

From Campus to Cyberspace: The Transition of Classroom Faculty to Distance Education Roles

by Michael Beaudoin

The Changing Professoriate

In an increasingly digitized society, both the profile of colleges and universities, as well as the role of its faculty, are experiencing profound changes, as both providers and consumers of educational products and services adapt to new ways of teaching and learning across time and space. As busy working adults seeking additional credentials through part-time study demand convenience and flexibility, academic planners and decision makers now worry as much about which buildings to wire for Internet access as they do about where to build new parking lots. There will, of course, be a continuing market for the traditional campus-based experience for large numbers of recent high school graduates, yet a larger percentage of even this population is now taking advantage of computer-assisted courses, whether they live on campus or 1,500 miles distant.

New England represents a market place that is especially well suited for distance learning activities. With a large land area, many small rural communities, difficult driving conditions over long winter months, the lack of a well developed community-college system in some states, and many technical colleges filled to capacity, there is urgent need for increased access to post-secondary education opportunities. New England institutions of higher education would do well to consider partnerships with one another, and with regional businesses and industries to collaboratively design and deliver additional distance education initiatives. If this does not occur soon, more and more enterprising out-of-region institutions with entrepreneurial capability will move into the region, knowing that there are lucrative markets for learners who, rather than come to campuses for classes on fixed schedules, will search and satisfy their needs via education that can be delivered anytime, anywhere.

Despite heightened interest in distance education nationally and globally, New England institutions still lag behind their counterparts in other regions of the country. Even national surveys reveal continued reluctance on the part of much of the professoriate to utilize any form of technology. The Campus Computing Project found in its most recent survey that many college instructors still don't even use e-mail to communicate with their students, much less integrate online features into their courses. Only twenty percent of the faculty make use of electronic

course management tools made available to them by their institutions.

But what about those faculty who do become actively engaged in alternative modes of teaching students at a distance? Although they still represent a minority of faculty on campus who make some use of computer assisted tools to teach asynchronously across time and space, their numbers are steadily increasing at public and private, large and small, rural and urban, prestigious and lower-tier institutions. The transition of faculty from face-to-face classroom teaching at a fixed time and place to asynchronous mentoring from a distance is being played out at hundreds of academic institutions worldwide. How are they making this transition from the classroom to cyberspace? Considerable attention has been given to comparisons of the efficacy of distance education and more conventional classroom-based instruction. Less evident at this point is data on how faculty are responding and adjusting to this burgeoning phenomenon.

The role of instructional personnel is inevitably changing, and significant numbers of faculty, whether by individual choice or institutional direction, are now engaged in, or at least flirting with, some aspect of teaching at a distance. Most are doing so after some years in the more familiar and comfortable role of content expert delivering lectures and dispensing assignments at the front of a classroom to a group of students assembled at a fixed time and place. While many now elect to integrate some form of instructional technology designed to augment their classroom teaching, others are faced with the prospect of adapting to instructional duties that may eliminate the need for any face-to-face encounter between teacher and learners.

A research project conducted in 2001 yielded some interesting data regarding this phenomenon which may be instructive to both faculty experiencing this role change and to administrators who oversee institutional adoption of distance education formats. This research activity studied the transition and self-perception of a sample group of faculty currently teaching in distance education programs, all of who have taught previously (or still are teaching) in traditional campus-based academic settings. The study examined and analyzed how these faculty have adapted and adjusted to their new teaching milieu, how effective they feel they are, what tools they utilize, how

satisfying this different role is compared to their earlier instructional tasks, and what their perception is of their students? satisfaction with them and with courses delivered in a distance learning context. Approximately 100 faculty currently teaching full-time or as part-time adjunct at six institutions (two in New England and four in other regions of the U.S.) which offer graduate degree programs delivered through distance education modalities, were asked to complete a 35 question survey in fall, 2001. Criteria for participation were a minimum of two years teaching in a classroom environment, and a minimum of one year of distance teaching experience. Fifty respondents completed and returned the instrument, which was sent to them either electronically or via the mails.

Faculty Profile

As expected, the classroom teaching backgrounds of respondents varied, with 50% indicating they had more than ten years of classroom experience, while the other respondents were evenly divided between 2-5 and 6-10 years of traditional teaching. Not surprisingly, their teaching experience in distance education venues is considerably less, with 62% having 1-5 years background, 20% with 6-10 years, and only 12% reporting more than 10 years of distance teaching. At the time of the survey, three-quarters of them were teaching concurrently in both environments, and nearly 50% reported that they were teaching three courses at a distance within a single semester. While this latter number might seem somewhat high, it should be noted that many are teaching as adjuncts, and several are recently retired educators, thus for some, this is their primary professional activity at the moment. Slightly more than half indicate they have between 26 and 50 students in each of their distance courses, about one quarter have 51-100 students, and the other respondents claimed to have enrollments of 100 or more per course (it is possible that some aggregated the number of students in all of their courses).

Resources Utilized & Time Spent Teaching at a Distance

Because all respondents teach at institutions using primarily print-based instructional materials (augmented by electronic media such as video-tapes), there is a high incidence of correspondence delivery. In fact, 92% exchange printed materials with students; forty-six percent reported use of tapes (a medium used by several of the institutions represented); eighty-eight percent use e-mail, 50% correspond via regular mail, 34% use the telephone, and 18% use the Internet (presumably through a course web site). Although a majority (56%) felt they had less interaction with students enrolled in distance education courses than in classroom-based courses, nearly one-quarter felt their communication with students at a

distance was greater than with those in face-to-face settings. Exactly half of the faculty surveyed stated that they spent about the same amount of time teaching in each format, and about one-quarter of them spend more time on their distance teaching duties. The average number of hours per week usually spent to provide instructional support for a three-credit distance education course is nine hours.

Training for & Transitioning to Teaching at a Distance

Thirty-two of the fifty faculty reported that they had received some type of training for their new roles as distance educators, but approximately one-third of the respondents did not receive any training from their institution or from elsewhere. A few indicated that they did obtain a general overview of the program from administrators, and a few others said they simply spoke with experienced faculty already involved in the same program. When asked what sort of training might have been helpful, orientation to the use of technology was cited most often.

The most frequently cited challenge, indicated by one-fifth of them, is adjusting to the lack of face-to-face contact with students. Since none of the distance education programs these faculty members are associated with currently include a visual two-way medium, faculty awareness of students? comprehension is determined through verbal and written communication. The second most common issue (identified by 8%) is difficulty adjusting to and becoming facile with the technology used in their courses. Other factors cited include: slow turnaround time of materials between students and faculty; the time-consuming process of mentoring distance education courses, and a few complained of having too many students and too little compensation. Despite the time involved in these activities, some stated that they did not feel they were making a significant contribution to their students' learning. A few respondents also expressed frustration at the lack of communication and feedback from program administrators. Two respondents indicated that making the transition from teaching younger students to older adult learners was actually a more difficult adjustment for them than the change from the classroom to a distance teaching role.

Roles and Rewards of Teaching at a Distance

Despite some persistent challenges for faculty increasingly involved in this mode of instruction, they have a sense of their new roles, and articulate significant satisfaction with these roles. The role of 'mentor' was selected most often (by 38%) from a list of five options; 32% chose 'facilitator'; about one quarter (26%) felt their role was to provide feedback, answer questions, and offer encourage-

ment, support, guidance and constructive criticism. Twenty-two percent identified themselves as teachers; and 14% viewed themselves as content experts. When asked if they felt their students recognize the importance of their role and its contribution to their learning, a substantial majority (92%) said yes, while only 4% replied no.

Asked about their own level of satisfaction with their distance teaching, a slight majority (54%) replied that they are about equally satisfied with their classroom and distance teaching. Thirty-four percent indicated they were more satisfied with classroom teaching, and only 8% felt generally more satisfied with their distance teaching. When asked to explain their response, 16% identified aspects of classroom dynamics they felt to be preferable to teaching at a distance, primarily related to the ability to have visual, face-to-face contact with students. But to the question regarding the most rewarding aspects of their distance teaching, many positive experiences were cited. Sixteen percent felt they had a positive impact on students; 13% were gratified by the mentoring relationship established with students; an equal number cited the satisfaction of witnessing self-directed learning taking place; eight percent felt they were providing an educational experience not otherwise available to these students; and eight percent noted the rewards of working with motivated students.

Another tangible reward associated with distance teaching is, of course, compensation. To the question asking them to compare their salaries for teaching distance education vs. classroom-based courses, 56% replied they are paid less for teaching distance education courses; 32% indicated they receive about equal pay for both types of teaching; and only 4% report they are compensated at a higher rate for teaching at a distance.

Student, Colleague & Self-Perceptions of Distance Education

The study sought information not only about the respondents' own perceptions of distance teaching, but also what they perceive to be the opinions and attitudes of their students and colleagues toward distance education. Eighty-four percent reported that their students completed a faculty/course evaluation at the completion of their online course(s), yet only slightly more than half (54%) felt that it was an appropriate instrument. When asked to characterize their distant students' satisfaction with their online teaching, compared with evaluations by their classroom-based students, 43% felt there was a comparable level of satisfaction among both student cohorts; 20% felt that distance education students were generally

more satisfied; and only 8% were of the opinion that their classroom students were more satisfied.

To a question about their colleagues' perception of distance teaching, nearly half of the respondents felt most other faculty considered distance teaching less important than classroom instruction. Only one responded that colleagues considered distance teaching equal to classroom teaching, yet 12% indicated colleagues felt distance teaching was more difficult. Just over one-quarter perceived their colleagues to be largely indifferent to distance education. Reasons cited for why many of their colleagues did not view distance education favorably are: it is too impersonal, it is too new; it is not effective. Several felt their classroom counterparts underestimated the time involved in distance teaching, or did not recognize the rigor of this form of education. The survey asked respondents if they believed their respective academic department and/or institution recognized their impact as distance educators on their students. Fifty-eight percent feel they get some acknowledgment for their role from their organization, and 22% replied they did not get any sense of recognition. A few who did sense some positive recognition made a distinction between their department and the overall institution, with most indicating that their own academic department was more attuned to their distance education roles and responsibilities.

A question was posed asking faculty about their perceptions of students' most positive and negative experiences with distance education, based on feedback they had received. Sixty-eight percent felt their students were about equally satisfied with courses they had taken in class and at a distance. Eighteen percent felt their students were more satisfied with their distance education experiences, while only 6% thought students were more satisfied with classroom courses. Nearly one-third (30%) thought that relevance and applicability of the curriculum was what their students considered to be the most positive aspect of their distance courses; the same percentage believe that convenience and flexibility of the distance format was what appealed most to students. Twenty-two percent identified faculty feedback as the feature students valued most. Other positive aspects cited were the opportunity provided to students to learn from one another, and to reflect on their learning. Distance education is not, of course, immune to criticism from its consumers. Sixteen percent of these faculty felt that the aspect of distance learning their students considered to be most negative is the slow response time in getting faculty/mentor feedback on submitted course work; fourteen percent cited that poor administrative support was their students' major criticism. Lack of interaction with faculty

(10%), lack of interaction with other students (8%), and too much work (8%) were other negative aspects cited by students.

Faculty were also asked to assess the quality of instructional materials utilized in their distance course compared to what might typically be used in classroom courses. Two-thirds considered quality to be about the same in both teaching venues; 16% felt distant students had better materials available to them; and 10% thought classroom-based students benefitted from better materials. As with classroom courses wherein some students maintain a low profile (e.g., frequent absences, minimum participation), so too can distance educators typically expect 'low visibility' students (e.g., little or no contact with faculty, minimum participation in online discussions with other students). This behavior is compounded by the fact that distance students cannot be seen by faculty. When asked if they thought these minimally active students were still engaged in the course and learning from it, a surprisingly high number (70%) responded affirmatively. Only 16% believe these students are compromising their learning by low participation. We also wanted to know if those teaching at a distance feel that the achievability and quality of learning outcomes is similar to what they expect in a classroom teaching environment. Slightly more than half rate learning outcomes about the same in either instructional setting; 22% think it is higher with distance learners; and 16% rate this higher in the classroom.

The survey included a question asking if faculty had changed their opinion of distance education in any way since they had acquired more experience teaching in this medium. Nearly sixty percent acknowledged that changes had occurred, all reporting a more positive opinion. Most who responded affirmatively indicated that they now took distance education more seriously as a viable alternative (to classroom teaching). Comments included: more impressed with materials; more respect for students; courses more challenging; more impact on students; more time consuming. Twenty-two percent now realize that this mode of teaching is much more labor intensive than they had initially thought. Several expressed much less skepticism now that they had experience in this mode of instruction.

Faculty Recommendations for Improved Distance Teaching

Finally, respondents were invited to recommend one change that they felt would improve their current distance teaching situation. The most frequent cited suggestions were: enhanced electronic systems for faculty-student contact (22%); improved administrative procedures to

support faculty (16%); the inclusion of some face-to-face contact with students (14%). and increased compensation (12%). Other comments included more input in course development; more technology training; smaller numbers of students per course, and quicker turn-around time of material between students and faculty. Ten respondents chose to offer a final remark in the open-ended portion of the survey instrument. All but one of these, who was critical of the quality of instructional materials, made highly positive statements about distance education in general, expressed high regard for their particular program, and wanted to make clear what a positive experience their involvement in distance education has been for them.

Analysis & Implications

The research findings highlighted above, though preliminary, are helpful in identifying and understanding the attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of a professoriate whose role is fundamentally changing at a rapid pace. Can we discern useful implications and applications for those moving into distance teaching roles as well as for those supporting these faculty? In view of the dramatic changes and adjustments involved in moving from a classroom setting to a distance format, it appears from our study of fifty faculty at six different institutions, that training, monitoring and evaluating faculty to function effectively, and to enhance their skills in this new environment are not seen as particularly high institutional priorities. This is evident in the fact that one-third of our respondents received no training whatsoever as they assumed these new functions, worked with new technology, and often shifted from faculty-driven instruction to student-centered learning. The same number do not even see results of student evaluations, nor do they receive any feedback regarding their teaching. It may be that some program administrators are reluctant to impose training on faculty for fear of offending experienced teachers. Yet, many of these same faculty indicate assistance with instructional technology, guidance on effectively mentoring adult learners, and adjusting from being content experts to facilitating the learning process for adult learners, are all aspects of this transition where support would be welcome.

Nonetheless, a clear majority has a solid sense of their new roles; nearly three-quarters of the respondents refer to themselves as mentors or facilitators of their students? learning progress, and nearly two-thirds see their main function as providing feedback. Surprisingly, even though a few express some frustration that they do not feel they really contribute much to their students? learning, over 90% feel that their students recognize and appreciate the role they play. And nearly three-quarters of

these faculty felt that even those students who maintain a low profile in their courses are nonetheless still learning and benefiting from it. It seems that most of these faculty have come to recognize that facilitating self-directed learning is as critical to students' success as disseminating content. This study also confirmed findings of many other research activities that have concluded that quantity and quality of interaction between students and faculty and students with other students are the qualities most closely associated with faculty satisfaction with distance teaching. A strong sentiment expressed among our sample of distance educators was that this work is very labor intensive, that they receive little appreciation from their colleagues or institution for their efforts, and only two respondents stated they were compensated more for their distance teaching than for their classroom instruction.

How satisfied are these faculty once they have acclimated somewhat to teaching at a distance? Since 58% stated that they felt more positive about distance education now that they had acquired some experience and familiarity with distance education, it seems somewhat surprising then, that only eight percent felt more satisfied with their distance teaching than with their classroom work. Despite increasingly favorable attitudes toward distance education, many still miss the visual, face-to-face, live contact with students. This is reflected in what they say they want changed to improve distance education. The most frequently cited recommendation is for increased interaction through various media; several even would like to have live, synchronous sessions with students to complement the interaction achieved via distance modalities (even though most institutions delivering distance education do not require any on-site sessions for degree completion). Another key area where faculty express need for improvement is increased administrative support. Just as students in some distance education programs suffer the fate of being "out of sight, out of mind," apparently so too do many faculty experience a feeling of being somewhat abandoned by their institution. This, of course, is exacerbated by the fact that most of these distance education programs are serviced by part-time adjunct faculty, who have little or no presence on campuses.

Although this study did not specifically address the issue of how the use of instructional technology affects faculty prospects regarding promotion and tenure decisions, this is an increasingly important area that demands urgent attention. Currently, many distance education programs are serviced by large cadres of adjunct faculty not involved in tenure considerations, but as more full-time tenure track faculty engage in teaching with technology,

institutions are well advised to address the issue thoughtfully and soon. There are other intriguing questions which this study did not pursue, but which warrant further attention and action:

- What role does gender play in satisfaction levels of distance educators?
- Do faculty who miss face-to-face contact with students make optimum use of online communications tools?
- Does reduced satisfaction levels of faculty who miss face-to-face contact make any difference in their teaching effectiveness?
- Is the transition from classroom to distance venues easier for adjunct faculty than for full-time academics?
- Do faculty who avoid distance teaching opportunities do so because of doubts about how to teach with technology, or doubts about the efficacy of the medium?
- How do distance teaching experiences influence instructional approaches when faculty return to classroom settings?
- How do distance faculty interpret (and grade) the behavior of online students who participate only minimally in their courses?
- Do distance faculty expect more interaction in distance settings than they do in classroom venues?
- Will faculty whose work in distance education is not rewarded seek alternative employment in corporate e-learning settings?

These and other important questions regarding distance education and training, both in education and in the for-profit corporate sector cannot be ignored. The continuing skepticism of this burgeoning phenomenon by the traditional academic establishment does a disservice to those who have launched innovative programs utilizing technology to provide increased access to educational opportunities for those seeking anytime-anyplace learning. Despite the fact that, in 1998, 1,690 post-secondary institutions enrolled 1.6 million students in 54,000 distance courses, there are still too many who believe that only fringe institutions desperate for new enrollments engage in such practices. Although there exists substantial and credible research documenting the efficacy of this mode of teaching and learning, the argument persists that it is not as good as face-to-face education. This implies that what goes on in a typical classroom is what should be emulated. Further, despite evidence to the contrary, the critics maintain that teaching at a distance is too impersonal for students and therefore is not satisfying to them.

The results of this study, as well as other ongoing research in the field, reveals that computer-assisted teaching and learning does not compromise teaching goals or learning outcomes, despite geographic distance and time differences. After all, it is to be remembered that technology is merely a tool to facilitate the process, and that simply because a student is not visible to the instructor, does not mean that learning is lacking. John Dewey observed that a critical element of the teaching process is to create the conditions for ‘productive inquiry’ that takes place independent from the teacher. In the distance education environment, this inquiry is indeed occurring, however invisible it may be. Faculty who make the transition from the classroom to teaching at a distance have an opportunity to not only foster and facilitate their students’ learning, but also to reflect on and enhance their practice in both instructional settings.

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