Online Learning and Post-Secondary Expectations: Bridging the Gap from Academic Leaders to Instructors

Marian Muldrow
Georgia Southern University
Ed. D. Student
Executive Leadership In Higher Education

Introduction

Because of the increase of online learning on college campuses, some researchers primarily concern themselves with student perceptions to online learning (Jain, Jain, & Jain, 2011). Others are concerned with the changes they would consider beneficial through the instructor perspective (Lederman & Jaschik, 2013). Both groups want to determine the breakdown between the structure of online courses and student success. Therefore, attention needs to be turned to the academic leaders such as the coordinators, directors, and deans of distance learning.

To support the need for increased professional development for instructors of online courses, a study reported that “70% of faculty members describe their institution’s support for online instruction as average or below, and nearly 20% of all institutions do not offer any support…, and more than one-third of faculty members who have developed or taught an online course report that developing and teaching online courses takes much more work than traditional courses” (Herman, 2012, p. 88). Among the types of training that Herman advocates for are those provided through professional development from academic leaders and training tied to evaluation programs. Furthermore, Lane (2013) explains that online course training requires a different set of skills from academic leaders and appropriate professional development programs should be in place. Moreover, Clay, who is an Academic Coordinator for Distance Learning in Georgia, states, “deans can improve online learning and help me do my job by requiring their supervisors with direct-report faculty and all faculty members themselves to be thoroughly trained in the LMS functionality before a faculty member is allowed to teach online” (personal communication, November 21, 2013). This could improve the quality of training of online course instructors and additional

guidance would enhance the success of online learning for students. Additional professional development is needed from academic leaders, and these leaders should take a skills approach to leadership as Katz (1955) suggests.

Online learning is “engaging [to] the learner in reflective and collaborative thought processes through learner-to-learner interaction results in the most effective learning” (Cox and Cox, 2008, p. 553). In addition, online learning can open the doors to communication between peers and students (Cox and Cox, 2008). As a result, online learning can be a powerful tool to educate today’s population of scholars because they are already submersed in it through social media, texting, and the Internet.

Since schools around the world are embracing online learning as a prominent feature on college campuses (Lederman & Jaschik, 2013), education must be prepared for this influx of technologically driven students. Less contemporary educators tend to be against online learning and would rather not change the world of education through the influx of technology. However, it is important to note that the beginnings of online learning, distance education, independent study, or any of the myriad of terms sprouted from economic, social, and physical disabilities limiting individuals from attending a school (Schulte, 2011). By offering so many online learning opportunities, institutions might be counterproductive and aiding the same impairments that online learning was meant to prevent.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study is to explore the leadership gap that exists between instructors and academic leadership that prohibits students from being successful in online courses, which is the result of academic leaders who inadequately prepare faculty. This is a leadership gap because programs should be established by the administrators to ensure all avenues of learning are addressed. As the enforcers of the college’s strategic plan, academic leaders should be held accountable for training the staff to teach growing numbers of online courses. Students’ experiences in online learning are a direct result of the instruction they receive. However, instructors can only educate students based on the knowledge and training they receive. Furthermore, academic leaders should employ strategies to bridge the gap between the instructor and the online learning platform. The skills approach to leadership as outlined by Robert Katz (1955) is useful in examining the challenges and experiences of the instructors and how those apply to the characteristics of a leader. A skills leader possesses three different abilities: technical skills, human skills, and

conceptual skills (Katz as cited in Virkus, 2009). The skills based leader recognizes that a particular knowledge base is needed in order to conduct an institution effectively.

History of Online Learning

The incorporation of technology is not a new concept, and it is a widespread across college campuses. To set distance learning in context of today's online learning courses, Power and Gould-Morven (2011) suggest that Saint Paul, author of the Corinthians, developed distance learning over 2,000 years ago. Therefore, technology unfolded in the classrooms in stages; the first one began with Saint Paul's letters to his people followed centuries later by the mid 1800s with Sir Issac Pitman's introduction of correspondence courses, which acted as the catalyst for what continued to evolve into distance learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Schulte, 2011). Pitman's early courses used laser discs, cassette tapes, television, CD-ROMs; however, as the times progressed, so did the concept of moving technology instruction out of the classrooms.

Shortly after the time Pitman established his concept of distance learning, the world was introduced to what were called teaching machines. Sidney Leavitt Pressey developed these machines in the 1920s as a way of scoring multiple choice tests. By 1954, B. F. Skinner suggested improvements to these machines to work better in academic settings. The idea was to be an aide for teachers to reach diverse learners in a heterogeneous classroom (Tiemann & Markle, 2009). These machines, however, could not stand alone as a way of learning for students in the absence of an instructor as hybrid and online models can today.

The next phase that came about was the Open University concept that was established at the United Kingdom Open University, which is similar in design to today's hybrid model. The model included television broadcasts, videos, and even radio (Schulte, 2011). The last phase brought about the present day sense of technology, which is online learning through the computer without students attending campus. The term online learning is being phased out by that of electronic learning or e-learning (Upadhyaya & Mallik 2013).

Faculty Perceptions

Lederman and Jaschik (2013) presented a webinar for instructors concerning online teaching. According to the researchers of the study, one in five professors state that online courses do not serve students as well as face-to-face courses even though, at some schools, nearly half of the instructors teach or have taught an online course. In addition, nearly half of those instructors believe that online courses are not as rigorous as traditional

classes while only 7% believe that online courses could be designed to be equivalent to a face-to-face course (Lederman & Jaschik, 2013).
Lederman and Jaschik (2013) suggest the need for improvement in structure of online learning. This would aid in educating students who want to study online. The improvements would improve instructor morale and lead to a better experience for everyone. Since many colleges' online campuses are growing at a larger rate than even their physical campuses, academic leaders must find a way to retain these students.

Naidu (2013) suggests in an editorial the need for teaching practices of online instructors to be reevaluated by academic leaders. Naidu claims that instructors recognize how technology and workloads have shifted, but the professional development by academic leaders in higher education has not been as consistent. Samantha Lentle-Keenan (as cited in Naidu, 2013) calls for "the development of institutional strategic plans and policies around learning and teaching online and with technology, including models for the design and development of online courses as well as support and the professional development of staff involved in teaching online" (p. 2). To further situate the need for online learning professional development, Darabi and Lin (as cited in Naidu, 2013) explains how instructors desire for the quality of online courses to be designed with guidance and support. The primary responsibility lies in the hands of the academic leaders who are to oversee online instruction and student as well as faculty technology needs.

A study conducted by Gabriel, Campbell, Wiebe, MacDonald, and McAuley (2012) includes eight professors at a University in Canada. These researchers used a quantitative data instrument to survey the practices of first year university instructors and their expectations of using digital technology. The purpose of the study was to determine whether they were meeting the expectations of the students. The result of the study was that digital technology embraces both the social aspects of learning and the individual quest for knowledge, but the study concluded that colleges need to offer increased professional development regarding using various technologies in the classroom. Professional development also needs to occur in order to reconsider how instructors need to distribute knowledge and how today's students learn. Though the students completed their coursework, instructors did not feel they incorporated various ways to use technology in the course because they did not have the necessary prior knowledge.

Student Perceptions

Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, and Killion (2012) analyze the student perceptions of online learning as related to creating a sense of community among those in the course. The researchers used five focus groups of students, and the primary concentration of the focus groups was to discuss aloneness, anonymity, nonverbal communication, trepidations, and unknowns. A prerequisite of the study was for the participants to have taken at least two online courses. The first instrument used to collect data was general questions and opinions about online learning. Along with that, open-ended discussion questions were sent to the participants, and they compiled their answers and sent them back.

In this study, the students took classes and completed coursework primarily online through a controlled platform provided by the respective colleges, and the instructor acted as the facilitator. The research study attempted to figure out what students needed in order to be successful in an online course and what instructors needed to do in order to provide students with such an environment in terms of course design and implementation. In addition, the researchers wanted to understand how students in different disciplines learn and interact in an online environment in order to better service the students.

The results of the study proved that when the curriculum embeds, creates, and fosters community, the learning environment improves. The students were more inclined to engage with, not only the coursework, but their peers during online assignments. Though some of the students preferred the sense of being alone and being able to work independently, most of them wanted to know their voice mattered. They were also reluctant to share information with each other, personal information, or even asking another student for help because they did not know each other as the instructor did not design the course with the means to do so. Trepidation was also a part of the same feelings they felt with aloneness. Understandably, the participants also noted that relationships developed slower online than they did in person because of the lack of design that made for communication between peers. As for nonverbal communication, the majority of the participants did not like not being able to see the expressions, inflections, and laughter, or other interaction they would normally receive from conversations. However, they did like the telephone interviews where they could hear a voice. Consequently, the students explained that not being able to hear the instructor discuss the syllabus made navigating the course harder and expectations were not clear. In addition, they usually felt out of place asking for clarification on assignments and would just muddle through the work.

Because the researchers see interactions as a complex and multifaceted form of education, the dialogue between students should create a real-world learning environment (Jain *et al*., 2012; Reilly *et al*., 2012). The implication is that online learning does not have one clear look; instead, it depends on the course, region, institution, college, and expected learning outcomes and objectives.

On the other hand, Zimmerman (as cited in Shea *et al*., 2013) sees students as being self-regulated learners. He insists that online learners need to communicate with their peers often and ask peers for help as well how often they helped others. They found that the instructional role acquired by the students mimicked the traditional role that students have in social networking platforms when they communicate with their peers, which means instructors need to be educated on the nuances of social networking platforms in order to incorporate those into their leaning environments online. Instructors must be able to gauge the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate students who take courses online in order to determine the students' motivation, characteristics, and experiences and decide what they can do to improve the experience as well as how the chosen tools in the learning platform affect the learners (Armstrong 2011; Jain *et al*. 2012; Reilly *et al*. 2012).

The aim of Armstrong's (2011) study was to determine the motivation, characteristics, and experiences of undergraduate students who take courses online to define what instructors can do to improve the experience as well as how the instructors' chosen tools in the learning platform affect the learners. The questions revolved around how communication determines students' approaches, and whether negative experiences were the result of technology or how technology was used in the course. Additionally, Armstrong (2011) analyzed the data to find out whether or not how the instructor structured the course impacted student outcomes.

The methodology was qualitative and included one-on-one open ended interviews, think-aloud observations, and online focus groups. The primary means of data collection was student interviews. Armstrong (2011) collected data for two semesters in 2008 from two different sites. Additional data was collected in 2010.

The theoretical framework was approached using a three pronged analysis: Deep, strategic, and surface. Armstrong (2011) defines strategic learning as approaching; deep learning as examining the facts critically and making links between ideas, yet he doesn't provide a

definition for surface. The responses from the study instruments were analyzed and categorized by the before mentioned approaches. The think-aloud data was simply used to add to the information gained during the interviews. However, not all students participated in all the instruments.

The findings show that even though most students took the online courses because they preferred to work independently, they always want clear and detailed instructions on every assignment. In addition, students feel that faculty didn't have a presence in the course. Students, overall, were not negative about the idea of using technology but rather about its implementation and application in the coursework. Armstrong (2011), Jain *et al*.(2012), Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, and Killion (2012), Shea *et al*. (2013) all point towards the idea that even though most students take online courses because they prefer to work independently, they always want clear and detailed instructions on every assignment.

In addition, instructors understand that regardless of how technology is used, different students will respond in different ways. However, the key, just in a face-to-face classroom, is instructors must incorporate a variety of measures to ensure that they reach all students in some capacity even if they prefer one method over another. Students are always going to take different psychological approaches to learning as is in every environment, but the instructor must be prepared to meet a variety of needs.

Current Trends

According to Marc Prensky (2004), 1.5 billion students have access to cell phones and other devices; he goes on to call these devices computers in their pockets. Prensky (2004) is an advocate for appreciating the power of having a computer in a student's pocket to assist in everyday learning experiences and make a strong statement when he explains how cell phones are not just communications devices or new ways of communicating between people, they are actually computers in the students pockets and are always with them (Prensky, 2004). His belief is that by prohibiting students from using the devices, educators cut their students off from the full potential of their learning experience.

As Naidu (2013) and Borup, West, and Graham (2013) point out, the inclusion of visual communication, such as a recording by the instructor, in order to increase the social aspect of online learning, which means that students would not have to use outside sites or devices to communicate with the instructor or the other students in the course, or they would simply click a link that is already there in the online learning platform course content. Borup *et al*.

(2013) examined how even though students have a variety of learning styles, being able to see their instructor, even though virtually, is a technique that crosses various learning styles because it is more about the person-to-person experience and being able to connect to a person and not just an email address. The fact that Shea *et al*. (2013) tied social networking into their study on online learners is a sound 21st century move and surely lends itself to further exploration and would be an extension to the Jain *et al*. (2011) and Borup *et al*. (2013) studies to see how the different disciplines can most effectively use social networking in online learning. Further analysis of the Borup *et al*. (2013) and Naidu (2013) study suggests that in order for social networking to be effective in the online sphere, it must not happen sporadically or once during the semester, but it should be an active component to the course that academic leaders are going to have to integrate as a component to preparing instructors to teach online courses.

Along with the previous trends in online learning, Massively Open Online Courses, which are commonly referred to as MOOCs, are growing in popularity and also mentioned in the 2013 Horizon Report. The interesting aspect of MOOCs is “the connectivity of social networking, the facilitation of an acknowledged expert in a field of study, and a collection of freely accessible online resources” (McAuley as cited in Rodriguez, 2012). Because the courses are “massive,” they contain many students at one time and open because they use various types of learning platforms and open to, usually, anyone with computer access and conducted by major universities (Rodriguez, 2012). The results of a survey after MOOC showed that the participants were not always familiar with the various tools used in the course, and they had no instruction from the instructor on how to do so (Rodriguez, 2012). In addition, Cusumano (2013) supports the notion that instructors are unprepared for MOOCs by citing funding as a reason along with limited resources. However, professional development can be as simple as the academic leaders learning the nuances of the systems and passing that information to the instructors.

Future of Online Learning

In the video “What are today’s college students like?” digital natives and techno newbies are the two categories of students. They are either too far removed from 9/11, or they are digital natives and have grown up with a fast-paced and ever changing world. The latter have created their own worlds of technology and do not see a connection to traditional classroom and college campuses. Educators need to understand the expectations and habits of these students, who want an online experience, and find ways to meet them where they are.

Social norms, physical disabilities, and economic barriers continue to change and evolve, and students do not need the structure and guidance that the four walls of college used to provide, but they need a new system for a new student, which instructors must understand. Students read more emails and status-updates than school related material and bring their laptop to class to occupy their time. The question is: Can formal training in different types of technology save education? That is a valid question for educators in terms of what they can do for students and provide teachers with in the classroom to make the experience the best possible for students. Schulte's (2011) review proved that online learning educators should consider "alternate education models [that are adaptive to online learning]… and the needs of our present and future society" (p. 39).

Clay (2012) sees the future of online learning as a bit of a crisis. The crisis stems from the administration not taking online learning seriously enough. She explained it this way: "The decision-makers must… provide [academic leaders] with the tools [they] need in order to do [their] job… [the ability] to travel to multiple campuses to train faculty, supervisors, and students; attend conferences and workshops that keep [them] abreast of rapidly changing, new technology in the distance-education arena (personal communication, November 21, 2013).
Until the academic leaders are trained and given the tools they need to improve online learning, it will remain in a state of limbo.

Conclusion

Though teachers are in their roles in higher education because they have proven to be educators and experts in their field, experience in the content is not enough to be prepared completely for the world of online learning. Further research must explore the academic leaders and the skills they need to possess in order to ensure the instructors are prepared for their online classes. If more students are going to continue to enroll in online college courses, to be more competitive in the workforce, it only makes sense that academic administrators are doing their part to maintain high standards as institutions of higher learning.

References

Armstrong, D. (2011). Students' perceptions of online learning and instructional tools: A qualitative study of undergraduate student's use of online tools. *The Turkish Online Journal*

of Educational Technology, 10(3), 222-226. Retrieved September 6, 2013, from http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=EJ944973

Borup, J, West, R. E., & Graham, R. (2013). The influence of asynchronous video communication on learner social presence: a narrative analysis of four cases. *Distance Education*, 34 (1), 48-63.

Cox, B. & B. Cox. (2008). Developing interpersonal and group dynamics through asynchronous threaded discussions: The use of discussion board in collaborative learning. *Education*, 128(4), 553-565.

Cusumano, M. A. (2013). Are the Costs of 'Free' Too High in Online Education?*Communications of the ACM*, 56(4), 26-29. doi:10.1145/2436256.2436264

Gabriel, M. A., Campbell, B., Wiebe, S., MacDonald, R. J., & McAuley, A. (2012). The role of digital technologies in learning: Expectations of first year university students. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 38(1).

Herman, J. (2012). Faculty Development Programs: The Frequency and Variety of Professional Development Programs Available to Online Instructors. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 16(5), 87-106.

Jain, P., Jain, S., & Jain, S. (2011). Interactions among online learners: A quantitative interdisciplinary study. *Education*, 131(3), 538-544.

Katz, R. L. (1955). *Skills of an effective administrator*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Lane, L. M. (2013). An Open, Online Class to Prepare Faculty to Teach Online. *Journal of Educators Online*, 10(1),

Lederman, D., & Jaschik, S. (2013). *Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology*. Retrieved September 06, 2013, from http://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/survey-faculty-attitudes-technology

Moore, M. G. & Kearsley, G. (2005). *Distance education. A systems view* (2nd Ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Naidu, S. (Ed.). (2013). Learning about learning and teaching online. *Distance Education*, 34 (1), 1-3. DOI: 10.1080/01587919.2013.775715.

Prensky, M. (2004). What can you learn from a cell phone? – Almost anything! Web. Retrieved September 2, 2012 from http://www.marcorensky.com/writing.

Power, M., & Gould-Morven, A. (2011). Head of Gold, Feet of Clay: The Online Learning Paradox. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(2), 19-39.

Reilly, J., Gallagher-Lepak, S., & Killion, C. (2012). “Me and my computer”: Emotional factors in online learning. *Teaching with Technology*, 33(2), 100-105. doi: 10.5480/1536-5026-33.2.100

Rodriguez, C. (2012). MOOCs and the AI-Stanford Like Courses: Two Successful and Distinct Course Formats for Massive Open Online Courses. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*.

Schulte, M. (2011). The foundations of technology distance education: A review of the literature to 2001. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1), 33-34.

Shea, P., Hayes, S., Smith, S., Vickers, J., Bidjerano, T., Gozza-Cohen, M., & … Chi-Hua, T. (2013). Online Learner Self-Regulation: Learning Presence Viewed through Quantitative Content- and Social Network Analysis. *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning*, 14(3), 427-461.

Tiemann, P. & Markle, S. “Teaching Machines” 2009, Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia, *EBSCOhost*, viewed 8 January 2014.

Upadhyaya, K. T., & Mallik, D. (2013). E-Learning as a Socio-Technical System: An Insight into Factors Influencing its Effectiveness. Business Perspectives & Research, 2(1), 1-12.

Virkus, S. (2009). Skills Approach: Robert Katz. *Leadership Models*. Retrieved from http://www.tlu.ee/~sirvir/Leadership/Leadership Models/skills_approach_robert_katz.html

“What are today’s college students like? A recent national portrait provides a picture. (25 November 2012). *YouTube*. Retrieved from www.youtube.com.watch?v=zJCw3s RzULM.