

Nuanced Perspectives about Online Teaching: Mid-Career and Senior Faculty Voices Reflecting on Academic Work in the Digital Age

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Abstract Students’ demand for online learning continues. At the same time, results of multiple studies from the early 2000s through the present day point to a set of common concerns that may explain faculty members’ hesitation and resistance to online teaching. However, less is known about how faculty members experience online teaching, especially the “essential elements” of work that the literature shows relate to positive workplace outcomes. Essential elements of work, as defined by Gappa, Austin, and Trice (2007) include flexibility and balance, academic freedom and autonomy, professional relationships, and professional growth. Findings from interviews with 19 faculty members showed that online teaching simultaneously enabled and frustrated faculty’s experiences of the “essential elements.” We recommend ways in which administrators can address these frustrations and highlight the positive aspects of online teaching.

Keywords Online teaching · Faculty work · Mid-career faculty

One of the most significant indications of the fast pace at which technology has infiltrated the academy is the increased number of online classes (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Data from

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Allen and Seaman's (2011, 2012, 2013) series of national surveys about online education, with samples of 3,000–4,000 faculty and chief academic officers, show that since the early 2000s the number of students signing up for online classes has surpassed the total number of students signing up for face-to-face classes. Data from the national 2016 *Online Report Card* (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016) show that enrollment in online courses is still increasing despite the fact that fewer students are enrolling in higher education. With continued student demand for online learning, online teaching is becoming a larger dimension of faculty work and a more common tool for supporting student learning.

Faculty members, however, demonstrate a range of reactions to online teaching. Some have expressed excitement about online teaching as an intellectual challenge, an opportunity to learn more about teaching and technology, or a way to increase the number of students who have access to education (Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009; Hunt et al., 2014; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016). On the other hand, data from multiple large-scale national surveys (e.g., Allen & Seaman, 2012, 2013; Allen et al., 2016; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016) reveal a high degree of skepticism, hesitation, and pessimism about online teaching within the faculty. In the *Online Report Card*, Allen et al. (2016) observed, "The trend over the past several years has been one of little change...A continuing failure of online education has been the inability to convince its most important audience – higher education faculty members – of its worth" (p. 26).

Results of multiple studies from the early 2000s through the present day point to several common concerns that may explain faculty members' resistance to online teaching. First, there is a set of technology concerns (Hunt et al., 2014) related to inadequate technological support and training (Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012; Oomen-Early & Murphy, 2009; Tabata & Johnsrud, 2008). Second, there is a set of student-related concerns (Hunt et al., 2014). Some faculty members are doubtful that online courses can meet the same learning outcomes as face-to-face courses (Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016). Third, there is a set of pedagogy-related concerns (Hunt et al., 2014). Faculty members are skeptical about the amount of time and work it takes to create a well-designed course (Chen, 2009; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016). Fourth, there is a set of institution-related concerns (Hunt et al., 2014). Faculty members are dissatisfied with a lack of credit for online teaching toward the tenure and promotion process, lack of adequate compensation, and lack of release time (Jaschik & Lederman, 2013; Lloyd et al., 2012; Orr, Williams, & Pennington, 2009). All of these concerns relate to how faculty members experience their work when they teach online.

Conceptual Framework

"Essential Elements"

Understanding how faculty members experience different dimensions of their work is important because the literature (e.g., Gappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007; O'Meara, Neumann, & Terosky, 2008) shows that various elements of the work experience relate to positive outcomes such as productivity, satisfaction, and commitment. According to the research of Gappa, et al. (2007), these elements, outlined in their "Framework of Essential Elements," include flexibility and balance; autonomy and academic freedom; professional relationships; professional growth; and employment equity. Flexibility and balance refer to faculty members' ability to maintain satisfying personal and professional lives. Autonomy and academic freedom refer to faculty members' ability to maintain ownership and control over their work. Professional relationships

refers to faculty members' sense of being part of a professional network of colleagues that is supportive and inspiring, and professional growth refers to their ability to develop new skills and derive meaning from their work (Gappa, et al., 2007). While important in ensuring a productive workplace, employment equity will not be discussed in this study as it was beyond the scope of the data that could be collected.

Experiences relating to online teaching may be perceived by some faculty members as interfering with what Gappa et al. (2007) have labelled the “essential elements” of academic work. Thus, because more faculty members are teaching online and because they appear resistant or hesitant about this form of work, it is important to understand how faculty members experience online teaching in terms of what the literature has designated as the “essential elements” of faculty work. This study will focus on faculty in the middle and senior phases of their careers. There may be some particular challenges of teaching online for faculty members who are confident and experienced teachers, whereas focusing on faculty members who are earlier in their careers might make it difficult to determine if the challenges could be attributed to teaching in an online format or to being inexperienced teachers. The selection of middle and senior career faculty members who have taught online at least twice helps to ensure that participants are not novice teachers and have a basic understanding of how online teaching works.

Research Question

Although the research (e.g., Allen & Seaman, 2012, 2013; Allen et al., 2016; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016) shows that faculty members experience a range of negative reactions to online teaching, less is known about how faculty members experience the “essential elements” of work that are associated with positive outcomes (Gappa et al., 2007) when they teach online. Therefore, this study asked how middle and senior career faculty members who teach online experience flexibility, autonomy and academic freedom, professional relationships, and professional growth in regard to their online teaching experiences, all elements of work that are critical to their satisfaction, productivity, and commitment.

Literature Review

To ground this study in the related literature, we first review studies that address incentives and barriers to online teaching. Then we highlight findings from studies about online teaching that reference faculty's experiences with any of the essential elements.

Data from large national surveys (e.g., Allen & Seaman, 2012, 2013; Allen et al., 2016; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016) reveal that many faculty members are skeptical and resistant to online teaching before they teach such courses, while they teach them, and after they teach them. Other data suggest that some faculty members appreciate the opportunity that online teaching affords to experiment with technology and to provide more students with access to classes (Betts, 2014; Chapman, 2011; Glass 2012; Green et al., 2009; Hunt et al., 2014; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016). Since faculty members are demonstrating mixed responses to online teaching, it is important to understand the factors that encourage or discourage them from online teaching. The literature reveals a number of incentives and barriers to online teaching, which we explain below.

Intrinsic Incentives

Faculty members report that they experience several intrinsic rewards from teaching online.

Increased Student Access to Education The literature (e.g., Betts, 2014; Hunt et al., 2014; Windes & Lesht, 2014) shows that faculty members are motivated to teach online in order to provide a wider variety of students (e.g., adult students, underserved students, students with disabilities) with increased access to classes and more flexible scheduling. For example, based on a synthesis of ten studies about faculty experiences teaching online, Major (2010) found that the ability to offer increased access to education for students functioned as an intrinsic motivator.

Stimulating Intellectual Challenge The literature (e.g., Betts, 2014; Chapman, 2011; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016; Windes & Lesht, 2014) shows that the opportunity for faculty members to experience a new intellectual challenge makes online teaching appealing. For example, data from some of the 1,671 faculty members who participated in the 2016 “*Inside Higher Ed Survey Of Faculty Attitudes On Technology*” (Jaschik & Lederman) showed that online teaching has helped them “think more critically about how to engage students with content” (p. 7) and “make better use of multimedia content” (p. 33). Results of a smaller survey of 142 faculty members at the same university who had taught at least one fully online course showed that excitement about experimenting with technology, improved online teaching ability, and fulfillment were among the most salient motivators (Chapman, 2011).

Extrinsic Incentives

Findings from multiple studies have revealed a similar set of extrinsic incentives associated with online teaching: additional compensation, release time, flexibility, free parking, adequate training, funding for professional development, and credit toward tenure and promotion (Betts, 2014; Green et al., 2009; Orr et al., 2009). For example, based on data from 135 faculty members with different appointment types and a range of experience teaching online across different institutions, Green et al. (2009) concluded that motivators for online teaching included institutional support in the form of continuous training and financial compensation proportional to the workload. Paralleling these results, Chapman (2011) found that flexibility and financial compensation were among the most salient motivators.

Barriers

On the other hand, journal article titles such as “Faculty-Perceived Barriers of Online Education” (Lloyd et al., 2012) and “Financial Bottom Line: Estimating the Cost of Faculty/Adjunct Turnover and Attrition for Online Programs” (Betts & Sikorski, 2008) suggest that there are barriers that deter faculty from online teaching. Quantitative studies with a range of full and part-time faculty members have offered examples of technology-related, student-related, pedagogy-related, and institution-related barriers (Hunt et al., 2014) to online teaching.

Technology-Related Concerns These concerns include faculty members’ anxiety about technological skills, inadequate technological support, and inadequate training (Hunt et al.,

2014). A number of studies have given voice to these anxieties. For example, based on survey data obtained from 75 faculty members with a range of experience teaching online at a university in the southeast, Lloyd and his colleagues (2012) concluded that outdated technology deterred faculty members from teaching online. Several researchers (Oomen-Early & Murphy, 2009; Tabata & Johnsrud, 2008) found that, in addition to their own technological support needs, faculty members expressed concerns about providing adequate technological assistance to their students.

Student-Related Concerns These concerns include faculty members' worries about students' limited interaction with their peers and instructors, difficulties with properly attending to student needs, effectively serving students with disabilities, and poor quality courses (Hunt et al., 2014). Data from the faculty who participated in the 2016 "*Inside Higher Ed Survey of Faculty Attitudes On Technology*" (Jaschik & Lederman) provide evidence of these concerns. Over half of the 1,671 respondents indicated that online courses did not meet the needs of "at risk" students or offer the "ability to rigorously engage students in course material" (Jaschik & Lederman, 2016, p. 21).

Pedagogy-Related Concerns These concerns include faculty members' skepticism about the ability to amend their classes easily, insufficient time to get their courses ready, doubts of their ability to manage the workload, and lack of opportunity to design courses that meet the intended learning outcomes (Hunt et al., 2014). Data from both *Inside Higher Education* surveys cited above show that the majority of participants were doubtful that online instruction and face-to-face instruction can lead to the same learning outcomes (Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016). Faculty doubts about course quality are compounded by their concerns about spending more time and effort teaching online than they do in person. Data from the 1,485 institutions that are part of the Postsecondary Quick Information System show that faculty members' anxiety about workload was the one of the most significant factors that prevented the institutions from using distance education (Chen, 2009).

Institution-Related Concerns These concerns include faculty members' uncertainty about intellectual property rights and inadequate institutional support (Hunt et al., 2014). Lack of credit for online teaching was cited across multiple studies (Jaschik & Lederman, 2013; Lloyd et al., 2012; Orr et al., 2009; Simpson, 2010) as a barrier to online teaching. For example, only 11% of faculty who responded to the 2013 *Inside Higher Education* survey strongly agreed that they were given credit for online teaching in the tenure and promotion review process (Jaschik & Lederman, 2013).

Online Teaching & "Essential Elements" of Faculty Work

To shed more light on what is known about how faculty experience the "essential elements" of academic work when they teach online, this section focuses on studies that include findings about flexibility, academic freedom and autonomy, professional relationships, and professional growth in the online teaching environment, each of which is an essential element of academic work, as explained previously. The studies highlighted focus on a range of circumstances, including part-time, full-time, tenured, and non-tenured faculty members from different disciplines, some of whom are new to online teaching and others who are not.

Flexibility Flexibility is defined as the ability of faculty members to maintain satisfying personal and professional lives (Gappa, et al., 2007). Our review showed that indeed the flexibility of online teaching functioned as a primary motivator. Survey and focus group data about the pros and cons of online teaching from 386 faculty members in the State University of New York (SUNY) system who taught online revealed that flexibility was the most popular motivator for teaching online (Shea, 2007). On the other hand, results of a few studies revealed that some faculty members experienced an increased sense of pressure to be online because students could access their classes twenty-four hours a day. For example, in the same SUNY study, Shea (2007) recommended that faculty members should think carefully about how to manage their time because of the flexibility of this type of work. Similarly, Heijstra & Rafnsdottir (2010) interviewed 20 faculty members and found that the majority of participants struggled with balancing work and family due to the pressure they felt to be online and responding to students at all times.

Academic Freedom & Autonomy Academic freedom and autonomy relate to faculty members' ability to maintain ownership and control over their work (Gappa et al., 2007). Many faculty members expect to be able to make independent decisions about course content and course development. In order to develop and teach online courses, however, faculty members may be expected to partner with instructional design staff or teaching and learning center staff, leading some faculty members to question whether they have autonomy (Hixon, 2008). Indeed, a review of the literature showed that faculty members raised a number of questions about how to maintain ownership of their work.

Online teaching, for some faculty members, for example, was associated with a decreased sense of autonomy and privacy. Data from interviews with senior academic leaders at over 25 institutions revealed that some faculty members were displeased about increased public scrutiny of their courses (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012). Data from the same study also revealed the copyright struggles over online courses. For example, several of the senior academic leaders reported that some institutions were denying faculty members the ability to copyright their courses. Based on these findings, Bacow et al. (2012) concluded that unanswered questions about intellectual property related to course content development might serve as a barrier to online course delivery.

Professional Relationships Gappa et al. (2007) asserted that participation in a professional network of colleagues that is supportive and inspiring is an important element of academic work. Our review found that some faculty members formed supportive new professional relationships when they taught online. Several researchers (Chen, 2009; Green et al., 2009; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010) found that faculty members desired opportunities to share ideas about online teaching with their colleagues in a supportive environment since many of them were dissatisfied with the training they received to teach online, did not receive training to teach online, or did not know who else was teaching online. For example, participants in TEACHnology, a faculty development program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst designed to support senior faculty who were teaching online, benefitted from (a) discussing teaching with peers, (b) new collegial connections across the university that lasted after the program, (c) a supportive community, and (d) useful feedback from their colleagues (Shih & Sorcinelli, 2007).

Professional Growth Professional growth refers to faculty members' ability to develop new skills and derive meaning from their work (Gappa, et al., 2007). Several studies (Chapman,

2011; Glass 2012; Green et al., 2009; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016) have shown that the opportunity for professional growth motivated faculty to teach online. However, regardless of whether professional growth served as a motivator for online teaching, several studies showed that professional growth might have occurred as a result of online teaching, despite its challenges (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Glass, 2012).

Based on survey and focus group data about the pros and cons of online teaching from 386 faculty members, Shea (2007) found that the opportunity to experiment with new pedagogies motivated faculty to teach online. Glass (2012) concluded, based on data from 16 faculty members who had won awards for online teaching at a research university, that professional growth occurred during the process of learning how to teach online regardless of whether or not they enjoyed the online teaching experience.

The Study

Findings from multiple studies have revealed a variety of motivators and barriers and have shown mixed results in regard to faculty experiences teaching online. Faculty members have experienced both positive and negative dimensions of the essential elements of workplace satisfaction, which is the framework for this study. These findings are based on the experiences of a wide range of faculty (e.g., non-tenured, tenured, full and part-time). What is not known is how the experiences of faculty with online teaching may vary with time in the career. That is, what are the experiences of seasoned faculty? Faculty members in this group are important because they take leadership in their departments in decision making and on committees, and they model academic work for their colleagues earlier in the career. Thus, in the study we report here we focused on how faculty members in the middle and senior phases of their careers who have taught online at least twice experience online teaching.

Method

The study involved interviews with 19 early-middle, middle, and senior faculty members who had taught online at least twice and who represented a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. The interview focused on how these faculty members experienced the “essential elements” of academic work when they taught online. Since the purpose of the study was to understand how faculty perceived the experience of teaching online, we used a social constructivist lens. A social constructivist lens helps to explain, from the perspectives of the participants, “how people make sense of their worlds and the experiences they have in the world” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13).

We conducted one-on-one, open-ended, in-depth qualitative interviews during the months of July through September 2014. Since the majority of the research about faculty who teach online has been quantitative (e.g., Allen & Seaman’s 2011–2013 series of national surveys), we believed that a qualitative approach was appropriate. A qualitative interview study with open-ended questions enables respondents to offer their own interpretations of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2009). Thus, we chose this qualitative approach over a written survey that might impose pre-established responses on the faculty. Specifically, the benefits of using qualitative methods in this study is that faculty members can give voice to their own experiences in direct and authentic ways (Glass, 2012), thus giving institutional leaders who

support the faculty and make programmatic decisions insights into the faculty experience (Maguire, 2005).

We designed our study to be descriptive and organized around a set of thematic ideas. The interview instrument began with open-ended questions designed to invite participants to talk generally about their online teaching experiences. Examples of these questions included the following. “Tell me about your experience teaching online.” “What have been some of the high and low points of the experience?” Following these opening questions, participants answered more specific questions about online teaching as it related to each of the “essential elements.” Follow-up questions were used to gain clarification.

Participants

We collected data from faculty members at three different sites: a Research 1 University in the Midwest, a comprehensive public research university in the northeast, and a small, private religious college in the northeast. Each of these institutions was selected because they offered online courses during the fall, spring, and summer semesters. Since the first seven years in the academy constitute the early career period (Austin, 2010) and the study examined the online teaching experiences of middle and senior career faculty members, we required at least eight years of face-to-face teaching experience. Since the literature (e.g., Allen & Seaman, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012) suggests that the online teaching experience gets easier as faculty members accumulate more experience teaching online, the other qualification for participation in the study was teaching a minimum of two fully online courses.

The participants were divided into three groups according to the number of years of face-to-face higher education teaching they had experienced. The first group of participants, early mid-career faculty, had between 8 and 13 years of teaching experience ($n = 6$). The second group, mid-career faculty, had between 14 and 21 years of teaching experience ($n = 6$). The third group, senior faculty, had between 22 and 31 years of teaching experience ($n = 7$).

The Institutional Review Board at the researchers' university had granted approval to conduct the study. We sent a short description of the study to the heads of faculty development programs and the distance education programs at each institution, asking to be directed to faculty members who met the criteria. The lead researcher met with an initial set of participants and asked them to recommend colleagues who fit the criteria and might be willing to participate. We use pseudonyms in the findings and discussion sections to help protect participants' privacy.

Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded, and participants could ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

We met with faculty members in their offices or over the phone, ensuring protection of participants' confidentiality.

The analysis was iterative, involving two phases of coding. The lead author read the individual transcripts multiple times and categorized them according to the three groups of participants (early middle, middle, and senior career). She did line-by-line coding in order to be “immerse[d] in the data and discover what concepts they have to offer” (Glesne, 2010, p. 195). The coding structure formed during the line-by-line coding was used to construct broader code categories. To ensure consistency, the lead author worked with a senior researcher

(second author), who reviewed coding categories, processes, and decisions. These categories were informed by constant comparison across the interview data.

Findings

Understanding how faculty members in the middle and senior phases of their career experience the essential elements of work when they teach online is important in light of their resistance to and skepticism about online teaching (Allen & Seaman, 2012, 2013; Jaschik & Lederman, 2013, 2016).

Alongside every positive aspect of online teaching a participant described, there tended to be an accompanying negative aspect. For example, while many participants seemed interested in attending professional development for online teaching, these same participants appeared to lack the time to attend. The co-existence of the negative and positive aspects of online teaching suggests that tensions are inherent in this form of work. Navigating these tensions presents opportunities for learning and professional growth. This section discusses the “essential elements” of academic work, showing how participants experienced positive and negative features of each of these elements when they taught online.

Flexibility: Convenience and Pressure

Flexibility pertains to opportunities within the academic workplace for faculty members to balance demands in their personal and professional lives (Gappa et al., 2007). Participants’ comments mirrored the literature (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Green et al. 2009; Shea, 2007), which suggests that faculty members identify flexibility as a primary motivator for teaching online. Participant 2 spoke of the “ease for the teacher,” and Participant 10 explained:

It[’s] more flexible...not to have to go to a classroom, which in my case was twice a week before....When I’m doing research...if this is the only class I’m teaching... then I’ll have the freedom to go somewhere else...[with] Internet access everywhere....I’m able to carry out my teaching responsibilities anywhere in the world.

On the other hand, also paralleling the literature (Heijstra & Rafnsdottir, 2010; Shea, 2007), the data show that participants confronted challenges related to managing their time even as they experienced the positive dimensions of flexibility. For example, Participant 7 commented, “The biggest benefit is its biggest curse. I’m...always the guy behind the curtain. I think they can always find me because I’m just a presence in cyberspace.” Participant 7 made multiple references to his students’ desire for rapid and frequent email contact. For some participants, responding to students’ frequent emails made online teaching “labor intensive” and took time away from other responsibilities. Participant 9 said:

Well, I went into the summer teaching two online courses for the first time, and I had fairly unreasonable expectations because, like the students, I was thinking, ‘oh, it’s online, it’ll be flexible,’ and I’ve already taught both of these courses before, so it’ll be easier... And it didn’t work out that way...I’ve done no research this summer.

Based on these comments, it appeared that several participants underestimated the amount of time they would need to commit and discovered that, in actuality, their flexibility was limited.

Autonomy and Academic Freedom: Choices about Course Design

Academic freedom and autonomy, another “essential element” of academic work, refers to the sense of ownership and control faculty members have over their work (Gappa et al., 2007). This element also is experienced in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, participants appreciated the freedom to design their own courses. On the other hand, this freedom left some of them feeling overwhelmed and unsure about where to begin.

Some participants spoke enthusiastically about the freedom they experienced in their online teaching. Participant 4 referenced “free reign.” Participant 8 explained: “I modeled it after my own experience as an undergraduate...almost like an independent study with an individual professor. It’s much looser along those lines, and I had a lot more autonomy.” A number of participants were particularly appreciative of the autonomy they exercised by abandoning their university’s learning management system, a decision triggered by a desire for easier ways to manage the course.

The “free reign” over course design cited by several participants brought with it some challenges, however. Due to a lack of clear guidelines, the participants were not sure what other approaches to use. Describing some of the challenges he encountered, Participant 11 observed, “I was kind of dumb the first time through.”

Just as some expressed uncertainty about how to approach designing their courses, others expressed uncertainty about who owned their courses. Participant 12 said:

You’ve created something, and you have no idea how it’s being taught... like your intellectual property.... I guess if you create a course when you’re online teaching, it’s the property of the department...I don’t know. What are the rules? ...Maybe at first I’d ask questions, but then I’d be like...do what you want.

Participant 12’s “do what you want” attitude stood in contrast to Participant 16’s reaction when the director of his department asked him to share the contents of a course he designed but was no longer teaching. Participant 16 said, “‘But that’s my content.’ [The director] said, ‘Not really’.” Notably, each of these participants worked at different institutions, and both of these comments reflect the absence of clear guidelines or policies about course ownership.

Access to courses was another issue of concern, and it is cited in other literature (e.g. Bacow et al., 2012; Tabata & Johnsrud, 2008). Among the participants, Participant 14 expressed strong feelings about who should be able to access her class. She explained:

I never give guest permission....If I was [sic] in a classroom, if someone wanted to come in...., I would permit them in, but they would have a conversation with me about coming in. You don’t just have someone...off the street just...come in. And, that’s the attitude that I have about the guest pass.

While Participant 14 did collaborate with staff members from an instructional support center to design her class, if other colleagues wanted to access her course, she would want to know why. Participant 3, however, was an outlier, using the term “totally open” to refer to his practice of sharing course slides on a Google site.

Professional Relationships

Professional relationships refer to faculty members’ sense of being part of a supportive and inspiring group of colleagues (Gappa et al., 2007). Participants described co-existing positive

and negative experiences with professional relationships related to their online teaching. On the one hand, participants' reports of their experiences using instructional support center services and participating in faculty learning communities mirrored literature that shows faculty members feel supported when they teach online (Chen, 2009; Green et al., 2009; Shih & Sorcinelli, 2007). In fact, a number of participants praised the level of support from colleagues at instructional support centers.

On the other hand, the literature indicates that faculty members sometimes feel isolated when they teach online (Bailey & Card, 2009; Betts & Sikorski, 2008; Glass, 2012). Some participants indicated that they lacked colleagues with whom to talk about their experiences. In fact, Participant 3 expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate in the interview for this study, observing that "I may have...overdone my welcome.... I never get a chance to talk at this type of level or even think about what it's done for me."

Professional Growth

Professional growth refers to faculty members' ability to learn new skills and experience fulfillment from their work (Gappa et al., 2007). Several participants cited examples of how online teaching was a stimulating intellectual challenge, paralleling the literature that cites professional growth as a motivator for online teaching. Participant 4 said, "I love the conferences and doing workshops... collaborating with people and sharing knowledge... I've gotten a lot of great ideas that...improved my teaching over the years."

Participants also gave specific examples of how teaching online made them rethink different aspects of their face-to-face courses. Participant 8 explained how working with an instructional designer to put together her online course helped her think through how to set up discussions. She said "I'm still working on...not posting questions that there's...a concrete answer to.... [It] helped me to think about how...I pose questions to my face-to-face class to get good discussions going." Participant 17 talked about thinking more about how to integrate multimedia content in his courses:

Online [I] give them...little movie clips...to experience multimedia rather than just reading. And, I think in the classroom...delivering a lecture for 50 minutes...it's hard for...students to keep their focus....I take some of those...videos [I use online], and I show them...to break up the monotony of a class and lecture.

For some participants, online teaching forced them to be more organized. Participant 15 explained:

You have to be very specific about what's happening. [Online] you can't...prepare your lecture a minute before class starts....I think the best thing was it really pushed me to be more thoughtful about my organizing of the class....it was a good motivation to make it a stronger class.

Another example of better organizational skills is recognizing the importance of clear communication in email. Participant 2 said, "There are better detailed instructions. Over the years, I perfected those [assignment instructions that I emailed to students]."

Teaching online also can spark ideas for research related to online teaching (Meyer, 2012). Participant 14 described an ongoing research project, centered on a question that emerged from teaching online. Another noted that students in class might be appropriate participants in regard to some of his research (with appropriate approval).

In contrast, for some participants, online teaching was not associated with major professional growth. For some, time is the issue. Participant 7 explained, “The time it took to develop the course has taken away from me doing the research that I need to be doing...It’s like robbing Peter to pay Paul.” For others, the lack of reward for attending professional development sessions about online teaching was a deterrent. Some participants simply did not feel as if they learned anything new when they taught online. One participant said, “I’ve been teaching...about [the] Internet...for almost 20 years and ...it’s just...old hat to me.”

Discussion

Due to increased use of technology and the popularity of online courses for advancing student learning, many faculty members are confronting the compelling challenge of online teaching. Based on existing literature and national survey data about faculty resistance to online teaching, one might expect that this study’s participants would describe hesitation, frustration, and pessimism about online teaching. However, surprisingly, an examination of how online teaching enabled or frustrated faculty members’ experience of essential elements of work (Gappa et al., 2007) showed that along with some of the frustrations, participants described some appealing aspects of online teaching.

Thrown off Balance: Understanding the Disequilibrium

Online teaching may be creating a sense of disequilibrium that is particularly poignant for some middle and senior career faculty. Adjusting course content and teaching for the online environment undermined some of the participants’ sense of confidence, particularly during the early period of the online teaching experience. The challenges they face in online teaching may contrast with their views of themselves as seasoned professors and experts in their fields. Participant 18’s comments about shifting a course into the online environment reveal confusion and a sense of ineptitude:

It’s... very much a translation from my in-class to online...., which from everything I read is not the way you’re supposed to teach online. But at the same time, having taken... [an online teaching] course twice and done a little bit of reading about how you’re supposed to do it, I don’t really see how to do it.

Lack of knowledge of how to teach online contributes to a sense of helplessness and the responsibility becomes time-consuming. Particularly for faculty members who are used to feeling efficient at their work, online teaching may really undercut their sense of autonomy.

Learning to Balance: Stories of Professional Growth

Ironically, by engaging in the challenging process of adjusting their course content and teaching for the online environment that initially threw them off balance, some of the participants surmounted what one called a “learning curve.” The obstacles associated with online teaching functioned as challenges for participants to master and underscored their capacity for professional growth (O’Meara et al., 2008).

Looking back on their initial sense of confusion also enabled some participants to realize that the more they taught online, the easier and more rewarding the experience became, and the

more confident they were about their online classes. Participant 14 described an initial sense of uncertainty, but explained, “By the time you’re through teaching the third time, you feel like... I’ve got this. I’m cooking...this... is like a dream class...just clicking along because I’ve worked out all of the problems.”

Recommendations

We now offer recommendations for ways to support faculty in their work and to use online teaching responsibilities as opportunities for professional growth.

Maintain Flexibility As indicated in earlier literature, the flexibility offered by online teaching attracts faculty involvement. Highlighting the flexibility of online teaching can be a strategic way to interest faculty members in this form of work (Major, 2010; Shea, 2007). For example, online teaching might be promoted as a convenient option for faculty members who are teaching abroad. At the same time, department chairs and faculty development specialists should provide guidance on time management, such as suggesting that faculty members set clear expectations for students about how much communication to expect (Shea, 2007). With more support and preparation, faculty members may manage their online teaching more efficiently and enjoy more flexibility in their work.

Maintain Autonomy: Allow Faculty to Design their Courses This study suggests that, for some, the freedom to work independently to design their online classes is appealing. At the same time, however, some participants described an initial sense of helplessness about how to approach the design of their classes. Faculty development staff can offer support by holding course design consulting sessions (Major, 2010). Balancing support for faculty autonomy with guidance on course design may help faculty members experience a greater sense of autonomy.

Protect Intellectual Property Some participants expressed frustration about being uncertain about who owns and who can access the course content they create. Developing clear policies about these issues may reduce this frustration. For example, faculty members need clear policies about how they will be compensated if someone else teaches a course they created or if they can teach the same course content they created at another university (Bacow et al., 2012). A critical policy question concerns the question of who owns the authorship rights to an online course. If not already in place, institutions would be well served to develop intellectual property guidelines for online course content so that the frustrations and uncertainties participants express do not discourage faculty members from teaching online.

Offer Professional Development that Encourages Thinking about Pedagogy and Reward Attendance The study findings underscore the arguments in the literature that approaches to faculty development for online teaching should focus on pedagogical issues first, followed by instruction in the use of the technological tools necessary to implement that pedagogy. For example, offering professional development about how to build a community online and how to structure activities for the online environment (Meyer & Murrell, 2014) would allow the faculty to think about teaching strategies specifically for the online environment. University administrators may be well served, though, to take faculty members’ proficiency with computers into account as they design professional development opportunities (Shea, 2007).

Provide Networking Opportunities Several participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to form relationships with colleagues whom they might not otherwise have met through participation in professional development related to online teaching. This finding echoes themes in the literature (Gappa et al., 2007; O’Meara et al., 2008) concerning the importance of meaningful professional relationships and professional growth opportunities in contributing to faculty satisfaction, productivity, and commitment. In light of these findings administrators should offer networking opportunities for those involved in online teaching to help conquer the feeling of isolation.

Design Suggestions for Future Research

In addition to research questions, we have a few suggestions for how to go about conducting research on this topic. As in any study, clarification of definitions is very important. With the varied formats of online learning opportunities that have developed in recent years (e.g., blended, partially blended), studies of this type need to ensure respondents are clear about the nature of online teaching being discussed. Similarly, definitions around career stage can be challenging but important to establish.

While much of the conversation about online teaching has focused on how it compares to face-to-face teaching and whether it is a worthwhile investment for higher education institutions, attention has broadened to focus on how to teach online. This conversational shift suggests that online teaching, a relatively new dimension of faculty work, is here to stay. Technological advances, and online teaching in particular, will continue to change the nature of faculty work. The issues faculty members must navigate as they do this work present opportunities for faculty developers to enhance how faculty members experience flexibility, autonomy and academic freedom, professional relationships, and professional growth.

Our findings suggest that faculty members do learn new skills regardless of whether or not they have a satisfying experience teaching online. Some of these skills, like learning how to use the learning management system, are instrumental. At the same time, some of these skills may be transformative. Informed by this study, we agree that “learning to teach online has the potential to transform faculty’s assumptions and beliefs about teaching, changing their [sic] face-to-face teaching practices” (McQuiggan, 2012, p. 27). Despite this potential, however, faculty developers and other campus administrators may not currently explicitly consider and promote the online teaching experience as an opportunity for professional growth and an occasion for rethinking teaching strategies. Future researchers might explore and highlight ways in which faculty members and administrators can simultaneously acknowledge the resistance to online teaching and the potential it offers for professional growth.

Establishing strong professional relationships contributes to faculty satisfaction and professional growth (Gappa et al., 2007; Glass, 2012; O’Meara et al., 2008). As more faculty members engage in online teaching, however, one must ask if they will form new in-person or virtual networks of colleagues with whom to discuss online teaching, or, in contrast, if they will experience isolation and a dearth of colleagues with whom to discuss the experience. Researchers’ attention to this question will provide data useful in creating supportive and productive academic workplaces characterized by a sense of community rather than isolation (Turkle, 2012).

Questions about ownership of content in online environments. Uncertainty or ambiguity about intellectual property rights in online environments can lead to conflict or

dissatisfaction (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013). Future research might explore the types of guidelines that are most effective in avoiding or resolving these issues. On a broader level, philosophical and practical questions about how technology is reshaping the nature of faculty work and their teaching in particular and the nature of intellectual rights within digital contexts in the academy deserve attention. This study and further work may help institutional leaders and faculty members find strategies that enhance the attractiveness of online teaching while addressing the challenges and issues that accompany it.

Conclusion

This study shed light on the ways in which faculty members characterized online teaching as frustrating and enabling their experience of essential elements of work. In addition to acknowledging the hesitation and skepticism faculty members have expressed about online teaching, findings from this study illuminate some of the positive aspects of online teaching. With adequate support from their institutions, perhaps faculty members can begin to experience more of the positive aspects of this dimension of their work.

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