Faculty’s Perceptions of Online Education

A Qualitative study

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Abstract

This research is designed to provide a qualitative description of university instructors’ experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of online learning in an effort to better design online courses that meet the needs of both teaching instructors and learning students. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of instructors regarding the advantages and challenges they face in online delivery of coursework compared to their experiences in the face-to-face delivery. The participants in the study were eight instructors, not necessarily at professorial rank, who work for a public Canadian university and who taught courses using both face-to-face and online formats. An inductive, qualitative methodology was used in this study. In depth interviews with the eight participating instructors were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed for themes in which the instructors related to online teaching and learning. Suggestions for improving distance education courses based on the participating instructors’ perceptions of their own teaching experiences are offered.
Introduction

Online education is increasing at a rapid pace in the environment of higher education. According to Stacey and Wiesenber (2007), this form of education has been used in recent years as a supplement to traditional face-to-face teaching. This growing interest and activity surrounding distance learning creates the need to understand how the expansion of distance education may be re-shaping education now and what it suggests for the future of formal institutionalized education (Nateriello, 2005).

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that during the 2000–2001 academic year, 56% of two- and four-year degree granting institutions of higher education in the United States offered distance education courses involving an estimated 3,077,000 enrollments. These institutions offered 127,400 different distance education courses, and degree programs were offered by 19% of the two- and four-year institutions. An additional 12% of higher education institutions planned to begin offering distance education courses within three years (Waits & Lewis, 2003, p. iv). This rapid growth can be explained by the numerous potential benefits of online education. Main benefits include new markets of opportunity for students, economic benefits for universities, international partnerships, reduced time to market courses or programs, educational benefits for students, anonymity for students, student interaction and satisfaction, growth in faculty learning curve in pedagogy and instruction, and “rich” feedback and evaluation (Appana, 2008).

With the growth of distance education, mainly through online delivery, comes a significant need to examine the phenomenon of Internet-based courses (Schrum, 1998). This new technology has changed the way students and professors experience the learning
environment. They no longer have to meet face-to-face, and they need to shift from a primarily oral form of communication to a written communication (Holand & Moore, 2002).

In his study of novice instructors’ reflections on their online teaching experiences, Conrad (2004) suggested that future studies should look at how online instructors “balance their concerns for content delivery against students’” needs for a social community where they can effectively learn. It is also important to explore the benefits and limits of web-based courses from the instructor’s point of view and compare their online experiences to face-to-face interaction in order to develop courses that would serve their content and pedagogical needs and simultaneously help students achieve meaningful and positive learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate instructors’ perceptions and attitudes towards online education, to explore the advantages and challenges they face when teaching online courses, and to compare their online experience of teaching to their experience with face-to-face teaching. This will help provide a clearer picture and a deeper view of the instructors’ experiences and concerns in teaching online courses, which will lead to the development of suggestions that will help to create effective online courses that facilitate teaching and serve students’ demands to achieve meaningful learning.

Research Question

The primary research question is: “What are instructors’ perceptions and experiences regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching versus face-to-face teaching?” This question builds upon several more specific questions namely: “What are the advantages and disadvantages of teaching online courses when compared to teaching face-to-face courses?” “What aspects of online courses are considered most effective for presenting information?” What
aspects of online courses are considered most effective for student learning?” “What aspects of online courses are considered most effective for assessing student learning?” “How do the answers of the last three questions compare with, or differ from, face to face courses?” “How can we design better online courses that would serve students and instructors needs?”

**Methodology**

My research attempted to answer the primary research question: “what are professors’ perceptions and experiences regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching versus face-to-face teaching?” In order to answer this question a qualitative approach was utilized because I was investigating complex attitudes and experiences about online learning, and because I was exploring what the full range of those attitudes and experiences may be.

There were several considerations when choosing to adopt a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methods can be used to gain in-depth information, search for deeper understanding of participants’ experiences or to represent their perspectives accurately. Moreover, the goal in qualitative research is to better understand participants from their point of view without aiming for generalizability (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

In the context of the proposed study, relatively few studies have examined online learning from a qualitative perspectives (Crossman, 1997). Gibson and Peacock (2006) state that the inclusion of open-ended questions interviews is even less frequent. As such it is not clear how learners and instructors perceive e-learning. They suggest more in-depth qualitative interviews to provide richer insights, which is the aim of the study reported here.

This study before you, therefore, uses a qualitative interpretive inquiry approach to a) describe the experiences of individuals teaching online courses, b) to gain a broader understanding of instructors’ perceptions in online course environments, c) to contribute to the
existing growing body of online literature and d) to potentially provide some insight into how to
design courses that best meet the teaching and learning needs of instructors and students. This
study, in particular, explores instructors’ perceptions of the advantages, disadvantages and
effectiveness of online learning compared to the face to face learning.

The participants for this study were eight instructors who work for a Canadian university
and who have taught students in both face-to-face and online courses. These participants were
interviewed using a semi-structured open-ended interview method. Semi-structured interviews
can contain open-ended questions because the researcher is expected to prompt for the other
person’s perspectives and to encourage a participant to become more engaged in the
conversation, particularly if the participant provides brief answers or has difficulties answering
and addressing the questions (Millar, 2008).

A purposeful sample was used in this study. Such a sample is not necessarily
representative of the population of all online instructors, but it was chosen because of the ability
of participants to provide more in-depth understanding of the topic being researched. The
researcher selected the sample because these individuals have experience and knowledge with
the topic at hand and, therefore, were able to provide in-depth perceptions. For this study,
instructors who teach face-to-face and teach or have taught at least one academic course online
in any department of the Canadian university or associated college were selected to participate.

In this research, member checking was used to increase credibility and internal validity.
All interviews once transcribed were returned to the instructors, via e-mail, for verification
purposes before analysis begins.
Research Questions

The interview protocol was composed of five open-ended questions:

1) Please describe your experiences of teaching in an online environment.
   (a) How many courses have you taught online?
   (b) What was the nature of the course(s)?
   (c) How many students were enrolled in the course(s)?
   (d) Is this course(s) also taught in face-to-face setting? If so, why was the course offered online? If not, why was the course developed for online setting?
   (e) What made you decide to try teaching in an online environment?

2) From your experience teaching in face-to-face and online settings, what do you consider to be some of the advantages of online learning?
   (a) For students
   (b) For instructors

3) From your personal experience please identify the challenges that you encountered during the process of teaching an online course?
   (a) For students
   (b) For instructors

4) In what ways (if at all) does teaching in an online environment differ from face-to-face teaching in terms of:
   (a) Course planning
   (b) Content choice and design
   (c) Presentation of information and/or pedagogical strategies
   (d) Building rapport with students
5) What suggestions might you have to facilitate a better teaching and/or learning experience for instructors and students in online coursework?

(a) Course planning
(b) Content choice and design
(c) Presentation of information and/or pedagogical strategies
(d) Building rapport with students
(e) Students demonstration of learning
(f) Students assessment and feedback

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis involved segmenting the information, developing coding categories, and then generating themes from the grouping of related categories. These steps are identified by Tesch (1990) as part of the process of analyzing written data, which includes the transcriptions of data from audio recordings. Once the researcher codes and constructs themes, these themes can be classified as: (1) consensus themes- when the majority of the instructors state the same theme; (2) supported themes- when approximately half of the instructors state a theme; and, (3) individual themes- when only one or two instructors state a theme (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The small sample size and the purposeful selection of participants limited the findings from being generalized. The results for the study are also limited by the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the researcher to be completely free of bias. However, the richness of the data
provided by participants who have taught online courses will contribute to the lack of qualitative data that exists in the area.

Conclusions of the Research

Upon analyzing the questions, certain themes emerged from the data. Some of the themes were similar for most of the instructors, some themes were mentioned by only a few instructors, and some were individual themes mentioned by one or two instructors. These themes were used to draw conclusions that are organized around the four research questions of the study.

Reasons for Teaching Online Courses

Based on the findings, there appears to be two primary reasons for instructors to become involved in teaching online coursework: pressure from external forces to teach courses, and excitement about the possibility of trying new teaching opportunities. According to the instructors in this study, one of the reasons for teaching online courses was the pressure of external forces. That is, instructors were hired to teach online courses or were asked to do so as part of their teaching loads, so they felt they had no choice. Another reason was a sense of a desire to experience the new media involved in teaching an online course. Although I anticipated that the instructors would have different motives, for teaching an online course, I was surprised to find that they were divided equally between being obliged to teach for various reasons and wanting to explore teaching in the online technological environment.

Advantages of Teaching Online Courses

No consensus themes from the instructors emerged when they talked about the advantages of teaching online courses. However, some of the advantages mentioned by
instructors included the following: being able to plan courses in advance; the ability to have good quality discussions with the students online; opportunities for maintaining personal communications with the students; having access to a variety of students; having the opportunity to improve their pedagogy skills; having more control over the learning environment; and being less judgmental about students because of the lack of personal connections that can cause biases to develop. The latter one aligns with Appana’s (2008) study where he listed the lack of visual cues as one of the advantages of online education because it helps the instructors to treat all students equally. In general, most of the themes found here are supported in studies that cited advantages of teaching online, such as: convenience and flexibility; as well as the ability to change roles and become a facilitator; to be more creative when presenting materials; and, to organize more structured courses; opportunities to improve students’ learning; to reach more students; to create innovative instruction; to take on the role of facilitator and manager; and, for professional development (Daugherty & Funk, 1998; Hurt, 2008; Rockwell, Shauer, Fritz, & Marx 1999)

Disadvantages of Teaching Online Courses

Technical issues became a primary concern for the instructors, whether it meant acquiring the proper technical skills or accessing the equipment or having to deal with technical problems regarding the system or the platform. This result aligns with Tamashiro’s study (2003) where technology was a detrimental factor because it required instructors to acquire typing skills and a high level of comfort with technology, which they lacked.

Another disadvantage for the instructors was their frustration with the course material. This theme was mentioned among instructors who did not design the online courses they were responsible for teaching. They experienced a hard time with the following aspects of the course:
the quality of the overall course; their ability to relate to the material; and, their ability to keep a fresh attitude towards the course because it did not reflect their philosophies and had not been modified or up-dated for several years.

Other disadvantages included the inability to see and interact with students. Also problematic was the inability to manage the overall learning experience; concerns about students’ understanding the material; and, the fact that teaching was labour intensive, which meant it required a lot of time, effort, and commitment from the instructors. The instructors spent more time than they anticipated teaching the online courses. This finding supports a study by Hurt’s (2008) where he found that the increased preparation time to design and monitor online courses was perceived as a predominant limitation to online education among the instructors.

Advantages for Students in Online Learning Environments

The majority of the instructors were in agreement that convenience and flexibility were major advantages for online students. The instructors mentioned other advantages for students, including: accessibility; the ability to receive personal attention from instructors while at the same time offering anonymity; and, the opportunity to improve their writing capacity.

Disadvantages for Students in Online Learning Environments

As with the case for instructors, technology issues emerged as a major theme. The instructors felt that students who lack technical skills and knowledge spend more time dealing with technical problems than understanding the material. Students must have the necessary technological skills to benefit from online learning otherwise they end up, as Piotrowski & Vodanovich (2000) have found, facing different problems such as those associated with registering, losing electronic documents, and technical problems with sound and video quality.
The lack of social and human interaction was another major theme. The instructors discussed the absence of visual proximity and verbal cues and the serious effect this had on the instructors’ abilities to monitor students’ learning. Several instructors felt that some students were not satisfied with the lack of interaction between their peers or instructors. In fact, there was consensus throughout much of the literature that the lack of interaction is one of the great factors that hinders the success of online learning and affect students’ satisfaction.

Several other factors that affect the success of online learning were mentioned by the participating instructors. One significant factor was that the student has to be an independent learner, which means that the student should be capable of managing time, navigating through the system, and working on assignments alone without the instructor’s usual help. In other words, to achieve success, online learners must be “self-directed” learners. They must be prepared to face different challenges, to motivate themselves and to commit to the learning process (Golladay, Prybutok & Huff, 2000; Laine, 2003; Serwatka, 2003).

The lack of social and human interaction also attributed to students’ inability to articulate concerns to instructors; having less negotiation with instructors, dealing with strict deadlines and being less productive when compared to face-to-face learning. Facing problems with instructors and the department of extended education were other reported disadvantages.

**Differences Between Online Courses and Face-to-face Courses**

In terms of course planning, the instructors suggested that online courses required more detailed structure and advanced planning. Instructors had to anticipate problems when they designed the courses and did more planning than they expected. This aligns with Moore’s (2003) study that showed some instructors use a more structured approach that includes using well organized and detailed syllabi and structured activities to deal with online learning, while others
concentrate on creating friendly courses where students are interacting and collaborating and where the instructor listens to students’ needs. Face-to-face course planning was reported by the participating instructors to be more flexible, and variable.

When it comes to choosing course content, several instructors felt that it was very important for the content to be largely similar to the face-to-face content since the number of credits was the same for both courses. Other instructors discussed designing online content with a more theoretical framework; and, the need to include more explanations and details to compensate for the instructor’s lack of face-to-face communication with their students. Hartzler-Miller, Emerick and Kenton’s (2006) study, reported that instructors faced an inescapable challenge of keeping the original content when converting the face-to-face course into an online course. They had to remove some of the course’s materials due to the lack of time, communication and online teaching experience. While the face-to-face course was mostly practical where students were asked to explore their own teaching situation throughout the course, the online version was based on a hypothetical case study minimizing the process of personal interpretation.

For online courses, technology was reported as the main method of presenting information to students. Instructors used different means such as recorded lectures, animations, videos, and Power Point slides. Although instructors are always encouraged to implement different technological components to produce meaningful learning experiences for students, they should be aware of the fact that offering the tools to provide information for students does not guarantee that they will employ these resources for their own understanding (Lana & Greene, 2000). Actually implementing advanced applications such as video, voice, lecture slides, bulletin board system… may affect the learning experience and could be distracting for the users
(Wuensch, Aziz, Ozan, Kishore & Tabrizi 2008). This contrasts with face-to-face environments where participating instructors used both technology and human interactions; body gestures, conversations and discussions. Other instructors in the study perceived the question differently and talked about the type of information they presented for the students, describing the layout of information in online courses as “big chunks and loosely connected” compared to “little bite sized” pieces in face-to-face courses.

Building rapport with students online was described as being different and difficult for the instructors due to the physical separation between themselves and the students. Only two instructors described rapport building in online learning environments as being easy. In contrast, building rapport with students in a face-to-face course was reported to be simpler due to the more intimate environment where social interaction became a basis of building rapport. This finding aligns with Aragon, Shaik, Palma-Rivas, and Johnson’s (1999) study where face-to-face students expressed a more positive perspective regarding the learning environment characteristics than the online students. Students in face-to-face courses can more easily get together and build a social relationship. In contrast, online students don’t have comparable opportunities. This, according to Aragon et al. (1999), suggests that the online environment may lack the strong social dimension that is beneficial to face-to-face learning experiences.

An interesting finding in this study concerned some instructors’ beliefs that rapport building was not necessary in online learning environments, and/or that students who chose to learn in this format were less interested in building rapport than students in face-to-face learning environments. Such a finding lends itself to the need for more research from a student perspective to consider whether such a perception may have merit.
When it came to demonstrating learning, instructors’ mainly used course assignments and tests to assess students’ learning in the online environment. Additional formative assessment methods used were online discussions, online tutorials, and problem sets. In face-to-face instruction, instructors talked about judging learning more informally by looking at body gestures and facial expressions, and by using assignments and conversations to judge if students were learning. According to Wuensch, Aziz, Ozan, Kishore and Tabrizi (2008) one of the main advantages of face-to-face setting is that the facial expressions and body gestures give a feedback mechanism for instructors. For example, instructors can immediately recognize if students are engaged in the material from their body language and facial expression. Unfortunately, this is not possible online.

In online courses, instructors agreed that their method of assessing students was largely similar to that found in face-to-face learning environments. Some instructors talked about being limited to the use of assignments and exams. Regarding the feedback instructors received from students in online courses, instructors commented that feedback tended to include mostly complaints about grades and instructors’ unavailability. It was also described by individual instructors as being more personal, useless, negative and specific as compared to the feedback from face-to-face courses. In contrast, the face-to-face feedback was mostly positive. There were minor complaints about how instructors deliver and explain their topics, but most instructors attributed this difference to the social interaction and community that is built in synchronous, face-to-face learning environments. While the instructor provided limited feedback to online students, various types of feedback were provided to the face-to-face students.

**Suggestions to Facilitate Better Online Learning Environments**
The majority of the instructors suggested changes for improving online learning environments that revolved around the material of online coursework. Several suggested revising the quality of the material, where others suggested adding more activities and a personal component that would help students to connect more with the material and feel less isolated. A Sloan Consortium report indicates that many instructors take great efforts to “personalize” their online courses, and they aim to create a friendly and trustworthy online learning environment. (Moore, 2003). The process of developing an online course is significant. According to Torrisi and Davis (2000), it should be considered as a transformation process instead of translating lecture and content to a different mode of instruction.

In addition, each participating instructor mentioned several minor changes such as changing the syllabus every couple of years, changing the layout of the information to appear in one site and organizing all planned activities according to a weekly schedule. One instructor mentioned the importance of receiving adequate training before teaching online courses. This is of particular importance, as several studies have shown that most faculty members don’t receive or have little formal training on efficient use of technology (Barely, 1999). Another instructor underlined the significance of understanding the financial implications of working with the extended education department prior to designing online courses.

In terms of choosing course content, the suggestions revolved around changing the material. Several instructors suggested adjusting the content by adding practical examples, a wide range of optional assignments and text books and keeping the material current and up-to-date. Some instructors were satisfied with the content and preferred to keep it the same. They suggested adjusting the delivery method rather than the content itself. In the estimation of most instructors, the content of parallel courses taught in face-to-face and online learning
environments should be standardized, as they believed students should experience similar content in both environments.

Related to the presentation of information, the instructors were in agreement in their desire to use more technological tools to replace the usual Power Point slides. They suggested using mini videos, flash animations, recorded concentrated lectures and synchronous chat to keep close contact with students.

Several instructors found a positive connection between the effort they put into connecting with students and building a good rapport. They suggested using synchronous chats or, phoning students in an effort to compensate for the lack of social and human interaction. This finding aligns with Branon and Essex’s (2007) results. They found that while instructors use both synchronous and asynchronous tools for a variety of reasons, the majority, 65%, preferred and chose an asynchronous approach more than a synchronous approach.

One instructor suggested using blended learning modules where both components from face-to-face and online environments are incorporated. The instructor felt that this type of blended module had lots of advantages particularly in terms of building a good rapport and decreasing students’ isolation. One instructor felt that it was significant for the instructors to be technically skilled in order to facilitate a better relationship with students.

The instructors mainly discussed adjusting assignments to facilitate demonstration of learning by applying different types of questions such as multiple choice, definitions, short answer to tap different types of knowledge, and making the assignments more random to cut down plagiarism. The latter issue, plagiarism, has become a significant problem in online learning environments. Although the percentage of students who had been surveyed at schools and admitted that cheating is wrong was never below 90% (Davis, 1992), Scanlon reported...
cheating rates as high as 75% to 87% among the same students (Scanlon 2003). One instructor, participating in the current study, talked about keeping a fresh attitude towards the assignments when grading. The instructor suggested that instructors of online learning courses should be open minded when grading and reading original answers and make an effort not to “stereotype” students’ answers.

The main theme related to assessment and feedback revolved around change. In order to receive good feedback from students, instructors discussed several suggestions including putting in more effort and time to phone students and follow up on questions and concerns and commenting on students’ assignments and test results. Kuriloff (2004) proposed that the role of the instructor in an online writing course is to expand, elaborate, or clarify student writing (p. 40). Other suggestions from the participating instructors were adding more live sessions, using peer evaluations, using students’ assessment as exemplars, changing some assignments, having a better rapport with students and establishing a clear rubric for assessment. Findings related to feedback were contradictory in online versus face-to-face environments, though more professors mentioned that feedback tended to be more negative for online courses, linking this to the lack of rapport and social interaction of these environments.

**Implications for Practice**

Online education is a good delivery method. The learning experiences, in face-to-face and online learning environments have their differences, both negative and positive. Educators must realize that online delivery as an educational format has its weakness and strengths as does face-to-face delivery, and that there are similar concerns regardless of the delivery method.

The instructors agreed on incorporating more technological activities and more personal components in online courses to better appeal to students. This personal approach includes more
online chats, more collaborative works and discussion groups, and having occasional face-to-face meetings or online tutorials for those students who face difficulties navigating through the course. I would suggest blended learning for those students who are in close proximity to the university and for those who feel more comfortable with the combination of the face-to-face and online experience.

I would also suggest that instructors be given proper training prior to teaching online courses especially training related to the potential for technological challenges that they may face when teaching online courses. In addition, I would recommend having a more user-friendly computer platform for students that would decrease the spent time on comprehending the system and searching for information and materials.

Students should be able to access an online tutorial that would help them navigate through the system without the need to seek out help from the instructor. More importantly, I would recommend that students be given a detailed specific outline of the syllabus, the activities organized according to a weekly schedule and important points to consider before attempting an online course. For example they must have an adequate technological knowledge of how to use a computer, how to search for information online, and how to contact and chat with the instructor. They also have to be aware of the significance of self discipline and direction to achieve success.

Instructors mentioned the amount of time and effort spent preparing and managing online courses particularly while designing and planning the material, grading and providing feedback and written comments to students. I suggest having an assistant, in addition to the course instructor, who could be available during specific times of the day and evening to complete different tasks such as grading, answering emails and reporting student concerns to the
instructor. This would free the instructor to deal with more pressing problems related to course content, pedagogy and assessment.

Another area that needs attention is the incorporation of social and human interaction, which was considered a great limitation for both students and instructors. It would be helpful to use more synchronous chatting, phoning, and adding some brief videos of the instructors giving the occasional lectures where they explain certain aspects of the material. This will offer the students the opportunity to see and listen to the instructor and may help them feel less isolated and remote. Students would also be able to watch the lecture repeatedly if they had problems comprehending the information. In fact, students would obtain the benefit of listening to the instructor and being able to take advantage of the instructor’s personality. It would also serve to connect the students to the course and the materials to a larger degree than reading alone.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The present study provides the foundation for further meaningful research. The following discussion considers studies that diversify the population, use a quantitative research method and a longitudinal design.

First, researchers should consider utilizing a quantitative method in order to reinforce the findings of the present study. Such a study would allow for a much larger population sample than was possible in the present qualitative study. A quantitative study could address questions about the potential generalizability of the results to other study samples or populations.

A further study, focused on students’ perceptions, could be conducted to compliment the current study focused on the perceptions of online instructors. Investigating students’ experiences of online learning, students’ comparison of online and face-to-face learning in terms
of advantages, disadvantages, and differences and students’ suggestions for improving online courses would allow researchers to address questions concerning the similarities and differences between students’ experiences and perceptions and the instructors’ experiences and perceptions described here.

Even though the scope of my study did not differentiate between instructors who designed their own course and those who just implemented an existing course, the information that I gathered through the interviews seems to suggest that there are differences. For example, implementers’ faced some difficulties trying to retain fresh attitudes towards the content of the courses and the assessment tools. Further study could be conducted that would compare the advantages and disadvantages of teaching online courses from the designers and implementers point of view. A different set of questions would need to be asked that would provide information as to what the similarities and differences are between designers and implementers’ experiences and concerns. As well, it would be interesting to compare their suggestions as to how they would facilitate a better online learning environment. This will also address issues related to designing online courses. Questions such as: Should implementers be allowed to redesign their online courses? Could this process of redesign be done outside the Department of Extended Education? Do implementers need the approval of the distance education department, and/or the designer of the course, before redesigning existing online courses? These issues and others, such as cost of changing an online course, could be addressed in these types of studies.

Finally, researchers should consider the option of conducting longitudinal studies of online instructors starting at the point when instructors begin developing and teaching online courses. This type of study would answer questions related to the development, over time, of
online instructors’ perceptions of teaching and learning in online environments, thus providing a deeper insight into the instructor’s role in this ever-growing educational phenomenon.

References


