, you have to respond to, literally, every student in the class and you have to respond at a much higher level...students can opt-out of discussions in a face to face class. Generally in an online environment, they cannot.” Another said, “You can expect that it’s going to take twice to three times as much time...” further noting, “...be prepared for the amount of time it’s going to take to put the class together; and then once the class is in motion...do not expect to go in there once a week.” These administrators noted that faculty must be prepared to face the reality that their time teaching online will require a greater commitment than typical, face to face courses.

In the area of student ratings, one administrator described the conundrum which faces online instructors, “...in the face to face class, you can establish who you are. There’s a human connection that has to be very hard – it’s very, very hard to establish in an online world.” He went on to explain, ...if you look at the literature on quality and how people rate quality, it’s very clear that content is not going to [be accurately rated]. That’s why the person’s coming to the class is to learn the content. So, whether it’s quality content, or not, that’s not a good person to ask. So what do you get from student in the rating system? You get personality, you get bedside manner. Was the person nice ... How do you get that in an online world?

The indication, then, was that if students cannot meet you face to face, instructors lose the connection that will earn them higher student ratings. Another administrator described the extent to which student unrest can become more troublesome if faculty don’t invest the time in creating good communication with students. “Students start getting their frustration level up [*sic*], and that impedes the learning of everybody in the class; because that kind of attitude spreads through a discussion group and it wreaks havoc.”

Teaching online, in the opinion of administrators in the study, carried with it several risks. The issue of time, one that was forefront in the minds of faculty members, was discussed at great length in the interviews. Student ratings were mentioned by administrators as another potential risk to faculty members who do not take the time and make the effort to develop a connection with their students. Part of this effort includes a commitment to not only return communication, but to do so very quickly. This represents a different approach to teaching than traditional, face to face models. Faculty members must be prepared for the increased time commitment this and other areas of teaching responsibilities will require.

Institutional Support

“I don’t think that we have accounted for the differential load that the online environment takes,” said one administrator regarding the lack of policy due to the increased time commitment which is required of faculty who teach online. In the area of policy relating to faculty who teach online, the administrator indicated this could represent a risk. He stated that he recognizes the amount of extra work which faculty are expected to do while teaching online, yet he is quick to point out that officially, “There’s nothing in our policy that [accounts for differences.]” When faculty performance reviews are conducted, faculty are not guaranteed to have someone who understands their position. The administration went on to reflect this particular uncertainty by saying, “...maybe if you get somebody on the [review committee] or in a chair;s position who’s sensitive to the fact it’s online – online is different.” Faculty understand this well, ...we’re not truly rewarded for [teaching online]...we’re not truly given any support for that type of commitment...annual review does not look at – in any great depth – development of courses, the time it takes to teach effectively online.

Particularly in the area of course development, it is recognized that the performance review policy makes no distinction for work in online courses. Right now it’s very – it seems procedural, that people put in there, ‘Develop such and such syllabi by [*sic*] – develop such and such course.’ I think what we need to do is to highlight in that, why that is important? Developing a new syllabus for a face-to-face course is hardly equivalent in my book, to developing an online course...to redesign a [online] course, it may take 300 hours. And so, they’re counted similarly...

There is currently no official recognition that distinguishes the work that faculty do teaching online. Faculty who teach online face, “... no differential ...” for the increase in work load and the changing nature of their work. One administrator summed this up well, saying, “...we haven’t come to terms with how to reward professionals who teach online. It has taken a long time for administrators to finally figure out that in fact it

takes a much, much higher commitment and a lot more work time to teach online.”

Implications

Among the four faculty members (including peer reviewers), concerns about risks focused on the three areas of APE; teaching, research, and service. In the area of teaching, faculty were concerned about four distinct areas, three of which centered on increased time commitments, indicating that faculty considering moving the courses online, and administrators seeking to increase the number of online courses would be well advised to carefully consider faculty member's available, temporal resources. Furthermore, if faculty are expected to teach online courses, consideration for the time required must be factored into their overall APE. The increased time commitment that is required of online faculty members was not recognized by policies that would help them accommodate other APE. In-course communication, grading, and, course development were identified as major time-intensive activities for online faculty members. Faculty support for such activities must be in place and realistic expectations placed upon any faculty member teaching online.

Student feedback in the form of course evaluations was also cited as a risk facing faculty members. Low response rates, coupled with a general confusion on the part of the students between technology and instructional performance, combine to place significant risk to junior faculty members. Faculty felt that only the most upset students completed course evaluations and that these negative comments would adversely impact their annual reviews. Instructional leaders must begin to think about student course evaluations somewhat differently for online faculty. If indeed response rates are low and the preponderance of responses are negative, are faculty who teach online inadvertently placing themselves at risk for poor performance evaluations?

The factors related to increased time commitment then, impact the areas of research and service. While these areas of APE should not be eliminated, administrators are well advised to consider that faculty who teach online may not have equal time resources to dedicate to quality research and service. The implication then, is that as classes are added to their teaching load, faculty must weigh the impact that choice will have on their ability to meet other APE. Likewise, if administrators press upon faculty to teach online, they must then consider how their assignments of classes should impact their expectations of the faculty to produce in the areas of research and service.

Administrative concerns differed slightly from those of faculty. They too recognized the increased time commitment required for teaching online. The notion that there is no official recognition of the changing nature of teaching online was also a concern. This lack of institutional support represented a risk which Administrators identified as one facing faculty who teach online. Administrators in Higher Education must begin to think seriously about how teaching online is administratively addressed at their institutions. Clearly, treating faculty who teach online in exactly the same way as faculty who do not is not a sustainable path. Research presented here supports the notion that significant risks are present; risks that could significantly impact the professional future of faculty members. Developing policies that can help mitigate negative impacts would be highly advisable.

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