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ABSTRACT

Previous research and policy in online education has underestimated the amount of effort and commitment required by those asked to develop and deliver courses online. Although implementation of e-learning technologies is on the rise, the faculty adoption rate is slow. Prior studies attribute the lack of adoption to faculty resistance to online teaching technologies (C. Gunawardena, 1990; D. McNeil, 1990; K. Stinehart, 1988). However, the way faculty perceive and respond to other issues associated with the online context are constructs worth examining. This study examines the beliefs, concerns, and practices of faculty from three state universities to determine implications for long-range e-learning reform. Data sources included 24 semi-structured interviews with faculty and administrators, archival document review, observational data, and participant questionnaires. Findings indicate that the combination of university policy disincentives confounds university efforts to encourage and train faculty to teach online. Such disincentives are the real reason that faculty fail to join the quest for online education. (Contains 24 references.) (SLD)

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Conflicting ideologies and the shift to e-learning

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Abstract

Previous research and policy in online education has underestimated the amount of effort and commitment required by those asked to develop and deliver courses online. Although implementation of e-learning technologies is on the rise, the faculty adoption rate is slow (Gunawardena, 1990; Heinich, 1984). Prior studies attribute lack of adoption to faculty resistance towards online teaching technologies (Gunawardena, 1990; McNeil, 1990; Stinehart, 1988). However, the way faculty perceive and respond to other issues associated with the online context are important constructs worth examining (McNeil, 1990). Current literature suggests the importance of instructors, yet the role, values, and attitudes of instructors in an e-learning context have largely been ignored (Beaudoin, 1990; Dillon & Walsh, 1992). This study looked closely at beliefs, concerns, and practices of faculty from three state universities in order to reveal implications for long-range e-learning reform.

Conflicting Ideologies and the Shift to E-Learning

Research in online education has focused primarily on its effectiveness and has underestimated the amount of effort and commitment required by those asked to develop and deliver courses online. Although implementation of e-learning technologies is on the rise, the adoption rate is slow (Gunawardena, 1990; Heinich, 1984). Prior studies attribute lack of adoption to faculty resistance towards online teaching technologies (Gunawardena, 1990; McNeil, 1990; Stinehart, 1988). However, the way faculty perceive and respond to other issues associated with the online context are important constructs are worth examining (McNeil, 1990). The extant literature suggests the importance of instructors, yet the role, values, and attitudes of instructors in an e-learning context have largely been ignored (Beaudoin, 1990; Dillon & Walsh, 1992). Faculty perceptions have not been fully examined and because educators are unfamiliar with this new context, study of the political and social aspects of the system is critical.

This study examined a unique case of faculty development and looked closely at faculty beliefs, concerns, and practices in order to reveal implications for long-range e-learning reform. Despite a significant push from local administration, university faculty have shown little interest in developing online courses. Researchers hypothesize that the reasons for the delay in online course development stem from factors other than those identified in earlier studies—such as teacher resistance to technology and incompetence (Simpson & Head, 2000). In order to pinpoint the impediments to faculty participation in online teaching and learning efforts, the current study examined faculty perceptions and actions. The case involved the study of a faculty development workshop. The discussion among the participant community allowed faculty to voice concerns associated with the transition from face-to-face education to online delivery.

Theoretical Framework

This case of local e-learning reform at a large urban university in the southwest took place within a broader context of nationwide restructuring. Although national and local efforts pushed for more online courses and programs, institutional history shows that these initiatives have failed. Administrators have often interpreted poor outcomes as evidence that individuals (i.e., faculty) failed to comply with agendas. However, earlier cases suggest that delay is attributed to intra-organizational processes—not a lack of professional integrity on the part of faculty (Ball, 1987). Before change is attempted, administrators should investigate the underlying assumptions. Acceptance of the institutional change towards e-learning depends on the fit between the norms embedded in the changes and those extant in the institution's culture.

Symbolic interactionism, the theoretical framework for the study, influenced the design and production of the research and functioned as the interpretive focus. This study blended theory regarding the connection between language and values with symbolic interactionism and acknowledged how mutual understandings occur through language and interaction. The objective was to understand the ideologies and beliefs that guide perceptions and inform participants about e-learning.

The Problem

The extraordinary growth of e-learning has created an imbalance in the system. Although the demand for online education is on the rise, the infrastructure to support it has lagged behind. For the purpose of this paper, infrastructure is defined as the technological and political frameworks necessary to provide an e-learning program. Technology incorporates such elements as student services, seamless online registration, and technology training. Political frameworks include administrative agendas and policy that enable and encourage faculty participation in e-

learning. The thrust of this paper is on policy frameworks, because without these, the rest of the elements in the system (i.e., the motivation for faculty to participate in technology training) will suffer and confound efforts to promote an e-learning program.

University discussions are rampant concerning the shift from traditional delivery to online delivery of courses. Diverse issues, stemming from the desire for change, hinder the process. Political framework concerns, like intellectual property, faculty workload, and promotion and tenure (Wolcott, 1997; Wolcott & Haderlie, 1996) coupled with technological issues, such as technical support, impede the process and often deter faculty from getting involved.

Lindquist (1978) and Combs (1991) argue that for any innovation to be successful, the "change" must fit the local context and must appeal to those who are asked to implement the change. They stress the role of ownership and values. Therefore, it is essential that instructors be involved in an active way, with the implementation and administration of an e-learning program (Schuttloffel, 1994). This will require that institutions re-assess their faculty's attitudes about e-learning in order to accommodate them with well-planned policy and to assist them in gaining necessary skills (Cummings, 1995).

Early Adopters

Most educators would agree that faculty members are key to the successful implementation of online education; however, research focusing on this area is minimal (Beaudoin, 1990). Rather, the theme of most distance education research has been on learner outcomes, characteristics, and attitudes. The few studies that address faculty, keep referring back to the earlier research (Dillon & Walsh, 1992), which really reflects the attitudes and perceptions of the "earlier adopters" (faculty who were eager to jump online). Prior research reveals that

early adopters were unique in that they held more positive attitudes about e-learning, were more intrinsically motivated to participate, and were veteran instructors (National Education Association, 2000). These three factors were recurring in the literature.

Overall, the limited and older studies report that faculty who started teaching at a distance had positive attitudes toward online education (Dillon, 1989; Johnson & Silvernail, 1990; Mani, 1988; Parer, 1988) and as instructors became more familiar with the context, their attitudes improved (Kirby & Garrison, 1989). Clark, Soliman, and Sungaila (1985) argue that higher-level instructors (i.e., senior level faculty) find distance teaching more enjoyable. Early adopters reported that teaching online provided intrinsic rewards, such as prestige and self-esteem, rather than extrinsic or monetary rewards (Dillon & Walsh, 1992; Taylor & White, 1991). Prior studies also revealed that online faculty are motivated by their goal to reach new populations of learners, work with motivated students, provide convenience, and utilize a broader range of media-based resources (Clark, Soliman, & Sungaila, 1985; Dillon, Hengst, & Zoller, 1991; Johnson & Silvernail, 1990; Taylor & White, 1991).

Faculty status (tenured or non-tenured) has a close relation to whether or not faculty chose to participate in e-learning efforts. Because promotion and tenure review at Research I institutions focuses largely on research rather than teaching, many newer faculty are unwilling to devote their valuable time and resources to developing courses and learning new teaching technologies. Veteran faculty who are not concerned with promotion and tenure are more likely to devote their time to e-learning.

Early adopters were driven, seasoned, and excited about e-learning; however, the demand has now surpassed initial faculty interest. Faculty who have already made a commitment to e-learning are retiring and voicing concerns that put e-learning in jeopardy. One recent study

revealed that the motivations of early adopter are now starting to include extrinsic rewards, such as technical support and increased salary (Wolcott & Haderlie, 1996). This same study surveyed faculty who did not teach online. When asked what would motivate them to teach online in the future, the factors they reported were primarily extrinsic. The author implied that the limited faculty participation in e-learning is related to the lack of extrinsic incentives, especially financial incentives.

The current study examines the underlying factors that hinder the shift to e-learning. What are the barriers faculty are facing that are influencing their decisions not to teach online? What influences exist today that were not present with the early adopters? How will faculty beliefs, concerns, and practices implicate long-range e-learning reform?

Methods and Data Sources

Qualitative methodology was used to portray processes in an active mode, provide concrete depiction of detail, and study institutional change. The study followed Erickson's (1986) approach to understand meanings in context and to interpret these patterns in light of broader contexts. This research employed the case study approach to qualitative methodology because it was the most appropriate choice for studying internal processes to uncover faculty perceptions and actions and for examining social change.

A multi-method approach was employed to incorporate diverse data sources and to generate a credible account of constituent ideologies. The researchers have been involved in training faculty to deliver courses in an online Master's program that is comprised of the three state universities. Subsequently, the data sources in this study include data from all three universities. Data sources included: twenty-four semi-structured interviews with faculty and administrators, archival document review, observational data, and participant questionnaires.

Archival data consisted of participant work, asynchronous threaded discussion postings, synchronous chat discussions, email correspondence, course evaluations, intellectual property policy, and promotion and tenure documents. The unobtrusive nature of archival records provided a rich data source without disrupting the site.

The data analysis procedures discussed in Erickson (1986) were generally followed to analyze the qualitative data. Throughout data collection, memoing was used to elaborate on and record conceptual ideas as they transpired. After archival data were coded and other sources were examined, we searched for themes, issues, and patterns evident in the documents that were collected.

Findings

The intention of this study was to identify the intra-organizational processes disabling the comprehensive push to deliver online education. This case study indicates that institutional politics and policies are at the core of faculty disinterest in the e-learning context. Findings reveal that faculty fail to participate in e-learning because teaching online is not rewarded financially or as a scholarly activity. In addition, lack of participation is attributed to competing intellectual property issues and policies.

Finding I

Potential middle to late adopters are not participating in e-learning because teaching online is not well-rewarded financially. Faculty are more concerned with extrinsic rewards than the early adopters. In contrast to the enthusiasm seen with early adopters, the middle and late adopters demand more than intrinsic rewards and are not necessarily motivated by other's success. This sentiment is reflected in the following expert from an interview: "I have been doing this for three semesters and have not reaped the benefits. If I offer my class to online students,

then I am increasing my work load because I have to deal with more students—without remuneration. Where's the incentive?" Many faculty have chosen to wait for important financial issues, such as monetary rewards (i.e., increase in salary and support for participation) to be worked out in order to provide a better return on their investment. Another faculty comment during an online discussion reflects this concern, "If I implement all this interaction and discussions with my students then I will end up spending more time communicating than I do even in the [traditional] classroom. It's just not financially rewarding to me."

Faculty are pursuing course delivery through arenas other than the standard university course offering system. For example, they are turning towards for-profit organizations to market their course. In this way faculty are paid either a stipend per course or paid by the number of enrolled students. One instructor offered his insight on the situation, "I have chosen to deliver my course through [another affiliate institution] because I get paid for my course and am guaranteed reward for the extra work I put in." The funds received and effort expended in this situation are above and beyond typical faculty income and workload. In fact, some courses are delivered to typical university students while simultaneously delivered to students paying the for-profit organization. Faculty may be adding five or more students to their roster by promoting their course through for-profit organizations, but they are being compensated for each additional student. The financial incentive is certainly there for faculty, but at this time, they must go outside of the university.

Finding II

Potential middle to late adopters refrain from participating because teaching online is not well-rewarded as a scholarly activity and is not highly related to promotion and tenure decisions and benefits. When considered in an institutional context, participation in e-learning is of

negligible consequence in the promotion and tenure process. In fact, spending time on course instruction online or otherwise can actually hurt faculty when their review process is based on research.

Faculty are well aware that teaching a course online is different from delivering it in a face-to-face setting. Online courses have more room for peer review from not only their institution, but from peers outside their own campus. One participant mentioned in interviews that an online course "is available for all to view and is more open to scrutiny because it could likely have a broader audience." Faculty want to improve both the "technological and academic quality of any course that goes online." Interested faculty talked about how they wanted to make their online course "cutting edge" and that they wanted to include up-to-date technological and pedagogical information. Faculty mentioned that the courses, "would have to be updated and refined every year or two to be competitive." This requires investigating new techniques and technology and devoting additional time to developing and updating the course online.

When these issues were discussed with administrators, they were perplexed. Their views conflicted with faculty perceptions. Administrators felt that updating the course or making courses "cutting edge" were natural developments for any course regardless of the delivery method. One said, "What's the difference? They [faculty] have to develop course materials anyway for their traditional classes; what's so different online?" Another concurred, "We pay them to develop their face-to-face course; shouldn't that be up-to-date?"

Another issue that became evident was that some administrators are not aware of pedagogical difference between the two contexts. That is, they fail to see that, to be effective, one cannot just take existing course materials (as is) and put them online. From the administrator's lens, they see no difference in time, effort, or academic scholarship. This conflict

surfaced when an administrator stated that, "You just take what you have already and transfer it online."

Distance teaching commands little attention in reward considerations. The choice to teach at a distance has serious implications for the non-tenured faculty member. This sentiment is reflected in the following excerpt from a junior faculty member during an online symposium: "I'm working towards promotion and tenure and that's my primary focus right now. I have some material for an online class but that has to wait for now." Although untenured faculty are generally excited about creating an online course, the time devoted to that task outweighed its benefits. One new instructor, who is perceived by colleagues and administrators as an excellent instructor, stated the following, "I have courses in mind for the online environment, but I can't take away time from my research and regular classes. Currently, research is rewarded more than developing an online course. So, I have chosen to wait to fully develop those courses at a later time." These types of comments were recurring in all data sources. In summary, a major concern is that an online course has the potential to reach a broad audience of critics and faculty have the desire to do the best job possible when producing a product that is viewed by diverse constituencies. Additionally, junior faculty can place their promotion and tenure in jeopardy by investing too much time in online teaching at the cost of more valued and rewarded activities such as research.

Finding III

Competing intellectual property policies are barriers for potential online faculty. Conflicting policies among institutions confound online course development because faculty need to be given some assurance that they will have at least partial ownership of their course. Each instructor is simultaneously a member of a department, a university, and an online

"regents university." The role can be confusing because policy varies in the educational system. In this case study, one department's intellectual policy varied from the regent's policy. Conflicting policy in the system confuses faculty and, as reflected in our study, confounds individual faculty efforts to become participants in the online arena. Although policy is in place at the department, university, and regent's level, the policy varies among the three state universities, and those three policies may differ from the regent policy.

Faculty who pursue the option of offering their course through for-profit organizations are often given the more appealing option of actually owning their own course. The policy is very clear in the for-profit organization (outside the university). One professor who has chosen not to deliver his course online for the university made this comment during a tri-university symposium: "We [our department] have courses available and ready right now, but we are waiting for the intellectual property issues to be worked out." He indicated that six courses were available, but were not being offered until faculty understood all the implications of competing policy issues. This case is particularly interesting, since most intellectual property policies depend on "where" the course was developed and what resources were involved. In this example, if six courses were already developed using university resources, they may already be "owned" by the university. Another faculty member concurred: "It is hard for us to talk about what courses we are going to develop when these other issues [intellectual property] haven't been addressed."

Faculty are hesitant to transition to the online environment because the necessary scaffolding is not in place. These "middle and late adopters" are wrestling with unresolved policy issues. Although early adopters are already on board, many of them are retiring or voicing concerns about policy disincentives. Therefore, it is recommended that administrators re-evaluate

faculty in the context of this new decade, where the focus should include not only early adopters but also the middle and late adopters.

Educational Importance

This study hypothesized that the motivators for faculty who have already embraced e-learning are far different than the motivators for the faculty population who are not currently participating in e-learning. To keep up with the increasing demand for e-learning, policies need to take into account the changing motivations of early adopters and address the motivations of the middle and late adopters who will prove to be key players in the next phase of e-learning efforts.

As we enter the context of a new decade, this study examined the culture of three state universities in order to impact the future of e-learning. The report concludes that the combination of university policy disincentives confound any university efforts to encourage and train faculty to teach online and are the real answer to why faculty fail to join the quest for online education. The results of this study will assist those planning to provide online educational courses and programs and may offer implications for long-range e-learning reform. This research updates the extant literature, challenges current educational policy, and initiates action concerning shift to e-learning at the post-secondary level.

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