Teacher Autonomy Defined in Online Education

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine how online instructors interpret the extent to which they exercise autonomy in an online setting and the subsequent effect it has on perceived teaching quality. In April and May of 2008 a confidential Web survey was e-mailed to randomly selected higher education instructors across the country who were employed by community colleges, public and private four-year colleges, and universities. Questions were geared towards the nature of the curriculums as well as differences in teaching requirements compared to ground school courses. A follow-up e-mail was sent to respondents, requesting them to comment on what they believed "teacher autonomy" meant, and asking them how they believed it should be defined. Results showed that online instructors who taught pre-designed curriculums had more restrictions, added required classroom time, and additional retention responsibility. These factors played a role in many online instructors' sense of loss of autonomy and, consequently, lowered their perceived teaching quality. To ensure high teaching quality, administrators should seek ways to return autonomy to instructors of online courses. The first step in this process is to identify differences between online and classroom teaching, and define teacher autonomy as it applies to online instructors within the parameters dictated by the specific educational institution.

Teacher Autonomy Defined in Online Education

The term "teacher autonomy" can be a convoluted and confusing term. Because it is an informal concept, it is often confused with "academic freedom"—an equally ambiguous term— or, alternatively, freedom from excessive interference from administration. When asked to give a definition of what teacher autonomy meant, online instructors gave varied answers. Some instructors focused on the idea of academic freedom:

- The concept of teacher autonomy is closely related to the concept of academic freedom.

- [Autonomy is defined as] academic freedom, professional freedom, and deciding what professional development I choose.

- The teacher has academic freedom to teach as they see fit within their own curriculum and classroom.

Other instructors emphasized the decision-making process:

- Autonomy refers to decisions regarding pedagogy and online class structure

- [Autonomy is] the right of the teacher to decide on matters such as materials and delivery of course objectives.

Many commented on a "bounded autonomy," and recognized that teacher autonomy is subject to certain parameters:

- Teacher autonomy is defined as the "freedom" of an instructor to facilitate learning within the confines (policies and procedures) of the institution which he/she is teaching . . . . "freedom" is limited, yet not unjustly so.

- It would be the use of professional expertise within the boundaries of agreed-upon course content and normative standards of how students should be assessed.

More often than not, though, the term is associated with the need for teachers to manage their classrooms and choose instructional materials and strategies to best foster learner autonomy. Little (1995) explains but does not define teacher autonomy when he states that

> successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers. (p. 179)

In order to determine how instructors interpret the extent to which they exercise autonomy in an online setting and the subsequent effect it has on perceived teaching quality, a comparison of administrative requirements between online classrooms and face-to-face classrooms was undertaken.

In April and May of 2008 a confidential Web survey was e-mailed to randomly selected higher education instructors across the country who were employed by community colleges, public and private four-year colleges, and universities. No consideration was given to the subject taught or whether the instructor was associated with an institution that was completely online or part of a ground school that offered online courses. Questions were geared towards the nature of the curriculums as well as differences in teaching requirements of online courses compared to ground school courses. In October 2008 a follow-up e-mail was sent to respondents, requesting that they comment on what they believed "teacher autonomy" meant, and asking them how they believed it should be defined.

While many of the respondents who taught online courses have a certain amount of flexibility and thus believe that they have retained their teacher autonomy, those instructors who

teach online courses with unalterable, pre-designed curriculums believe they have lost their teacher autonomy, and furthermore, that this negatively affects their teaching quality.

Respondents were asked whether they taught pre-designed or personally designed courses, or a combination of both. Slightly more than 12% of the 143 respondents who completed the survey indicated that they taught pre-designed curriculums. Of those particular instructors, 66.6% were not permitted to alter the curriculum to fit their teaching styles. Answers to the follow-up question showed that all but one of those instructors perceived that the rigidity of the curriculum had a negative effect on teaching quality.

Most Web survey questions specifically sought to compare requirements between online courses and face-to-face courses. Survey results indicated that online instructors spent more time and had more responsibilities than their classroom counterparts. In a brick and mortar setting, there is a direct relationship between the number of credits for the course and the amount of time an instructor spends in the classroom. Online instructors were asked whether they were required to be logged in to their online classrooms for more time than would be required in a traditional ground course (3 hours a week for a 3 credit course, etc.). Almost a quarter (24.6%) of the respondents said they are required to be logged into their online classrooms for more hours than their ground peers are required to be in their classroom. Of that number, 25.7% report that this requirement has a negative effect on their teaching quality.

In addition to spending more time logged in, online instructors are also required to be more available. About 31% of the respondents said that they were required to respond to students' questions within 24 hours, and 23.2% were required to be logged into their online classrooms on weekends, even if they did not teach a weekend course.

In a ground school course, it is typical to hold one office hour per week. Just over a quarter (25.3%) of instructors were required to hold online office hours. Of those who were required to hold office hours, 21.6% were required to hold one office hour per week, 13.5% were required to hold one office hour per week per class, 35.1% were required to hold one office hour per day, and the remaining 29.8% said "other."

Unlike regular classroom courses, some online courses have a mentor that appears in the classroom as a "guest" or "observer." Most of the time—but not always—it is made clear to the instructor that he/she will have a mentor assigned to his or her class. When asked, "Does your institution require that an online mentor be assigned to your classroom?" 2.1% of the instructors surveyed responded yes. All of them stated that this has negative effect on teaching quality.

One additional area of concern among online instructors is student retention. Traditionally, advisors play the lead role in student retention with support from instructors. However, in online education, the instructor is quickly taking on this added responsibility. When asked, "Does your institution require that you play an active role in student retention—calling students, sending letters of inquiry, etc.—even for those students who are doing well in the class?" 12.5% respondents indicated yes, with 33.3% of those respondents saying it has a negative effect on teaching quality.

Online instructors were also subject to more frequent student reviews. It is customary for an instructor to have quarterly student reviews for the first year and then yearly reviews thereafter. Just over 20% of online instructors had more frequent student reviews than classroom instructors. Moreover, online instructors also had more frequent administrative reviews: 11.3% had more than one or two administrative reviews a year.

When asked "As an online instructor, do you feel micromanaged?" 7.1% responded affirmatively. Of those who felt micro-managed, 90% said that it made them feel a "sense of loss of autonomy." Of this 90%, 88.8% indicated that this sense of loss of autonomy had a negative effect on teaching quality. While only 7.1% of those who took the survey responded to this question, it is important to note that 64.3% of all survey respondents believe that micro-management makes an instructor feel a "sense of loss of autonomy" and all respondents believe that this loss has a negative effect on teaching quality.

The instructors' answers were supplemented with explanatory notes. With regard to pre-designed courses, instructors wrote comments like "[I]t is not that it is negative so much that there is less 'buy-in' or 'ownership' on my part" and "My personality that was reflected in the course was removed entirely in the last revision. I got the hint."

A number of instructors commented specifically on the amount of time that is required to effectively manage an on-line classroom:

- "I spend approximately 12 hours a week as opposed to 3 with my online course requirements."
- "I am on ALL day answering questions via email and within Bb"
- "I am required to logon [to my classroom] 5 days a week. I find it necessary to logon 7 days a week, several times each day to check on progress and answer questions. If I don't respond to students' needs and questions promptly, they become frustrated and upset. Also the workload piles up exponentially if you don't keep on top of it."

While the survey question did not take into consideration the time that face-to-face instructors spend outside of the classroom on administrative duties, clearly in a ground school instructors are only required to be in their classroom according to the number of course credits.

Some of the frustrations of online instructors were directed towards school administration:

- "Administrators continue to underestimate the amount of time and work related to online courses."

- ". . . when it comes to on-line classes, I am suddenly treated like a new un-tested instructor. Students make a complaint and the administration assumes it is justified."

- "Any negative moral issues I have with teaching online are a result of the administration's pushing us to convert more of our classes to online but not financially supporting the faculty in doing so."

Few online instructors were required to have a mentor assigned to the classroom, but those who did felt strongly that it had a negative effect on teaching quality:

- " I feel like there is always someone looking over my shoulder—so to speak"

- "I don't like faculty and others to be added to my course without my knowing they have been added."

The restrictions imposed on those who taught unalterable, pre-designed curriculums along with added required classroom time; the inclusion of a mentor, observer or other course guest; and the added role of retention responsibility all served to play a role in many online instructors' sense of loss of autonomy and, consequently, lowered their perceived teaching quality.

Because they did not have final authority over their classrooms and instructional materials, online instructors with pre-designed curriculums felt relegated to the role of facilitators. To put this in the context of Little's (1995) description suggests that many online

instructors cannot exercise "the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process" in the same way that ground school classroom teachers can.

High teaching quality demands that instructors feel as though they have a sense of control over the curriculum and its implementation. To that end, administrators should be encouraged to determine ways in which autonomy can be returned to instructors of online courses. The first step in this process is for administrators to identify the differences between online and classroom teaching, and then define teacher autonomy as it applies to instructors of online courses. It is also essential to recognize that each educational institution has its own standards. Based on these factors, a good starting definition may be that teacher autonomy is the teachers' right to exercise control over the instructional materials and methodologies that they deem appropriate to foster learner autonomy within the context of the specific educational institution.

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