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ABSTRACT

Designing an online class guided by the principles of learner-centered instruction at the postsecondary level is a daunting challenge for new professors facing the demands of a tenure track position. This paper presents the findings of a pilot project on two junior faculty members' experiences with online course development and teaching in a university setting. The purpose of the study was to identify and describe those experiences in ways that would be useful to academic administrators, and in ways that would provide a robust basis for conducting a larger descriptive study. The professors' responses to the following research questions are provided: How do the professors describe the experience of planning and teaching an online course? How do the professors perceive the demands of teaching a class online compare with the demands of teaching a similar class face-to-face? How do the professors understand the context of online course development and teaching? Findings are discussed in terms of interaction, importance of students' expectations, and pressures in regard to tenure documentation. The study found that an online environment presents challenges unique to the technology, and the recommendation is made that university administrators must recognize such challenges in order to encourage pedagogically sound online instruction. (Author/AEF)

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CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING ONLINE AT THE POSTSECONDARY LEVEL

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Designing an online class guided by principals of learner-centered instruction at the postsecondary level is a daunting challenge for new professors facing the demands of a tenure track position. The case study identified challenges faced by a new professor teaching an online course. This study found an online environment presents challenges unique to the technology and recommends that university administrators must recognize such challenges in order to encourage pedagogically sound online instruction.

The Study's Purpose

This paper presents the findings of a pilot project on two junior faculty's experiences with online course development and teaching in a university setting. The study's purpose was to identify contextual issues faced by new, untenured university faculty. Often junior professors are learning to teach in the face-to-face environment as well as learning to teach in the relatively new online environment. Additionally, the current emphasis on integrating technology into postsecondary teaching practices as evidenced by the Pew Symposia in Learning and Technology (http://www.center.rpi.edu/PewSym1.html) and the academic reward system as evidenced by the tenure process can mean that new faculty often encounter overlapping and or competing demands on their time and efforts as they seek success in meeting these two challenges. This study was designed to identify and describe the contextual experiences of junior faculty as they developed and taught online courses. The study's purpose was to identify and to describe those experiences in ways that would be useful to academic administrators, and in ways that would provide a robust basis for conducting a larger descriptive study.

The researchers designed a qualitative case study examining two professors who were in the mid stages of the tenure process, who had experience teaching courses online and face-to-face, and who facilitated active, meaningful learning that can be termed learner-centered instruction according to Branch (1995) and McCombs and Whisler (1997). The researchers' primary purposes were:

- To clarify contextual issues that affect a professor's ability to successfully integrate online teaching technologies into instructional practices that support active and meaningful learning
- To describe the professors' perceptions and experiences in online teaching

The researchers' secondary purposes were:

- To identify any additional data sources that would provide a fuller description of this study's area of interest
- To develop useful questions in order to construct a larger study that will continue to further define critical issues

Research Method
Qualitative Case Study

Participant Selection

The research design selected for this study is a qualitative case study following the guidelines for a case study as explained by Merriam (1998). The case is bounded by the area of interest, the focus of the research questions, and by the selection of the participants. Based upon LeCompte and Preissle's (1993) recommendations for participant selection, selection criteria were established. The two participants selected for the study met the following qualities, they:

- Valued and followed good teaching practices as described by Chickering and Gamson (1987) and McCombs and Whisler (1997).
- Were in a tenure track position and were in the process of going for tenure

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- Were developing their experience in teaching with online technologies
- Had a personal interest in becoming better at teaching with online technologies
- Were teaching at two large universities that have officially adopted a course management software
- Were teaching an online class in two different disciplines
- Represented the use of two different brands of online course software

The two participants agreed to participate in the pilot study because they had a personal interest in the topic. When the data were collected and transcribed, the researchers assigned pseudonyms to the two participants. The transcribed interviews were returned to the participants. The participants have not yet seen the completed analysis.

Data Collection

One tape-recorded interview was conducted with each participant. The interviews were open ended and guided by the suggestions of Kvale (1996). The researcher let the interview process guide the questions rather than following a question guide. Each interview lasted until the interviewer and the participant sensed that the discussion and questions were exhausted. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were fully transcribed and the analysis made from the transcriptions.

Data Analysis

The first author read through the transcribed interviews, took notes in the margin and underlined sentences or phrases that appeared to describe each participant's experiences. This process resembled the coarse coding described by Merriam (1998). During a second reading of the transcribed data, the first author began constructing three charts that displayed and summarized the categories of data. One chart (Figure A) displayed information describing the participants in their setting. The second chart (Figure B) displayed the similarities between the two participants. The third chart (Figure C) displayed the differences between each of the two participants' experiences.

As the first author created the charts, she also began to create a list of categories pulled from the transcriptions. This list was kept on a lined notepad beside the transcribed pages. This list of categories became the basis for analyzing, refining, and representing the data in ways that would meet the purpose of the study and answer the research questions. These categories were then re-analyzed and combined according to their supporting data units.

Self-disclosure of the researchers

The two researchers were drawn to designing a study to explore this issue because they have had personal experience with creating and teaching online courses for university students. Their personal experience facilitated their perception that a professor's experiences when designing and teaching an online course were different than the experiences when designing and teaching a similar face-to-face class. Because the two researchers are not tenured faculty, they became aware that the demands of the tenure process seem neither to reflect nor to recognize the differences between teaching in a face-to-face class and teaching in an online class. Thus, the two researchers had a personal interest in developing a research study that would identify and describe the contextual considerations new professors face when teaching an online course. The two researchers knew one another from being classmates in a Ph.D. program at the University of Georgia.

The Research Questions

- How do the professors describe the experience of planning and teaching an online course?
- How do the professors perceive the demands of teaching a class online compare with the demands of teaching a similar class face-to-face?
- How do the professors understand the context of online course development and teaching?

Representing the Data

The two professors

The two professors in this study, Professor Eden and Professor Simpson, teach at major universities in the United States. Professor Eden is teaching in a college of education at a Carnegie ranked Research I University; Professor Simpson is teaching in a college of hotel administration at a

doctoral granting university. Both professors are teaching required courses in their respective colleges. They are each using a well-known brand of online course software. During the period of this study, both professors were teaching online courses for the second time, and both were confronting the demands of the tenure process.

Both professors were technologically fluent in that they had created web pages for their courses prior to using the online course software, and both had originally started making pages by hand coding with HTML. Both professors valued active learning for their students and sought to use strategies that would facilitate meaningful knowledge construction. Although the professors did not use the term *learner-centered* to describe their approach to teaching and learning, they both described their concerns and teaching strategies in ways that meshed with Branch (1995) and McCombs and Whisler's (1997) description of learner-centered.

Professor	University	College	Course	Class Size	Students	Software
Eden	Primarily residential, Research Level I	College of Education	Educational Technology Required	15	Graduate In-service Teachers	Blackboard
Simpson	Urban, commuter campus, Doctoral granting	College of Hotel Administration	Human Resources Required	12	Undergraduate Working in hospitality	WebCT

Figure A. Chart displaying information describing the participants in their setting

The students in both classes were working in fields related to the course. Professor Eden's students were predominantly K-12 school teachers. Many were enrolled in the masters program because they wanted to advance to a higher pay level. Professor Simpson required the students to be working at least part time in the hospitality industry as a pre-requisite for enrolling in the class, and gave the students assignments that required the students to interact with the human resources personnel in that industry. The students in both professors' courses could choose to take the course online or in a face-to-face classroom environment.

Both professors wanted to be better at teaching. Professor Simpson stated,

To get tenure you need to be able to teach at a standard that's acceptable to the university, and that standard is not acceptable to me. I needed to push myself to learn how to teach. So, I took a certification class, it's called a certified hospitality educator, which was a week long class.

Professor	Technology fluency	Online software	Teaching goals	Importance of feedback	Course development
Eden Simpson	Created their own resource rich web pages when teaching a prior class.	Had to spend time on their own to learn to use the university online courseware	Wanted to be better teachers than what their administrators suggested was acceptable	Believed students need good feedback in order to learn.	Learned about teaching online from the students' feedback, interactions and assignments.

Figure B. Chart displaying similarities between the two participants

Both professors believed that their online courses had to be more than just reading and completing the assignments. Professor Eden explained,

> How are you really going to get them to think? . . . . I mean if all I had to do was pick up a book and read materials, then I guess universities are not really necessary . . . . So, I mean just

having a web site with your information on there, and having those discussion boards is not doing it. Because the discussion boards are hard to manage, people are not reading everything, and you're not really getting the interaction between the students that you want

Neither Professor Eden nor Professors Simpson had definitive answers to the challenges they were encountering as the developed their online courses. They were both actively learning as they went along. Both professors were learning from their students.

The two professors differed in some of the online software usage and in the ways they were encouraged to teach an online course. Professor Simpson was given release time from the department chair to develop the course. The professor considered online learning to be of growing importance to the hospitality field. The department let the class "go" even though its enrollment of 12 was less than the required number for running a course.

Professor Eden felt somewhat pushed into teaching an online course because the administration wanted to get more of the curriculum online. She was worried that the course would not be appropriate for online learning. "I didn't think the class was appropriate because it was team based, and I don't care if you do e-mail, you still want to meet face-to-face in a team kind of thing."

The two professor experienced differences in the way that their universities marketed the online classes. Professor Eden's university promotes online courses and online programs on the web site by appealing to people who don't have sufficient time to take a class. Professor Eden explained,

The way that it markets is probably the reason why we have the attitude problem of our students. The web site says, 'You don't have time to take a class? You don't have time for class?' So, what does that mean? . . . . Which means that you don't have time to do all the work that goes with the class, then take web based classes.

Eden	Advised to get the course up and it will run itself	Misleading marketing	Has used more than one course software	Teaches using team projects	Students reported confusion understanding organization of courseware interface
Simpson	Administration gave release time to develop course	Lack of informative marketing	Knows only WebCT	Teaches with individual projects	Students did not report interface confusion

Figure B. Chart displaying differences between the two participants' experiences

In contrast, Professor Simpson's university does very little marketing of the online courses and has no online programs. Professor Simpson attributes some of the class's low enrollment to a lack of marketing. "I don't know what distance ed said to them over there. The two flyers that I saw were not acceptable to me to find out information, and so I will be creating my own marketing this year for fall semester."

Because Professor Eden's students were taking courses at the university that were presented with different course software, and because part of their course included designing websites, they expressed their confusion about finding how professors' organized their online courses. "People organize information differently. So, I might put my assignment in *Assignments*. Some people put all their assignments in *Course Documents* . . . . Where do the students look for just this document to help them do something?"

Summary

Although the professors had many differences between their institutions and their fields of study, both professors shared a strong belief in active learning and learner-centered instruction. Both professors were motivated by a desire to create a positive and meaningful learning experience for their students. Both professors needed interaction and feedback from their students in order to gauge the

progress of their students' knowledge development. Both professors created projects or assignments in their online class to help their students learn and to enable the professors to understand how the students were progressing.

Findings in Response to the Research Questions

How do the professors describe the experience of planning and teaching an online course?

The two professors found their time management and preparation skills differ when they teach in an online environment. Both professors were learning to develop their online teaching and course development skills. The two professors discussed changes in their thinking as a result of developing and teaching online. Professor Simpson reported that the experience of both taking an online course and creating an online course caused her to think differently about learning. She explained, "I'll talk with my students about where do they learn best. And if they say, 'I learn the best curled up on my couch.' OK. Can you get you computer there?"

For Professor Eden, the online course caused her to rethink her frequency of online responses as it related to the students' ability to manage themselves..

The first time I taught, I tried to respond to every other message . . . . I started letting them control as far as like responding to each other. And I would add something in if I felt they were off target or getting out of hand, you know a little bickering and so forth . . . . But I felt I was taking up too much time trying to make sure they were doing what they needed to do.

How do the professors perceive the demands of teaching a class online compare with the demands of teaching a similar class face-to-face?

Both professors remarked about the different time expenditure between an online course and a face-to-face class. Professor Eden stated,

It's much more work than face-to-face. You definitely have to be more prepared, far more in advance. A lot of time when I was doing face-to-face I'd think, I want to change that a little bit because of the way they reacted maybe the week before and I could prepare the night before.

Professor Simpson was even more specific in the time differences.

I logged an average of six hours a week in WebCT in my class which is more than I ever put in on class time. . . . So, maybe four and a half hours max a week in a face-to-face class that I may teach two sections of versus six hours a week in an online course. And that's not counting the grading and inputting. I knew what it took to grade a project that I taught in a face-to-face class. That same project or some elements of the project to grade in an online class, write up the results, post the results, do follow-up, adds twice the amount of time.

How do the professors understand the context of online course development and teaching?

Both Professor Eden and Professors Simpson felt that the university administration did not have a realistic understanding of the time demands and demands for self-teaching that an online course required. Both professors had to spend time and energy figuring out the technology and the pedagogy of online teaching for themselves.

Both professors were strongly encouraged by their college administrators to use online course software although the quality of their support varied. Both professors knew that university administrators anticipated being able to teach larger classes with online technologies, and both professors expressed concern for the quality and course management of classes with larger enrollments than 25 or 30 students.

Teaching an online course forced the professors to confront the technology and the software. Professor Simpson designed elements into the course, such as audio clips or animated gifs, in order to check capability of the students' computers. "Throughout the course, I kept checking with the students to make sure they still had computers at home. And two students either lost their computers because they moved and it was the room mate's computer, or the computer failed on them."

Discussion of the Findings

Interaction

In the context of teaching their online courses, interaction became an important concept. Interaction infused both professors' thinking. The professors sought to create interactions on many levels. The interaction between the professors and the students and the course content and the students' work experiences and the technology was complex and was an important part of the professors' thinking about their online courses. The professors encouraged interaction between the students and the course content. The students in both professors classes were working in the field of study, and the two professors deliberately structured their courses in ways that would make the course content interact with the students' work life experiences.

The professor interacted with the students and learned from their students' interactions. Through the students' interaction, the professors learned how well the students were progressing in their knowledge development as well as how effective the technology and course organization was. In sum, the professors learned about how to create, organize, and teach their online courses from interactions with their students.

The Importance of the Students Expectations

The two professors' online teaching experiences were very influenced by the students' expectations. The students' expectations, as described by the two professors, were related to their reasons for taking the courses and the university's conceptualization of online learning as manifested through their outreach marketing. Professors Eden's students were primarily working K-12 teachers whose motivation for earning a graduate degree was to move into a higher pay grade level in their school systems. The university marketed the online learning program by implying that online learning was easier and required less time than coming to the campus to attend classes. The university's marketing efforts influenced the students' expectations that the course would make it easier for them to manage their time.

Tenure considerations

There were differences between the pressures the two professors experienced in regard to tenure documentation. Professor Simpson considered her field more applied than theoretical. Although there was pressure to achieve excellence in at least one of the categories, achieving excellence in the teaching category was sufficient to carry the lack of an excellence rating in the research category. However, this put even more pressure on ensuring a good rapport and evaluation from the students in the online course. Professor Eden faced greater pressure to publish and conduct research.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for university administrators based upon the study

- Universities must provide more specific training support for professors using online technologies.
- Online courses are not a time saver for faculty.
- Universities must be critical about the way online courses are marketed to potential students

Recommendations for further study

The findings in this pilot study have served to illuminate the areas that need further data collection in order to design a more robust study.

- Further interviews and data needs to be collected to explain why the university administration is urging new professors to teach courses using online technologies.
- Further interviews and data need to be collected from more professors in order to exhaust all the questions that were raised in this pilot study
- A fuller search of the literature related to the context of online teaching needs to be developed.

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