

Networking educational administrators through e-Teaching

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Abstract

This paper is about e-teaching in the context of a university graduate program and how the program metamorphosed from being entirely campus based to entirely online, and from declining enrolments to increasing enrolments. It is about the faculty and lecturers who conducted a critical analysis of their particular situation, examined their options, researched other program delivery options and finally settled on a solution that has proven successful. Because of this labour-intensive process, they discovered that the networking processes undertaken by them to complete their mandate enabled them to become better networking mentors as e-teachers. This is their story and it sheds a critical light on various delivery models currently deployed by universities worldwide. Most importantly, it demonstrates that a good deal of reflection and agreement on what good teaching is and how it can be achieved has to be conducted prior to delivery model adoption. It also raises the question as to the wisdom of across-the-board institutionally decided program delivery choices. Such choices not only affect e-learners down the road but also directly affect faculty's motivation and ability, as a community of practice, to carry out their teaching responsibilities efficiently and sustainably.

Data was gleaned from an ongoing study, mostly from a series of semi-structured interviews with administrators and faculty, including lecturers, who participated, over the course of a two-year period, in transferring this program from on-campus to online. Six semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted. Access to work documents, ongoing email exchanges and personal conversations completed the data set. The interview guide used was developed to highlight respondent experience over the course of the two-year program migration online, focusing on the move from on-campus teaching to e-teaching, course delivery model selection, and an open questions for respondents to add related comments. Complete data analysis and interpretation is proceeding as this proposal is being sent to conference organisers. Results show a high degree of unanimity in the decision to adopt BOLD as program delivery mechanism. Respondents describe how it gave them back what they most liked in their work: direct and continuous, regular contact with their students, free-flowing discussions on concepts, principles and their applications, access to students who would normally not enrol in their courses and a workload that was more manageable than other delivery systems they had known.

Keywords: networked e-teaching and learning; online learning; blended learning; graduate studies; educational administration; principal training

Introduction

“Education is a political football; you get a new minister, you get new policies and regulations that undo the former minister’s policies and regulations. And then we have to add this to the training”. This was the first thing the first respondent said to me when we started talking about the M. Ed. Program in Educational Administration. Instructional designers would call this high level “content volatility”. With this comment began an interesting series of interviews on the nature of e-teaching, the nuts and bolts of program design and the quicksand-like environment in which graduate studies are located.

This proposed paper is about e-teaching in the context of a university graduate program and how the program metamorphosed from being entirely campus based to entirely online, and from declining enrolments to increasing enrolments. It is about the faculty and lecturers who conducted a critical analysis of their particular situation, examined their options, researched other program delivery options and finally settled on a solution that has proven successful. Because of this labour-intensive process, they discovered that the networking processes undertaken by them to complete their mandate enabled them to become better networking mentors as e-teachers.

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Methodology

Data to support this proposal was gleaned from four sources: 1) notes from two workshops initially conducted with the team of six faculty members in charge of teaching the courses. The first workshop aimed at analysing the situation and choosing the right delivery method, while the second one consisted in a training session on the Blended Online Learning Design (BOLD) approach including virtual classroom e-teaching techniques. 2) Two years later, six semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted with administrators and faculty, including lecturers, who participated in transferring the graduate professional program from on-campus to online delivery. The interview guide used was developed to highlight respondent experience over the course of the two-year program migration online, focusing on the move from on-campus teaching to e-teaching, course delivery model selection, pedagogical and logistical challenges, and virtual classroom dynamics. 3) Work documents and 4) email exchanges completed the data set.

Context

Since 1998, aspiring school principals in Quebec were required to obtain a postgraduate degree. As a result, several universities launched training programs including the one on which this case is based. During the first decade, enrolments were high but, as local saturation occurred, enrolments began to dwindle making the program non-viable. At the same time, the team of faculty members observed that needs were not being met on the part of two sub-segments of the student population; potential students from outside the immediate geographical area where the program was being offered and female students with work-study-family issues with which to contend. Moreover, given the extreme winter weather patterns typical in Quebec, many students were actually putting their lives at risk by driving to attend on-campus classes. Given the above considerations, the Department Head and faculty members started investigating alternative delivery modes.

From on-campus program delivery to Distance Education

Until the 70s, the only course delivery mechanism for program delivery in mainstream higher education (HE) had been campus based. As the democratisation of HE in North America began taking hold throughout the system, probing forays into Distance Education (DE) emerged in the 70s and 80s but such initiatives were usually marginal, rarely involving regular faculty, and emanating from Continuing Education or Extension Departments. As cost recovery was imperative, course design and development were usually rudimentary. Moreover, courses targeted were generally at the undergraduate level, and only rarely at the graduate levels. This of course was mostly a matter of plain economics: a DE course was naturally designed and developed for a substantial target population in areas where content stability had been achieved. Therefore, graduate studies, ipso facto, met neither requirement and little development occurred at this level. Yet, in cases where graduate programs became unsustainable due to dwindling enrolments, as was the case in our study, administration began revising their stance on the issue as Online Learning became viable in the 90s.

Online Learning

OL, as the heir apparent to distance education (DE), became a reality as the Web emerged and demonstrated its viability as a course delivery mechanism in the mid-90s. OL has had a much-easier row to hoe. It has been adopted as a stand-alone course delivery system by mainstream universities despite the doubts that linger over its progenitor as being a solitary, even isolating, learning experience for students. Indeed, Rosenberg (2001) stated that computer-based learning failed because it was "deadly dull" (p. 23), lacking the essential ingredient of good teaching: interaction. OL, as DE before it, has been particularly challenged in this regard, as it incarnates a classic Catch-22 situation: for a course to be of good quality, i.e. engaging and interactive, it needs the input of a great deal of creativity, fuelled by a considerable upfront capital investment; but garnering the

required upfront investment is virtually impossible, until revenue from successfully deployed OL courses start trickling in.

Now, after approximately 20 years of mainstream adoption of OL in HE, it is fairly well known and accepted by researchers that quality has its price. Indeed, this has been known since the British Open University opened its doors. Good quality DE or OL depends upon good quality upfront design and development carried out by a competent course team (Peters, 1998), and headed by a committed academic. Simply ponder Moore's 35 steps required to develop an online course and you will get an idea of the tremendous work and subsequent costs involved (Moore & Kearsley, 2011: p. 123-125). What is surprising here is that Moore's university is not even a single-mode, distance education university, the milieu within which the course team approach originated; it is what has been termed a dual-mode university with an extensive campus offering. Yet this kind of 35-step course has been touted as the be-all and end-all of online learning, the *crème-de-la-crème*. Indeed, it may be just that, for those universities that can somehow marshal the enormous resources needed to produce such courses. However, it is no secret to anyone in HE that most universities simply do not dispose of the kind of upfront capital required to fund the design, development and delivery of quality online courses. Yet they do try to do so; and so the illusion of quality is perpetuated.

With massive OL initiatives being launched within mainstream HE beginning in the mid-nineties and expanding ever since (Allen & Seaman, 2016), regular faculty began to experiment with e-teaching. This came at a time when the call for "sages on the stage" to relinquish their control and become "guides on the side" was being heard, requiring faculty step aside to let the design team-crafted didactic materials do the lecturing. Faculty involved in such initiatives began realising that e-teaching meant, in fact, e-design and e-development as they set aside considerable time and devoted considerable effort to this work, work for which they were lacking competency, for which they had no training, and which infringed on their research time (Power, 2009). For many faculty, the cost simply outweighed the benefit, especially in situations where there were doubts about intellectual property rights (Fine & Castangara, 2000). As a result, the development of OL in mainstream HE continued but mainly through the efforts of adjunct faculty (Sammon & Ruth, 2007).

The information above was shared with workshop #1 participants during the search for an appropriate delivery mode. The group involved in the present case study realised rather quickly that,

- *given the nature of their program (graduate),*
- *the size of the target population (relatively small),*
- *the current level of faculty training with regard to technology (very low)*
- *and the level of funding available for course design and development (virtually nil),*

Online Learning was not a good fit as a delivery system vis-s-vis their predicament.

Blended Learning

Given the limits of OL, mainly the high cost of its development and resistance from regular faculty, what might be termed a watered-down version of OL emerged onto the HE landscape in the early 2000s: blended learning (BL). The advantage of such an approach was purportedly that faculty could simply add a new dimension of flexibility to their teaching by implementing a limited form of online learning, while continuing their usual practice of teaching students on campus, at least part of the time (Owston, York & Murtha, 2013). Faculty resistance was less fierce than it was to OL and administration were quick to realise that, by having students come on campus only once every two weeks (a typical formula), course delivery-related expenses were, in general, about halved. Better still, more students could be accommodated on campus when they did come, especially on large, busy city campuses, so enrolments increased (Bonk & Graham, 2006). But all of this occurred without any equity-minded decision-maker seeming to realise that students not living close enough to a campus – actual distant learners – were simply being left out of the equation, since at least some amount of on campus, seat time was required from them. Despite being actively adopted by major universities around the world, BL is severely limited when it comes to university outreach.

Again, the group of administrators and faculty in question assessed the pros and cons of implementing BL as a delivery system. In their analysis, given...

- *the nature of the target population (spread out across a huge geographical area),*
- *the possibility of said population coming to campus even part of the time (not an option),*

- *the content volatility in the field of study (very high), and finally,*
- *the likelihood of even a modest, upfront investment in OL development (unlikely as cost prohibitive),*

BL was not a good fit as a delivery system vis-s-vis their needs.

Finding a suitable course delivery model

Conscious of these limits and constraints of OL and BL as delivery modes for their program and coming to the subsequent and logical conclusion that neither were adequate for their needs, the team started envisaging other options. One option, which had been successfully deployed years earlier, had demonstrated sustainability: this approach was termed “Blended Online Learning Design” (or BOLD) because it blends two kinds of online learning technology, asynchronous and synchronous (Power, 2008). Briefly, this approach, to be implemented, requires faculty and students to have access to a virtual classroom and a basic website. Such an approach overcomes the cost hurdle linked to the intensive front-end design of learning materials as required by OL in that course design is at about the same level as classroom-based instruction, as the focus is on student-professor interaction. Course materials are uploaded to the course site as they are developed; in some cases, graduate students also participate in course development. BOLD also solves the learning-in-isolation issue common with DE/OL, as the virtual classroom provides students and professor with weekly spontaneous and instantaneous feedback possibilities. As for the access problem created by BL, it is no longer an issue since all courses are delivered entirely online, so learners anywhere can attend so long as they can manage any difference in time zone. The result has proven sustainable in that all of the Online Learning Consortium’s Pillars of Quality¹ have been achieved and enrolments sustained.

Once again, the group of administrators and faculty in question assessed the pros and cons of implementing BOLD as a delivery system. Given...

- *the dwindling number of local enrolments in the program (saturated population),*
- *the unmet need for program access among the two above-mentioned student sub-segments (distant students and female students with work-, study-, family-related responsibilities),*
- *the dispersed nature of the target population (Quebec is roughly 4 times the size of France),*
- *their access to high-speed Internet (Quebec has Canada’s highest-level bandwidth penetration),*
- *the very high level of content volatility in the field of study (requiring constant updating),*
- *the absence of funding for online course/program development,*

BOLD was deemed the best fit as a delivery system vis-s-vis their predicament.

BOLD Implementation

According to respondent 06, “All of the faculty were fully engaged in training to use the virtual classroom technology. They were all aware that this was necessary. One colleague expressed regret that he would miss the face-to-face component but all of the others were positive. Most of the lecturers were retired school principals and they saw this as keeping up with educational technology, as an opportunity to be cutting-edge; they saw it as an interesting challenge. So the change process was experienced positively, given the quality work provided by the instructional designer accompanying us”.

About the effect this design phase had on their working patterns, respondent 04 said: “Before going online, planning was more decentralised. We each planned our courses individually with a minimum of consultation. Going online brought faculty and lecturers together, which increased the overall quality of instruction. The whole team felt their individual courses were improved as was the overall quality of the entire program, since more internal logic was added, more linkages, clearer objectives and more diverse, interesting and active learning activities”. E-teaching appears to have been seen as a boon, professionally speaking.

With regard to the previous problems encountered, Respondent 1 answered: “The dwindling enrolments problem was solved, as our enrolment levels went up and have not decreased since”. “Because enrolments are allowed right up to the start of the trimester and because of the reputation for quality of our program, it has

¹ <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/about/quality-framework-five-pillars/>

attracted enrolments from all parts of the province, even from all parts of Canada”. Yet this recognition brought with it a new issue. Respondent 1: “The sudden increase in enrolments meant that, in the short term, we had to limit numbers and set new enrolment deadlines, ”.

The “weather issue” was solved because the entire program was now offered online, no more risking one's life on treacherous, icy roads as students and faculty could work from the comfort of their home. As respondent 3 put it: “It would take one hell of a snow storm for the course to be cancelled!” And a solution was found to the equity issue related to the university responsibility to provide students from outlying regions with access to this compulsory training. In fact, a new level of openness and equity with regard to access took root, meeting the needs of young parents, new school principals who often work on weekends, and women, especially, who often feel the burden of balancing the demands of their work environment, their home responsibilities and their study commitments (gleaned from comments made by respondents 1, 2 and 5).

About e-Teaching and preliminary results obtained from the new program deployment

- Course planning became generally manageable over time since oral presentations by faculty which took place in the virtual classroom were recorded and later edited into teaching artefacts.
- Teaching became more systematic, coherent, justified; a balance between inductive and deductive approaches emerged as well as between professor-led and student-led activities and small team work and group work.
- A primary consideration was recognised: this is a very busy target population. Students were, for the most part, already acting principals or assistant principals. As a result, faculty provided them with time during the virtual class for teamwork to occur (because they have such little time to work together outside of class).
- Key observations: a principal's job is naturally very lonely (only one principal per school). A major result of the new program: creation of networks of colleagues during their studies and the continuation of such post-graduation; naturally-emerging networks over the course of the 3-year program; students found out about each other's problems and work-related realities, context and similar issues; this led to deep-level sharing. And the networks have proven to be resistant over time (based on faculty-reported student feedback). One student, who was a school principal in the most remote area in the province, through these online courses connected with other colleagues who had exactly the same job but who resided in other regions; she eventually met them at work-related regional meetings, and her group became very tight-knit. In addition, principals living up North were even more isolated yet they created a functional online professional community of practice; this was not pre-designed. In short, groups of interest emerged naturally through interaction; affinities attracting people to one another.
- Faculty and lecturers supported this process; they seized this opportunity to create networks. Faculty and lecturers were already part of a community of practice (CoP) through the course design process; this they emulated during their e-teaching.
- E-teaching and role of program chair (PC): the first PC made sure the teaching team met frequently, working as a CoP; the 2nd PC kept up this practice, making it a priority to meet in workshops, learn together and work as a team. Then the 3rd PC, perhaps for lack of time, did not make this a priority, so the team stopped meeting regularly. The result: learning was not being shared and a lack of coherence appeared; overlap began occurring in courses and students complained about it; in short, a general lack of coordination ensued. So meetings were brought back as a result of implementing BOLD as a course delivery system.

How have faculty e-teaching and networking competencies developed?

In prior courses, there was a general lack of systematic, designed, active learning techniques. As a result of spending time together, discussions among faculty and lecturers centred on teaching competencies, general course design technique principles and course content. It was agreed that each lecturer-or-professor still needed leeway in their pedagogical choices; some still lectured but, thanks to the reactivated meetings, there was a heightened awareness of the lack of efficiency in lecturing and more active learning methods were implemented. The more innovative faculty used time in the virtual classroom to encourage discussion which, given the high content volatility, was time well spent.

From a networking perspective, even more impressive results are emerging, akin to what Rainie & Wellman (2012) have found: "...large, loosely knit social circles of networked individuals expand opportunities for learning, problem solving, decision making, and personal interaction" ...(...)...“The new social operating system of “networked individualism” liberates us from the restrictions of tightly knit groups”. According to respondents interviewed, this is a close approximation of the activity occurring within groups training as school principals. There is also support in our findings for what Castells named “networked individualism” which has “transformed work into less hierarchical, more team-driven enterprises; encouraged individuals to create and share content; and changed the way people obtain information” Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Overview). Again, such activities have been observed on a regular basis between students who not only maintain their burgeoning networks after classes end but appear to strengthen these networks over time. This is significant, we feel, in light of what Jones, Ferraday & Hodgson (2007) said about the nature of the positions occupied by educational leaders: “The posts occupied by such workers are often isolated and the use of digital networks has been suggested as a way of developing forms of cooperation and community” (p. 1). According to respondent 3, this description of “isolated workers” has very much been the case with these principals-in-training: “As students became used to the rhythm of their weekly seminar and as they started sharing issues, problems, even ethical dilemmas encountered in their work, a strong bond of solidarity developed among them. They realized that deep learning was occurring as they strove to break out of the isolation in which they found themselves. For many, it was a true epiphany!” Amidst these findings, the faculty working as a team in this online delivery process also realized that they had strengthened their own networking skills with regard to their teaching. Respondent 1: “We realised we had to “walk the talk” before expecting our students to do it. Working together as a team, although time-consuming at first, paid off later as we all benefited from each other’s ideas and we all were able to invest team ideas into individual course planning”.

Hodgson, Dirkinck-Holmfeld, & McConnell (2012) echo another realisation that dawned on faculty as their e-teaching skills were honed. “Hartley (2010) examined the development of online learning as technology developed and enabled new approaches. Initially tutors would adopt a behaviourist approach, software gave little opportunity to communicate and relate to others. As the technologies improved the focus moved to a cognitive approach, problem solving became the focus; activities were set in real situations to make the learning more logical. This progressed to a constructivist approach as a result of technology becoming more interactive, enabling students to collaborate with peers and tutors to develop a deeper understanding of the concepts being taught (Cox, 2013)”(p. 31). Both regular faculty and lecturers said they gradually underwent this kind of transformation in their e-teaching as a result of the pressing need for discussion as expressed by students. Having the technology that allowed such, they began exercising less control over their class, allowed for free-flowing discussions to occur naturally, as issues deemed relevant to students emerged and were debated.

Such exchanges, so reminiscent of actual campus-based classroom discussions during seminars, became natural to students as their communities of practice defined themselves. The following description by Benkler (2008) of such an open system is germane to our discussion here:

“Where implemented, cooperation-based systems seem primarily aimed to construct human systems capable of observing a complex and rapidly changing environment, learning about new conditions and practices within it, and pursuing them in flexible, adaptive ways”(p. 59).

Indeed, the system within which faculty and their students were all working, some students already appointed principals or assistants, very much fits with their reality as being immersed in a rapidly changing environment and their need to learn from each other and their mentors about new conditions and practices within it.

Yet, there is still a crucial missing dimension: actual in-depth and sustained online networking among faculty with regard to a program approach. The traditional pattern among faculty and lecturers who had an established custom of meeting face-to-face on a regular basis is still the prevalent mode; they have not fully embraced the online experience and have not yet become true networked collaborators. More research will be needed to monitor online implementation patterns in both individual and collective work processes as well as conditions conducive to sustained networked e-teaching practices.

Conclusion

In retrospect, several respondents, throughout their interviews, commented on the overall fitness for purpose of the course delivery choice made by faculty and administration with regard to this program, focusing as it did on real e-teaching as they defined it, on instantaneous exchange and feedback among students and

professors/lecturers and on keeping course design manageable. Respondents made numerous references to earlier e-teaching experiences which were linked to OL and BL, most ending up being less than desirable. In the case of OL, respondents engaged in course design and development of mega-courses (courses that had annual enrolments of 500 and more) expressed feelings of a lack of ownership (indeed, their university claimed copyright). Others mentioned OL requiring them to relinquish their teaching responsibilities by delegating such to teaching assistants. Some said devoting so much time to their course design was tantamount to seriously jeopardising their research and hence their jobs. Others felt decidedly dubious about BL, citing the lack of equity it creates by depriving students residing in remote areas of access to programs that they need to advance in their careers. Most noticeably, there was a high degree of unanimity in the decision to adopt BOLD as their program delivery mechanism. Several respondents said it gave them back what they most liked in their work: direct and continuous, regular contact with their students, free-flowing discussions on concepts, principles and their applications, access to students who would normally not enrol in their courses and a workload that was more manageable than other delivery systems they had known. And they said they would repeat the experience and would recommend that their colleagues try it.

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