The Perceptions and Needs of Faculty in Distance Education Courses in a Conventional University

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Abstract: For instructors in a distance education program which employs pre-pared lessons, the lack of classroom meetings and of regular student-instructor contact sets up a solitary teaching environment which can be quite different from those used to classroom teaching.

In this study, a questionnaire and interview probes faculty perceptions of distance teaching. Further interviews with several faculty who have taught several times at a distance attempt to determine their attitudes regarding distance education and whether their initial perceptions changed as they have become more famil-iar with this mode of education.

For administrators and faculty in a dual mode institution, the results of this study outline the perception of traditional faculty in a distance teaching situation, changés in their opinions over time, and suggest strategies in course preparation and course management to address the concerns of instructors so that they are more comfortable and effective teaching distance education courses.

Résumé: Pour les enseignants oeuvrant dans un programme à distance qui utilis-ent des leçons préparées, le manque de réunion de classe et de contact entre les enseignants et les étudiants mènent à un environnment d'enseignement soli-taire qui peut être très différent de l'enseignement en salle de classe.

Dans cette étude, un questionnaire et des entrevues nous ont permis de recueillir les perceptions des membres de la faculté vis à vis l'enseignement à distance. D'autres entrevues faites auprès des membres de la faculté qui ont enseigné à plusieurs reprises des cours à distance visaient à déterminer leurs attitudes vis à vis l'éducation à distance ainsi que l'évolution de leurs perceptions à mesure qu'ils devenaient plus familier avec cette façon d'enseigner.

Pour les administrateurs et les membres de la faculté ou les deux modes d'en-seignement se côtotent, les résultats de cette étude soulignent la perception traditionnelle des membres dans une situation d'enseignement à distance ainsi que l'évolution de leurs perceptions au fil du temps. Des stratégies applicables dans le préparation et l'organisation des cours sont proposées. Ces stratégies viennent répondre aux inquiétudes des enseignants de façon à ce qu'ils devien-nent plus confortables et efficaces dans des situations d'éductation à distance.

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Introduction

The University of Windsor is a conventional educational institution, in which contact between the student and the instructor is regarded as available during and between classes and is considered important in order for the student to receive guidance on aspects of course content and feedback regarding assignments and tests. Also, contact with the instructor is considered a factor in motivating the student to spend the time and attention needed to complete courses successfully. Recently added to the university offerings are distance education courses in which courses are taught by full time and sessional faculty more familiar with in-class teaching.

As in most dual mode institutions, the distance education program has some detractors among faculty who fear or suspect that the courses are not as rigorous as regular courses, and that student contact will be less likely than in classroom-based programs. Even among those who have written the distance course guides, there is some ambivalence about being involved in the program. There have also been some questions raised about the academic standards possible in distance education generally at faculty councils.

This study is the first attempt to investigate the attitude of faculty participating in the program. This study searches for the factors beyond the basic pay-for-service which are important in making distance teaching rewarding for instructors under the assumption that the more rewarding the teaching environment, the better the learning situation is likely to be for students.

Research Regarding Faculty Attitudes

Taylor and White (1991) note that the attractiveness for distance teaching centres on the flexibility of scheduling for the instructor. Of concern to instructors in distance education is the quality of the interaction with students, described as the most rewarding feature of teaching. The lack of face-to-face student interaction was found by Blanch (1994) as the most urgent academic concern of distance instructors. Holmberg (1981) notes that communication with the student is a critically important factor for students. However, faculty often feel less than well rewarded for distance education teaching (Dillon, 1989; Siaciwena, 1989). In many dual mode institutions, distance teaching is less prestigious than in-class teaching (Siaciwena, 1989; Stinehart, 1988). With this perception influencing the attitude of traditional faculty involved in distance teaching, it is important to provide a rewarding teaching environment in order for instructors to be motivated in their distance courses.

This study was undertaken to further the research on faculty attitudes in distance education and specifically to evaluate the attitudes and opinions of distance education instructors at the University of Windsor in the Winter semester of 1994.

Background to the Study

The distance education program at the University of Windsor is ten years old and includes telecourse, correspondence and audiotape enhanced courses in Arts. Social Science, Science, and Business.

Business courses comprise the majority of the distance courses, and most of these are correspondence-type courses. Each course includes a textbook and a detailed course guide prepared to meet the curriculum requirements of the course in the degree program.

At the beginning of the semester, each registered student receives a package of materials including the textbook, course manual and study guide, any audio or video materials and semester specific information regarding assignments, due dates, examination dates, etc. Students are required to submit assignments to the instructor on specific dates. These are marked and returned by mail. Each instructor is required to have telephone access hours (six per week), including at least three evening hours.

Instructors in the distance program are appointed by the relevant department in the academic faculty. Currently, there is an agreement that the course writer will offer the course twice, for debugging and improvement purposes. Full time and sessional instructors are assigned to teach the courses, according to the Faculty contract.

Instructors review the course materials, select assignments and deadlines, prepare and mark the final exam, make themselves available for telephone tutoring, and evaluate materials for future revision.

Distance instructors, like campus instructors, receive little direction in their work. Each distance instructor receives a set of suggestions and regulation information from Continuing Education.

Research Methodology

Twenty of the twenty three distance instructors for the Winter, 1994 semester were contacted for this study by telephone during the second half of the semester. Sixteen of those contacted were instructing courses which were basically correspondence-type courses, two were telecourses, one was a correspondence course with a set of audiotape lectures, and one was a correspondence course with a weekend workshop. A set of questions was prepared (see appendix) which included an open ended final question allowing instructors to make comments about any aspect of the program or their concerns. While

all were asked the set of questions listed, follow up questions permitted clarification of comments or pursuit of interesting or unusual comments.

Survey Responses

   Instructor background.

   The range of experience with distance education courses varied from those involved in instructing their first D.E. course, to one instructor who had taught over 20 D.E. course offerings. Only four were novices; all others had taught at least one distance education course previously.

   Some instructors had been involved in course preparation; others had not. Seven had written the course guide for the course they were teaching. Eleven of the instructors were regular full time faculty at the university; one was a former (retired) faculty member, eight were experienced sessional instructors.

Instructor/Student contact.

   Instructors received information on how the students were doing by their performance on assignments and through student telephone contact. Most of the courses in the accounting/finance areas have printed solutions. In others, this is not appropriate for the assignments, (e.g. Expository writing, Sociology, Geology, Management, Marketing). In all courses, instructors indicate extensive marking is required in order to highlight errors and indicate what information the students are missing, or where they are mistaken. Four instructors mentioned that they often prepared a written commentary based on frequent errors on student assignments. All found the marking in D.E. courses to be extensive and time consuming.

   A major part of the discussion with the instructors in the program included their thoughts on what they liked and disliked about classroom teaching and about distance education. By establishing this comparison, it was hoped we could learn how we might enhance the experience of distance instructors, thereby reducing negative criticism of the program.

   Without exception, contact with students was mentioned as the major reward for teaching in-class and without exception, the lack of contact and the anonymity of distance students was the major drawback for distance courses from the instructors' point of view. One instructor mentioned that not having student contact prevented the instructor from testing his command of the subject, and the level of his ability to teach effectively. Another missed the opportunity to "play the dynamics of the class" in discussions.

   While student contact was extremely important to instructors, seven mentioned that large classes were least desirable about in-class teaching because large classes led to lack of instructor-student contact and anonymity. A detailed comparison of the amount of contact with students in current classes

with the amount of contact with distance education students may indicate if the difference is real or perceived.

In the distance courses, instructors had particular telephone office hours for students, but most received few calls from students. The proportion of the class that called was estimated by most in the 20% - 30% range. One instructor insisted students call to discuss their major project in the course; in that class 100% of the students who finished the course called. Of the experienced D.E. instructors, most estimated that of the students who called, they made contact one to four times during the semester. First time D.E. instructors were experiencing calls that would result in a similar call pattern as those who had taught in the program several times. In one course that had frequent assignments, the instructor noted that a small number of students called several times per week. Three others indicated they had frequent calls from two or three students in their class.

In all but three classes, it was reported that students called mostly about logistics in the courses (expectations regarding assignments and exams, requests to submit assignments late, etc.). In the class where the students had to call the instructor about their assignment, this was the major subject of the conversation. In the course in which there were frequent assignments, calls focused on the expectations of the instructor regarding the assignment, and questions about the grading of previous assignments. In one business course in which solutions to assignments were *not* provided with the graded returns, the questions were mainly for clarification of the course material and returned assignment difficulties. From the calls received, all instructors thought that students had no greater difficulty with the course material than a typical class of campus students.

In the interview, faculty members were advised that some distance education institutions have the instructors call each student early in the course to introduce themselves and encourage the students. When asked if they thought this was a good idea, ten gave an unqualified "yes" answer indicating that this might help to encourage the students to call more often, two indicated it might be a good idea, but personally would not want to do it because of the time involved. One opposed to instructor initiated calls said it would be hard to know what to say, while another stated that instructor calls were not a good idea because the spirit of distance education includes placing the onus on the students to study at their own pace, and be responsible for initiating any contact, if needed or desired. Two others said they already sent a friendly note to students early in the course, encouraging them to call with questions or problems. Three were unsure of the value of instructor calls.

Attitude toward distance education.

Thirteen instructors remarked that their attitude toward distance education had not changed during the time they had taught in the program. One

mented that he had been involved in a professional society's distance program for many years as well as the university's, and that there would be more need for distance education, and more technologies used in all instructional programs in the future. Two in their first distance course felt they had too little experience yet to answer this question.

Of the remaining instructors, several commented about the students in distance education, rather than their own activities. Comments regarding students are noted below.

One instructor who was a course writer stated that his perceptions about teaching had changed because of his involvement in distance education because preparing the course guide forced him to view the course through the eyes of the student. He had to make the material accessible without an instructor to explain concepts, and he felt this had given him a way of approaching "underachievers" who do not see themselves coping with a daunting amount of unfamiliar material. He was rewarded that students found the course concepts understandable and relevant, even if they believed previously that these were difficult. One often-mentioned attraction for instructors to distance education courses is that there is no need to appear at class for three hours each week. Instructors appreciated the flexibility of completing the work involved in a distance course at times and in places that suit them.

Instructor perception of the distance students.

Fourteen of the instructors believed that the majority of the distance students were more disciplined, more motivated and more mature than campus students. Three felt there was little difference among students, and two noted that they had so little contact, they could not comment on the distance students. Distance students had more complicated lives, noted three instructors, with more personal problems, and barriers to learning such as babies heard in the background while a student was attempting to clarify a course-related matter over the phone.

Two were surprised that some students who never or rarely contacted them did so well in the course. One concluded that it was more difficult for students to pass a distance education course than a regular course because of fewer opportunities for feedback and reinforcement.

Conclusions

The major concern of most instructors regarding their experience in the distance education courses is the lack of interaction with students. This is what they find most rewarding about in-class teaching, and most lacking in distance education. Other comments are related to logistical difficulties regarding assignments, most of which could be alleviated if there were better

ways of sending and receiving information, which is another type of contact between the instructors and their students.

In order to increase instructor satisfaction in the courses by assuring more student to instructor feedback, several initiatives will be undertaken:

1. Cost analysis of using a fax for assignment receipt and/or return
2. Establishing e-mail opportunities for distance classes
3. Analysis of 800 number calling system to instructors. This may include a survey of students to determine their willingness to contribute a set fee each term for access to their instructor on an as needs basis for the term
4. Suggesting instructors initiate a written personal introduction inviting student calls
5. Workshops for new and former instructors for the sharing of experiences and techniques for effective interaction with distance students
6. Introduction of a newsletter for students and faculty
7. Dissemination of more information about distance education and relevant research to all faculty

For Further Study

1. Analysis of the behaviour of instructors that encourages student contact.
2. Search for additional means of increasing instructor-student contact.
3. Research regarding effective tutoring techniques for distance education instructors.
4. Followup surveys to assess changes in conventional instructor needs and perceptions when they instruct distance education courses.

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APPENDIX

Faculty Perceptions of D.E.

1. Including this, how many times have you taught this D.E. course?
2. Have you taught other D.E. courses?
3. Were you the course writer?
4. Are you full time faculty?   sessional?   retired?
5. What is the frequency of student calls?
   % of class that calls
   Of those that call:
   #of calls per student   from   to   AVG.:
6. What types of questions do students ask most often?
7. In some D.E. programs, instructors call students early in the semester. Do you think this is advisable? Why or why not?
8. What type of feedback on assignments do you provide?
   solutions?
   detailed marking of student submission
   suggestions for study
   other
9. Do a significant number of students indicate they have difficulty understanding the material? (Is this similar to regular courses)
10. What is most satisfying about instructing a D.E. course?
    Least?
11. What is most satisfying about teaching an in class course?
    Least?

12. If you have taught through D.E. more than once, have your perceptions about this type of teaching changed?

13. From your experience in the D.E. program, how would you compare the students with on campus full or part time students? (such areas as maturity, motivation, intellectual ability?)

14. What do you think would improve the D.E. program:
    technology   materials   contact arrangements   other

15. Are there changes in the D.E. program you would suggest to improve your ability to help the students?

16. Are there changes in the course that would improve your satisfaction in being the instructor of the course?

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