Transforming Yourself into an Online Educator

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Abstract The number of higher education and K-12 institutions that offer programs and courses online is on the rise, which has led to an increased need for educators equipped with the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attributes/abilities to effectively teach an online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014, 2015). However, educators are skeptical of online teaching and many are resistant to it altogether (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, Taylor Straut, 2016). As such, it is imperative that educators overcome their skepticism of online teaching by examining their own assumptions and exploring the various roles required of them in the online learning environment. This chapter describes the multiple roles of an online educator under the following four dimensions: 1) pedagogical, 2) social, 3) managerial, and 4) technical (Berge, 1995; Bonk, Kirkley, Hara, & Dennen, 2001), and provides best practices for educators to fulfill each role in the online learning environment.

Keywords Online teaching · Instructional design · Roles of online teachers · Teacher professional development

1 Introduction

Online learning today makes it possible for educational institutions to extend student access beyond the physical location of a traditional classroom setting. Student enrollment in online courses in higher education is on the rise, with over seven million students enrolling in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In addition to institutions of higher education, K-12 has experienced growth in online learning opportunities, with students required to successfully complete at least one course online to satisfy graduation requirements (Watson, Gemin, Ryan, & Wicks, 2009). Consequently, such increases at the K-12 and higher education levels has led to an increase in the number of educators needed to teach online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2015). The demand for higher education and K-12 institutions to offer

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additional programs and courses online is on the rise, which is likely to lead to an increased need for educators who are equipped with the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attributes/abilities to effectively teach an online course. It is important to note that online courses can be defined differently across institutions, and, as such, it is equally important that educators seek clarity from their institution on what constitutes an online course. For the purpose of this chapter, an online course is one that is defined as being delivered fully online through the Internet with no requirements for physical meetings, but can incorporate virtual synchronous requirements.

2   Assumptions of Online Teaching

An understanding of what inspires face-to-face educators to transform their traditional teaching practices into effective methods for online course design and delivery is fundamental. Research has shown that many educators are skeptical of online learning and many are resistant to it altogether (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Taylor Straut, 2016). Studies have linked this skepticism and resistance to assumptions related to the time commitment required to design online learning, the effectiveness of online courses, and the expectations of students for immediate feedback and continuous access (Mitchell, Parlamis, & Claiborne, 2014). It is imperative that educators recognize and address these assumptions and attempt to transform their perspectives as they transition from a traditional face-to-face educator to an online educator. Every individual has a distinct view that is generally based on a set of assumptions derived from upbringing, culture, life experience, and/or education (Mezirow, 1991). Thus, educators possess life experiences, and their thoughts and beliefs are often a result of these experiences. Past experience as a student in an online course or a teacher of an online course can shape assumptions. And, if these experiences were negative, they can further fuel assumptions of online teaching and learning. Critical thinking and questioning can help educators to explore the accuracy of their assumptions of online teaching, which can be the stimulus to transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Therefore, in order for an educator to transform their perspective, they must engage in experiences that encourage them to question their perceptions of online teaching and learning. Reflection on personal beliefs and assumptions about online teaching is fundamental. An examination of recent research about online teaching success, and recognition of others' perspectives toward online teaching have the potential to assist educators with this transformation. It is recommended that prospective online educators reflect on their assumptions and beliefs about online teaching as part of the transformation process. Research has suggested that engaging in reflective activities on past experiences as an online learner or teacher, in addition to reflecting on personal assumptions and beliefs about online teaching and learning, can help educators to transform their perspectives (Baran, Correia, & Thomspon, 2011). Understanding and resolving assumptions about online learning can help prospective online educators to prepare to assume the roles of an online educator. A tool designed to help

instructors evaluate their preparedness and reflect on their readiness is included at the end of this chapter.

3 Roles of an Online Educator

Research has classified the multiple roles of an online educator under the following four dimensions: (1) pedagogical, (2) social, (3) managerial, and (4) technical (Berge, 1995; Bonk, Kirkley, Hara & Dennen, 2001). While the duties encompassed in the aforementioned dimensions may seem similar to those expected of educators in a traditional face-to-face classroom, it is important to note that the primary difference is in the strategies employed by online educators to fulfill these duties. Thus, the ensuing descriptions of the roles of an online educator are accompanied by examples to illustrate the tasks aligned to each role. The recommended tasks emphasize application to the online learning environment.

3.1 Pedagogical Dimension

The pedagogical roles refer to the facilitation of the learning process to support student comprehension and mastery of the content. Berge (1995) described these roles as tasks that are centered on facilitating the educational processes to foster student understanding of concepts, principles, and skills. Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee, and Su (2005) assigned the following titles to the roles of an online educator embodied within the pedagogical dimension: course designer, profession-inspirer, feedback-giver, and interaction-facilitator. In the online learning environment, these roles can be fulfilled through the design of a variety of learning opportunities. As an example, an educator can facilitate online discussions to encourage students to share their knowledge and opinions and to support students as they build on their existing knowledge. Another example involves the ongoing feedback that an educator can provide to individual students or student groups through synchronous and asynchronous discussions, assignments, and assessments. Additionally, an educator can enhance the learning experiences of students by embedding references within the online course to external resources and experts through a variety of formats, such as podcasts, screencasts, videos, and articles. Synchronous tools can also be used to invite a guest speaker to lead a virtual session on a relevant topic. The preceding described some of the tasks that online educators perform as course designers, feedback-givers, and interaction-facilitators. However, as a profession-inspirer, Liu et al. (2005) described the role of an online educator as one who promotes professional peer-to-peer communication, shares relevant personal experiences about the subject-matter, and directs students to professional organizations relevant to their field of study.

3.2   Social Dimension

The social roles of an online educator are to establish an online learning environment that is welcoming and promotes educator-learner and learner-learner engagement. Researchers determined the social roles of an online educator are fundamental to the promotion of a student-centered learning environment and the establishment of an online community of learners to encourage the cognitive learning processes of students (Berge, 1995; Bonk et al., 2001). Much like students in a traditional classroom, online students require encouragement, feedback, and regular communication with their educators. As such, an online educator's role in the online classroom setting is to encourage students to participate in the learning activities, provide timely and meaningful feedback so that students are able to apply it accordingly, respond in a timely manner to student concerns and queries, and communicate effectively with all students through synchronous or asynchronous methods. One of the roles of an online educator within the social dimension has been referred to as a social-rapport builder (Liu et al., 2005) and further involves the establishment of online teams and groups and building social rapport with students.

3.3   Managerial Dimension

The managerial roles refer to the organizational policies, as well as administrative and procedural tasks. Tasks associated with this role can involve the construction of the course syllabus to communicate established policies and procedures at the course level as well at the organizational level. As the course "manager", this role can also include determining how attendance will be captured, setting the availability dates of learning modules, establishing guidelines for assignment and test completion, managing the online learning activities, informing students of policies and procedures, and communicating course and organizational expectations. Roles of an online educator that are embodied within this dimension include conference manager, and organizer and planner (Berge, 1995; Bonk et al., 2001). Conference manager as described by Liu et al. (2005) centers on the role of an online educator as it relates to online discussions and their responsibility to ensure equity, provide rules and guidelines for students, and promote knowledge comprehension and application.

3.4   Technical Dimension

The technical roles of an online educator refer to the guidance, instruction, and support that student require in an online learning environment. Technical coordinator, media designer, and technology integrator have been identified as online educator roles within the dimension of technology (Liu et al., 2005). An online educator is

often the first point of contact for an online student, and consequently, they must be prepared to orient students to the instructional technology tools used within the course and to allow time for students to learn the new tools. Further, online educators must also be prepared to assist students with resolving technical issues encountered within the course environment. However, not all technological challenges can be resolved by an online educator, but a responsibility exists to guide students in navigating the technical support services. Therefore, it is essential for an online educator to familiarize themselves with technical support resources and services available through the organization for student consultation, thus establishing a community of support for the student. As a media designer, online educators may be expected to develop multimedia tools and design instruction that necessitates the pedagogical integration of technology tools to support student learning (Liu et al., 2005). For example, an assignment that requires students to produce a screencast may necessitate instruction for students in the use of a screencasting tool before they can even begin to work on the content of the assignment.

4 Fulfilling the Roles of an Online Educator

Effective transformation from a traditional face-to-face educator to an online educator requires the acquisition of prescribed knowledge and skills, as well as the demonstration of distinct attributes/abilities. "Teaching online is a new paradigm that requires a different set of skills than teaching face-to-face" (Wolf, 2006, p. 55). Consequently, an educator's effectiveness in the traditional face-to-face classroom may not necessarily translate to effectiveness in an online course because the educator may not be prepared to fulfill the roles of an online educator across all four dimensions. Similarly, an educator who is familiar and comfortable with the use of technology does not necessarily denote that they will be successful online educators. Hence, a combination of both pedagogy and technology is necessary. The subsequent section discusses knowledge, skills, and attributes/abilities necessary for online educators to fulfill the prescribed pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical roles identified by Liu et al. (2005).

4.1 Pedagogical and Social Roles of an Online Educator

Preparing to teach an online course requires more than simply converting traditional classroom course materials into a format for online use. Instructional materials that have been successfully implemented in a face-to-face course may not translate into successful elements in an online course. Face-to-face instructional materials should not be disregarded for online use altogether, but it is necessary to review their implications for use in an online course and to adapt them accordingly. Materials for use in an online course must not only be carefully crafted to provide students with

the information they need to be self-directed in their learning, but they must also be presented in a meaningful order that enables to student to build upon their knowledge and skills as they work towards achievement of the course learning outcomes. The independent nature of an online course necessitates a clear and meaningful structure. Various instructional techniques must also be employed to address the learning needs of the students. Online course materials can be presented in a variety of ways to foster and encourage student learning. In addition to presenting content through text, an online course should also consist of instructional materials presented through the use of video and audio, when pedagogically appropriate. Educators must also locate additional resources that students could reference and utilize to further support their learning. Consequently, to successfully fulfill this role, educators must familiarize themselves with learning management systems or instructional technology tools. Learning management systems are widely adopted by institutions and offer a variety of built-in and external tools and functions to support the design, development, and delivery of interactive learning experiences. Any technology tools should be closely examined prior to adoption for use to determine their effectiveness for helping students to achieve the learning outcomes. In addition to attending professional development opportunities offered by their institution, educators must also engage in self-learning through self-directed hands-on practice. Text and video-based self-help instructions are readily available through various websites, including the websites of the providers of various tools and applications as well as resources supplemented by practitioners.

Assuming the role of an online educator requires more than just the skills to manipulate the various technology tools and applications. An online educator must also be equipped with an understanding of the fundamentals of instructional design to produce learning activities that are meaningful and lead to student achievement of the learning objectives. An online search of instructional design models will yield a myriad of resources, and many institutions have adopted an instructional design model for their online courses or adapted one to meet their specific needs. An instructional design model can serve as a guide in the pedagogical organization of learning experiences to support student achievement of the instructional goals. Moreover, an instructional design model can help an educator to determine a structure for course content as they prepare their course for online delivery. Instructional design models also entail practices centered on refining and updating learning materials. Educators must be prepared to engage in a process of continuous improvement and/or enhancement to their online course based on student performance and student feedback. In addition to student feedback, educators should seek feedback from their peers through a course review process. Although there is more than one way to design an online course, an educator should seek opportunities to preview a variety of online learning experiences. Such opportunities may be offered in the form of course showcases, course shadowing, and educator-led best practices workshops or presentations. Similar opportunities can be found through virtual of physical attendance at conferences focused on teaching and learning with technology. A brief list of such opportunities is provided at the end of this chapter.

A great emphasis is placed on the role of an online educator to inspire students to make connections between what is being learned and how it relates to the profession in which they will pursue a career after they complete their studies. An online educator should be prepared to facilitate discussions among the students on topics related to their field of study. This could be accomplished through the use of synchronous or asynchronous discussions and can include the entire class or groups of students. Most learning management systems provide tools to support these discussion types. Facilitations skills are fundamental to the success of such discussions. As such, educators should carefully craft the discussion topics and plan to prompt students to engage and contribute. Ongoing encouragement and engagement by the online educator is fundamental to student contribution to such discussions.

A fundamental role of an online educator is to provide students with formative feedback. While designing the learning experiences, it is important to determine the feedback that students will require as they navigate their way through the learning materials. Equally important is the determination of the frequency and degree of the feedback to be provided to support students through the learning process. As a best practice in any learning situation, feedback should be provided to students in a timely manner to enable them to apply the feedback to future assignments. In addition to timeliness, feedback should also be comprehensive and detailed so that it provides students with direction and clarity.

Communication with students in an online course is essential, thus, it must be ongoing and purposeful. An online course can offer a variety of means through which educators can communicate effectively and efficiently with individual students or with all students enrolled in the course. Course announcements can be used to communicate information to all students. Synchronous and asynchronous tools and applications, such as discussion forums, email, and web conferencing can also foster communication. Another form of communication is the use of feedback and comments on graded components, which can be designed to allow for student reaction and response if they require additional clarity. Communication, much like feedback, needs to also be timely. Institutions typically provide guidelines on turnaround times for student emails or queries.

4.2   Managerial and Technical Roles of an Online Educator

In addition to pedagogical and social roles, online educators must be prepared to fulfill the roles that require them to manage various aspects of an online course and effectively integrate technology. Much like a face-to-face course, an online educator will need to establish guidelines for student communication, interaction, and other course requirements. Moreover, an online educator must implement policies and procedures set by the institution. Such policies and procedures can be related to virtual student attendance requirements, late or missed assignments, grading criteria, course withdrawal, and so forth. An online educator must also establish guidelines for students that clarify expectations for interaction and communication.

The nature of an online course requires students to be self-directed and somewhat independent in their learning. And, as such, the role of the online educator is to organize the learning materials in a way that supports and encourages student self-learning. Instructions should be provided in a variety of formats, through various means. Weekly announcements can be posted to highlight the week's learning objectives and reinforced with a screencast that demonstrates for students how to proceed with the week's learning activities. Instructions for discussions, assignments, tests, and any other graded component should be provided to students in advance and should be clearly written and explain the expected outcomes. Students should also be encouraged to seek additional clarity if needed by communicating their needs through a Question/Answer discussion forum in the course, or an email.

An online educator is expected to develop instruction for online delivery using a variety of technology tools. As such, it is important to seek professional development opportunities available within the institution and to request to preview an existing online course that demonstrates effective teaching practices. There are other ways that an educator can develop themselves beyond the offerings of the institution. Providers of learning management systems and instructional technology tools offer a plethora of resources in video and text format designed especially for educators. These are typically self-paced materials that can be used to learn how to perform a specific function. Additionally, instructional materials and best practices are often disseminated through user groups that consist of practitioners. Such resources can be located through the websites of the technology tool and application providers. If employed at an institution that has adopted a learning management system, request a sandbox course to practice using some of the tools and functions. If a learning management system is not available, visit the website of a learning management system provider and sign up for a free trial. A computer equipped with internal or external audio/video capabilities will be necessary for the development of instructional multimedia components.

Students enrolled in an online course may not necessarily be prepared or comfortable for this method of learning. Therefore, it is important for an online educator to familiarize themselves with the various technology support systems that exist across the institution to orient and support students enrolled in online courses. As the students' first point of contact, online educators can expect to coordinate with various support systems across the institution to secure help for their students. An online educator may consider orientating the student to their online course if an orientation does not exist at the institution level. Most importantly, the course syllabus should include the contact information for a help desk that has been established to assist online students with technical challenges. An online educator does not have to resolve all technical issues faced by a student, some will be beyond that of the course and necessitate additional guidance from information technology specialists. In such cases, the online educator's role is to encourage communication between the student and the technology specialists to resolve any outstanding issues related to technology.

5   Continuous Professional Development

As technology continues to evolve, online educators must be prepared to rapidly adapt to new and different ways of designing and delivering instruction. Changes in technology will result in the need for continued professional development. And, professional development does not have to be limited to scheduled and structured face-to-face workshops. Online educators are encouraged to be self-directed in their learning and seek professional development opportunities through the use of online resources provided by specialists and practitioners. Many organizations also offer credit-bearing and certificate-granting professional development seminars and courses on topics related to online teaching. As new technology tools become available, an online educator should engage in initiatives to test out these tools within their course and determine their effectiveness for future integration. A multitude of studies have been conducted on the various skills, knowledge, and attributes/abilities necessary for successful online teaching, and these resources are available through peer-reviewed journals for access by all educators. Additionally, attendance and participation at conferences that focus on online teaching and pedagogy can help online educators to maintain abreast of the latest developments and practices in the profession. Not only will technology continue to evolve, but the nature of the students served through online courses can be expected to evolve as well. The flexibility of online courses can make it possible for nontraditional learners to balance an education with their familial and professional responsibilities. And, as research continues to demonstrate effectiveness of online learning, more students may view it as a viable option to a traditional classroom setting.

6   Conclusion

Online learning is also not limited to a physical location, and as a result, it has the potential to attract students from around the world. Consequently, online educators are encouraged to continue to pursue professional development, not just in the use and integration of technology, but also in pedagogical topics centered on presence, communication, and facilitation. A selection of credit-bearing and certificate-bearing professional development opportunities is provided at the end of this chapter for reference.

7 Discussion Questions

1. What are some assumptions that you have of online teaching and what sources led to these assumptions?
2. What are some strategies that you can use to address any negative assumptions you have about online teaching?
3. Which online educator roles do you feel that you possess to successfully fulfill the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attributes/abilities?
4. What additional knowledge, skills, and attributes/abilities do you feel you need to improve in order to fulfill all of the roles expected of an online educator?
5. Being a teacher requires continuous professional development, and being an online teacher necessitates additional professional development to remain abreast of the latest instructional technology tools and best practices. Create a professional development plan for yourself based on your response to Question 4.

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