

“And the walls came a-tumblin’ down...”

Comment recréer l’ambiance propre au séminaire dans un cours en ligne?

Michael Power

Abstract

This case deals with a university program which is well respected but requires changes to be made to it as enrolments dwindle. Pressure from administration is making the Program Head and Program Committee members as well as Senior Instructional Designer LeFort consider new options for its delivery. Online learning is not a well-established practice among regular faculty although lecturers in the program are open to it. LeFort has to find a solution that maintains quality of instruction while increasing accessibility and enhancing cost-efficiency.

Keywords: Canada, program in jeopardy, dwindling enrolments, department tensions, faculty buy-in, virtual classroom, blended online learning design

Institutional context

Professor Joan Brown, Dean of the School of Education, was worried. She had been keeping an eye on enrollment rates in the School Principal Training Program (SPTP) over the past few years and what she was seeing in the most recent statistics was not warming the cockles of her heart. The decline in enrollments was now at a point that she felt was

critical. Action would have to be taken - and soon. She got on the phone and called her Associate Dean, Dr. Luis Montero, in charge of Research and Graduate Programs.

On the floor below, Dr. Larry Smith, Committee Chair of Graduate Programs, was also going over the same statistics and coming to the same conclusion. Action would be required to salvage this program. He was thinking about what had brought about this steady decline in fortunes as he dialed the number for his colleague, Dr. Frances Wheedon. Getting her voice mail, he said: *“Frances, Larry here. Just got the SPTP stats and they’re not good. Can you let me know when you’ll be in next? We need to put together a plan. Cheers!”* Larry then zapped off an email to the other committee members telling them what was up and that he’d send them a Doodle to find a time to meet.

Meanwhile, across the parking lot and on the second floor of the adjacent building where the School of Education housed its technical and pedagogical support unit, Bill LeFort, the Senior Instructional Designer, aware of the same stats, saw an opportunity.

Background

Headwaters University (HU) was a venerable and centrally-located university of about 30,000 students. Its School of Education had begun offering the SPTP over 20 years ago and had become the university standard in the field of K-12 principal training. Its graduates were working all across the country and represented strong alumni support for the university. As baby boomer school principals were beginning retirement *en masse*, the need for increased training capacity became obvious. However, HU’s SPTP was limited to 25 enrollees a year. As a result, given that success inevitably draws a crowd, so

too did this program. Several competing universities hurriedly launched their own principal training programs, enticing potential students with various formulas and opportunities for learning, such as blended learning options and even a completely online, anytime, anywhere, learn-at-home program. The effect of these new programs was immediately felt at HU, with a few currently-enrolled students switching over to the new programs, followed by a marked downward spiral in new enrollments. These trends only intensified over the years, thereby sounding the death knoll of HU's SPTP.

At first, faculty at the HU School of Education were fairly oblivious as to what was taking place. This was because most of the faculty involved in delivering the SPTP, since its inception, were adjuncts, for the most part retired principals who had been called back into service by HU's School of Education in order to develop and man the program. Indeed, Dr. Smith (Program Chair) and Dr. Wheedon (who was also Department Union representative) were the only full-time, tenured faculty who actually taught courses in this program. However, since they were both involved in various national and international research projects, they didn't really take note of the declining enrollments. Yes, they had perceived smaller numbers from year to year but they had actually seen that as a positive change, enjoying the extra time available to them to provide students with more individualized support. So no alarm bells had been ringing in their minds. Even as they saw competing universities launch their own programs, they (condescendingly) thought that they would not amount to much because they were nothing more than opportunistic attempts at cashing in on a trend. Little did they know that students had only been coming to HU because of a lack of other options. Now that they had options, students appeared to be voting with their feet.

Monday

Associate Dean Luis Montero was on the phone bright and early with Larry.

“Larry, you probably know why I’m calling, right?”

Larry responded, *“Luis, I’m way ahead of you. I’ve already convened a Program Committee meeting. Am just checking the Doodle poll as we speak... let me see ...OK, everyone is free on Friday afternoon between 1:00 and 3:00 PM. Care to join us?”*

Luis said: *“No, that’s fine. I just wanted to make sure you’re on top of this. Maybe we can get together over coffee sometime before your committee meeting. I’ve got dark roast ... the good stuff!”*

Laughing, Larry says: *“Free coffee? Just say when!”*

Luis: *“OK! How about this Wednesday at 3:00 PM?”*

“I’ll be there!” said Larry.

As Larry hung up, he locked in the time and date for his committee meeting and booked a meeting room. He then saw that Frances was free for lunch tomorrow. He immediately confirmed that he’d be there.

Tuesday

Dr. Frances Wheedon, like many of her colleagues in School Administration, was on her second career as a faculty member, having spent the better part of 20 years, first as Vice-Principal and then Principal of a large, downtown high school. As an empty-nester, she was enjoying her second career, having just been granted tenure. Her research program was replete with grants and writing projects. Life was good. The only dark cloud on the horizon was dwindling enrollments in the program. Larry showed up for lunch just as Frances was ordering mineral water. *“Ditto,”* Larry said to the waiter. After some chitchat, Frances said,

“So, the walls are a-tumblin’ down?”

Larry responded, *“Not really. I think we can pull things together. You know as well as I do that what the other guys are doing won’t stand the test of time. We’ve been here*

longer than they have and I see no reason why they'll outlast us. We simply have to hang tight. How about you?"

Frances, with an air of *laissez-faire*, said: *"I agree. We have to hang in there and make sure our students develop the competencies they'll need when they take the reins; (and mixing her metaphors) it's a rough row to hoe when you have to learn by the seat of your pants when on the job."*

Wednesday

As agreed, Associate Dean Montero met with Program Chair, Larry Smith to discuss options concerning the SPTP. Prior to the meeting, Luis had been briefed by Dean Brown on the "situation." Luis begins the meeting with some small talk about the current football season and another massive win against Caldarian University. Then, Luis said to Larry:

"So you've seen the SPTP stats. It looks like we're in trouble. Dean Brown is even talking about pulling the plug. I told her that this could be a temporary downturn, that enrollments will likely pick up when dissatisfied students from the other programs come back to us. But, she is worried. So that is why we're having this meeting."

Larry nodded: *"I agree, Luis. Both Frances and I think that this is just a phase and that things will right themselves. Who do UTM (University of Three Mountains) and BU (Brookline University) think they are kidding with their shoddy programs? I'd be surprised if they lasted another year! Seriously, home schooling school principals? Or partially training them via blended learning? At BU, they have absolutely no direct student-faculty contact and it's not much better at UTM! Just emailed-in assignments, usually corrected by grad students-for-hire! They don't expect much student engagement and so they don't get much. It's like their students are just in it for the certificate. Plus, the faculty involved - and I know a few of them - some of whom we refused to hire, by the way - don't have a clue who is enrolling in their courses and how they are doing. But that doesn't seem to bother them. So, yes, I do think our students will come back to us after seeing what a waste of time these other programs are. And you know as well as I do that word of mouth goes a long way in these matters."*

Luis seems unconvinced, *"Fair and good, Larry, but do you think the Dean will wait for the expected turnaround? I tell you she is watching the SPTP like a hawk and I bet you dollars to doughnuts that as soon as you start costing the school money, she'll yank the plug. And I can't really think of an argument to stop her from doing so. Can you?"*

Larry sputtered: *"Luis, are you kidding? Our program is the best around, everyone knows that. We were also the first program out there and our graduates are all over the*

country, some even overseas. They are also significant alumni supporters I should mention in passing. Students come to us, we don't go to them. And they will keep coming. Just watch!"

Luis responded: *"OK Larry, I'll watch, and you may be sure Dean Brown will be watching, too. Maybe we won't have to have this conversation next term."*

Luis then reported back to Dean Brown telling her that he had spoken to the SPTP Program Chair and that they were both confident program enrollments would *"most likely"* pick up next term. Dean Brown thanked him and said she hoped so as well.

Friday

As planned, the Committee members arrived at the meeting aware that their program was in trouble. Larry started by summing up what he had discussed with the Associate Dean. Mary Jones, a retired principal and the adjunct professors' faculty representative, who was never at a loss for sarcasm, said,

"Well, I'm glad that Luis and you have this all figured out! So, why are we even meeting?"

Larry, used to Mary's outbursts, simply stated, *"Mary, nothing is figured out. We have to come up with a strategy to turn things around or the next call I get from Luis won't be as genteel. So, I propose we look at the stats and start brainstorming, ok?"*

As they worked their way through the numbers spanning back ten years, they all agreed that the downward trend coincided with program launches by UTM and BU. Mary piped up:

"I don't get it! What they are offering is mush, pre-masticated mush. Their faculty have been retired for so long they are better suited to teaching history than administration! And yet students are lining up to enroll. What the heck is going on?"

Larry responds calmly, *"Well, the facts don't lie. They are indeed lining up for the other programs and we have to figure out why and do something about it."*

Other committee members proposed running ads in the local paper and maybe getting a journalist to do an interview with Larry to promote the program. The student rep proposed using social media to increase program visibility. Dr. Wheedon, having just published a book, said she'd been invited to participate in a regional symposium and that her presence there might help garner some visibility for the program. Mary Jones said she'd be addressing the Retired Principals Association later in the month and would put in a plug for the SPTP. As the meeting wound down, the members felt confident that *taking these measures would not only shore up the program, but ensure its future.*

Following term

As the new stats became available, Dean Brown picked up the phone and called Luis.

"Luis, I imagine you saw the new enrollment stats. The SPTP is in real trouble now. I think we both know that you need to take immediate action. No more waiting. Got it?"

Luis, mustering as much enthusiasm as he could, responded, *"Got it Dean!"*

As soon as he hung up the phone, he dialed Larry's number. He got voice mail: *"Larry, Luis here. We need to talk about the SPTP. Get back to me ASAP OK?"*

The next day

Larry was nervous as he waited to meet with Luis. He was, of course, disappointed that the SPTP stats were so bad. Disastrous, actually. A 30% drop - in one term - despite everything his committee had done. He certainly never saw that coming. It made him question the way he was looking at the program. OK, it was a great program, the oldest one around and he, himself, was a respected researcher and author in the field. Together with Frances, they were the backbone of the program. Yes, they had their own group of

adjuncts but they were all seasoned veterans, all hand-picked with impeccable credentials. WHAT on earth was going on?

Luis started the meeting with more calm than he felt: *“Larry, I hoped we wouldn’t be having this meeting but ... well... here we are. You know the story, so let’s cut to the chase. We have to take action NOW. Dean Brown cannot afford to pay to deliver this program or she’ll have the VP on her back... and we know how she’d like that! (Chuckle). Soooo, what’s your plan?”*

Larry, caught off-guard slightly, said: *“Honestly, Luis, I don’t know. After our meeting last term, I met with my committee and we set a number of initiatives in motion, which we thought would correct the situation. We now realize that it was probably too little, too late. The thing is, Luis, I’m a researcher first and a program chair second. I know how to train principals but I’m not adept at marketing. At this point, I don’t have a clue as to what we should or shouldn’t do. But, I agree, we are going to have to do something...”*

His voice trails off as he starts wondering why he didn’t turn over the Program Chair responsibilities to Wheedon when he had the chance last year. Was it really worth the one course release he got in exchange?

Luis responded, *“OK Larry, I know, this is not something any of us planned for. And none of us, myself included, really knows how to manage these things. Sometimes I think Higher Ed would be best if put in the hands of qualified professionals who are used to charting market share, cost-to-production ratios, and so on. Maybe we are dinosaurs at a time when mammals are ruling the roost. Nonetheless, this is happening on our watch so we’d best come up with some kind of a strategy that I can take upstairs. We’ll just have to do the best we can with the resources we have.”*

As they worked, Larry realized that Frances should be there as well. He quickly zapped off an email to her, asking if, by any chance, she was on campus today and available for an hour or two. Frances emailed him right back, noting that she was expecting his email, and would be right over. What was to have been an hour of work became a late-nighter, bolstered by all-you-can-eat pizza. They analyzed the numbers over the past ten years, examined what the other universities were offering, and looked closely at their own

program, scrutinizing it course by course, suggesting changes and tweaks as they went along. But, as they were nearing exhaustion, they realized that they simply did not have a concise and straight-forward strategy to resurrect the program. Luis said:

“OK, look, we’re tired, let’s go home. I think we need more minds on this. Larry, can you convene your committee members for an urgent meeting. I can ask your Department Head, Dr. Eloy Richards, to join us in case there are human resource issues to be handled. I think I’ll also ask the Head of the Theoretical Foundations of Education Department, Dr. Mowatu, to join us. I recall her Department was struggling with a similar challenge a few years ago but their numbers are now stable and I’ve not heard anything from them. Things must have sorted themselves out. We can also bring in our Senior Instructional Designer, Bill LeFort. He might have some ideas for us. OK, let’s get out our calendars to see when we can meet again”.

The following week

As the ad hoc meeting got to a start, Luis welcomed everyone and thanked them for making this meeting a priority. He reminded them that the Dean was expecting an action plan “*within weeks*” and that it had to be good; otherwise, she’d require us to start scaling back activities and, as the last graduates finished, closing the program. “*So, Luis said, “We’re working with an ultimatum. Let’s see what can be done.”* Discussions first focused on the statistics, bringing everyone up to speed. Then Luis opened up the floor to a brainstorming session. Highlights are summarized as follows:

- The student representative, Alice, stated that the current SPTP had not changed in years; the same overall structure and courses were being offered despite a few cosmetic changes occurring after the last program assessment five years ago. Program Chair, Smith said that the committee was about to start the periodic review process this term so the timing was right for reassessing options.

- Luis said the SPTP was probably losing ground because the upstart programs were simply offering students more flexibility in their studies; as busy professionals, they seemed to be migrating to programs that allowed them more leeway in managing their work and study schedules. As a result, the group should be focusing on how delivering the SPTP could be modified to better accommodate students' needs, adding, *"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."*
- Luis' contribution led to discussion on the use of technology, something Chair Smith had hoped to avoid as it was a divisive factor among his faculty, be they regular or adjunct. Senior ID, LeFort, said there was a *"wide array"* of options here, just waiting to be explored by faculty, adding: *"What was impossible just a couple of years ago has now gone mainstream. I urge you to keep an open mind when considering a technological solution."*
- Dr. Mowatu, Head of the Theoretical Foundations Department then spoke, praising the success of an online certificate program in Educational Philosophy, saying that, in his Department, they had gotten to the point, about three years ago, where they had seriously considered dropping the program altogether because of dwindling numbers. However, they decided to run a pilot, offering one course online and the success was such that they rapidly developed the other courses for online delivery in asynchronous mode. However, he said, the downside was that ongoing involvement by regular faculty in course delivery was virtually nil once the courses had been designed and developed, as they relied heavily on *canned*, talking-head recordings. Basically, graduate students had been put in charge of the day-to-day operations of the program, such as handling student support.

Moreover, although enrollments had increased to the point where the program was now self-sustaining, some students had expressed their dissatisfaction with the forum-based approach given to the course, saying that they expected more from a university-level course than students contradicting other students in online postings without input from a faculty member.

- Department Head Richards corroborated what Dr. Mowatu had been saying, stating that there had also been little enthusiasm among his faculty for online course development. He said:

“Faculty in our department seem to be OK with online learning, so long as it does not involve them. Up until now, most of our programs are doing well and no one has really considered having to teach online. Plus, with all the hullabaloo MOOCs are creating, some colleagues sense that the Academy is moving further and further away from its core values of student AND faculty engagement in teaching and learning. They don’t see online learning as a quality educational experience for anyone involved.”

As the discussion wound down, Luis asked Larry to assemble an ad hoc Committee to come up with a series of operational recommendations and to be ready to present them to himself and the Dean within the month. He said: *“I want the committee to consider all options, to leave no stone unturned in finding a viable solution to this problem and, if necessary, to even envisage a radical change in how we deliver this program.”*

Still a week later

Larry sat down with his Department Head, Eloy, his colleague and Union rep Frances, the adjunct rep Mary, the student rep Alice, and ID Bill and he went over his notes from the working session he had had with Luis and Frances. They all agreed

that some level of technology would be required to assist the program in meeting student needs and thereby recovering enrollments.

Bill said: *“I don’t agree with what Dr. Mowatu was saying about the Philosophy program. Our team salvaged that program by taking it online. And students are obviously happy with it since they’re enrolling in it! Hundreds of programs across the country are going online and no one is complaining. OK, although faculty aren’t on board, unions haven’t been complaining. I say, let’s just bear down and get it done.”*

Frances then said: *“You’re right Bill, unions haven’t been very vocal either in supporting or opposing online learning. I think they are more preoccupied with retirement benefits than anything else nowadays. Be that as it may, as it stands, Larry and I are the only regular faculty involved in the current program and some of my colleagues seem to privately think we are nuts... I’ve heard things. Anyway, can you imagine what they’ll think of us when we tell them we’re taking it online? We’d be the laughing-stock of our department. I mean, our colleagues seem to think that those who teach online only do so because they are completely out of options, right? I mean, I have a career to consider here.”*

Mary, the adjunct rep (having previously worked as vice-principal at a school where Frances was principal), couldn’t hold back: *“Well, I don’t have a career to consider here, nor do any of MY colleagues. They’ve spent their lives concerned with students’ needs and, even in retirement, they continue to prioritize STUDENTS’ needs. So, if the career profs here want to worry about the pecking-order in the department, or their research, or their grants and publications and leave the students to the adjunct faculty, so be it. We’ll do what has to be done to keep this program going!”*

Her comments landed with a thud. Everyone went silent. Then, Eloy, recalling a certain animosity between Mary and Frances, said:

“I don’t think this is any place to settle old scores. We all know there has been a fair amount of ongoing tension among faculty with regard to the University’s practice of hiring adjuncts rather than creating new faculty positions. We also all know that I’ve had my share of trouble with getting faculty interested in online learning. Without any incentives, my hands are tied. Besides, and I agree with Frances, many faculty think that going online does mean that they’ll lose about a whole year of research to writing up modules, often from scratch, developing multiple choice questionnaires, recording video sessions and what not. And for what? Our university has no way of showing them that their work is appreciated. Yes, there is an annual prize for the best online course – whoopee - but what about everybody else? As we all know, even if we don’t agree with it, a tenure-track faculty member cannot afford to devote any time to designing course materials because, when they come up for tenure, what is assessed is their research. If they don’t publish enough and in the right journals, they can start

looking around for another job. On the other hand, if they don't develop an online course, who is going to take them to task?"

Richard, Program Chair, said: *"You're right, Eloy, that is why Frances and I have avoided going online up until now; it just wasn't worth the effort. But, now that we have our backs up against the wall, it's a different situation. Frances, regardless of what our colleagues may or may not think of me, I think we have to reconsider online learning. I got involved in this program because I believed in it; I know it still meets a crucial, societal need and I'm proud of what we've accomplished thus far. And I don't think we have to worry too much about our careers. We are tenured aren't we?"* And, waving a white flag in Mary's direction, he said: *"While I'm at it, I'd also like to recognize the valuable contribution Mary and her colleagues have brought to this program. Without it, we would never have kept this program going for as long as we have. As for what Bill, you were saying, I agree that you did indeed salvage that program, as the numbers clearly show. But my concern is more general; what are students actually getting out of online learning? Are they indeed learning? Are there any objective data telling us just how well students learn online? Are there data on skills development and subsequent on-the-job transfer? I don't think we really know, but we should. I get the feeling that, with online learning, if you cast your net wide enough, you'll get enough students to keep a program afloat but enrollments are not, in and by themselves, a test of program validity, are they?"*

Bill, taking all this in, responded: *"There is a fair amount of data suggesting 'no significant difference' between student achievement in class or online. So it appears that how they learn is not the only variable at work here. The Online Learning Consortium <http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/5pillars> has set out fairly universal guidelines on what quality online learning is, so, if you wish, we could review these together. One thing I think we must look at, in reference to what Frances was saying, is how to make online learning a workable solution for busy academics. I was just reading about a new grad program launched by a university somewhere in Quebec that was a faculty initiative and involved low front-end design (musing out loud); now, where did I read that? Anyway, let me get back to you on this."*

Frances agreed, looking at Bill: *"Well, anything that allows us to spend more time on research and less time on teaching will likely be a winning option, especially in our department where almost a third of the professors are tenure track."* Looking straight at Mary, she added, *"Huh, you never know, maybe we'll be able to deliver this program with fewer adjuncts after all."*

Larry, trying to avoid an outbreak of fisticuffs, decided that it's time to conclude this meeting. He wrapped the meeting up with a brief suggestion, *"Ok, let's all do some homework, mull this over, and meet back here next, week, same time, same place."*

During that week

Bill went online and checked his recent Google history, quickly locating the article he'd been reading. It was about a grad program in Social Work which had recently gone online, using a combination of online synchronous and asynchronous technologies. As he read, he was ticking off little boxes in his head: start-up costs were low, check, it was a faculty-driven initiative, big check (since almost every initiative is admin-led), both students and administrators were satisfied, another big check. "Huh," he thought (somewhat sarcastically): *"Maybe this is the panacea we've been looking for! Anyway, it's worth a phone call."* He tracked down the researcher who wrote the article and called him. Getting his voice mail, he said, *"I'm Bill LeFort at Headwaters University and I'd like to talk to you about your article, which just appeared in the Journal of Online Solutions. Could I call you back, at your earliest convenience? I will also email you. Thanks. Bye."*

Larry and Frances

Meanwhile, Larry and Frances met over coffee and discussed the earlier meeting.

Larry began,

"About Mary - to be fair, we would not have been able to offer our program without her and her adjunct colleagues. You know that most of our colleagues simply don't have the expertise, the knowledge, or the experience to contribute to it. But I know that you and Mary have a history and that she really can get on your nerves. Just let her have some fun, ok?"

Frances responded, *"Fun, right! That's what they call it. Larry, the thing is, there are too many adjuncts teaching in this program, we both know that. And, regardless of the fact that Mary bugs me to no end, I do think it's something we'll have to change for the credibility of the program. I actually don't agree that Mary and her minions are all that necessary. What they are teaching is usually not based on research; it's just based on a rehash of their own personal experiences as principals which, in some cases, if not all, may not even represent best practices in today's schools. What I'm*

saying is this: when they were training to be principals, they didn't have the online resources that we have today so they had to be trained by the senior practitioners available locally. That is no longer the case. Besides, our adjuncts simply don't have a complete and up-to-date overview of current school administration techniques, such as the UCEA's ISLLC Standards. Mary has never been to a UCEA conference. By the way, weren't you telling me that, as Program Chair, you'd sat in on a few of the classes taught by adjuncts and that all they did was lecture students on the ways things used to be. (Larry nodded his head). So, I think that, were we to redesign the program as being primarily research-based and not experientially-based, we'd be providing our graduates with a firmer epistemological basis for lifelong learning. By refocusing our program, I think more of our colleagues might be interested in participating in the program. And we wouldn't have to put up with Mary any more, an added bonus!"

Larry nodded, *"I agree with just about everything you've said. Our students do seem to just want recipes for problem solving in the field. So when the adjuncts start telling them their war stories, they just lap them up. That has been bugging me for quite a while but, since our colleagues weren't interested in teaching in this program, especially since it meant teaching evenings, we had to do what we could with what we had. Yes, Mary is a real pain but she has been instrumental in keeping the program afloat. On the other hand, this could be the opportunity we've been waiting for to make some sweeping changes. Maybe making a break from the status quo that the adjuncts have been serving up to our students and focusing, instead, on empirical data for decision-making and on evidence-based research will take this program to another level. And it could galvanize support for the program in our department. So, Frances, how do we do that without having to spend evenings and weekends over the next six months designing online courses?"*

Bill

Professor Michel Laforce called Bill back the next day and thanked him for his interest in his article. He said that he'd been getting quite a few calls and emails about his article and that he was of course glad to share his findings with others. When Bill asked him about distance education and online learning at his university and about his own involvement, Michel said:

"At our university, distance education has a long history, actually spanning 40 years, back when courses were delivered via a combination of prerecorded TV and correspondence materials. Since educational technology is my field of research, I've been involved in teaching at a distance or online for the past 30 years. Over the years, as new technologies were invented and honed, we delivered courses to satellite

campuses via videoconferencing and dedicated ASDN lines. But that got cost-prohibitive once the telephone company subsidies dried up. What really saved distance education was the arrival of the Web. We were the first university in our province to offer Web-based courses. Looking back, they weren't much to write home about but, at the time, they were fairly innovative. And students enjoyed the ease of anytime, anywhere learning. We even started to give the single-mode, distance education university a run for its money."

Bill asked: "What kind of buy-in were you getting from your colleagues?"

Michel said: "Like almost everywhere, many of my colleagues shied away from getting involved in these courses and our department had to rely on adjuncts and teaching assistants. Some of my colleagues, when they were polled, said they just preferred their traditional, stand-and-deliver weekly lectures. It was the way they were taught and it was what their students were used to. Between the two of us, I think they figured: I'm in and out in three hours and I'm done for the whole week. No spending time laboring over course notes or writing study guides, no tweaking graphics, no design meetings, no long periods of time when they couldn't get to their research. And no forum postings! Honestly, the only reason I stayed involved throughout the years is that I've been able to do research on my own online teaching, thereby killing two birds with one stone. But that is obviously not the case for my colleagues."

Bill followed up: "OK, so your colleagues were more traditionally-minded but did any of them try online teaching?"

Michel: "Actually, some did but, when polled, they said they didn't like feeling, how should I put it... inadequate, or incompetent...that is, being put on the spot to work outside their comfort zone which is their subject matter expertise. They said that, at first, they had trouble navigating within the LMS which, admittedly, was pretty rudimentary at the time. They also said they found all the button-clicking downright annoying and not what they were interested in spending nights and weekends doing. Many realized that working in the new LMS required that they take some training and, you know as well as I do, not too many faculty sign up for that. But I think the thing that irked them the most was having an instructional designer telling them what to do and when to do it, when he wasn't telling them how to do it! OK, we're not all team players and some of us act like divas and are used to setting our own schedules and managing our own workloads. Nonetheless, we found out all of this after doing some follow-up interviews pursuant to an initial survey on faculty and online teaching."

Bill, feeling like he was getting down to the nitty-gritty, was really enjoying this conversation. He asked:

"What other feedback did you get from your colleagues about teaching online?"

Michel: *“Another thing we found out was that some faculty are categorically and philosophically opposed to online teaching what they call “forum courses,” that is, courses that are entirely delivered asynchronously. They told us that they needed “real contact” with their students, not some ersatz contact, that unless they actually “knew” their students, they felt they were copping out by giving them a grade. They added that, in online learning, they constantly had doubts about who actually was behind the forum contributions: Was it really their students or a student-for-hire? Were their students writing original contributions or were they just plagiarizing something someone else had written elsewhere on the Web? And besides, the forum entries became so voluminous that many of them said they just couldn’t keep up. They simply didn’t have time to read everything, let alone check everything for plagiarism.”*

“So what did they do?” asked Bill. “Did they stop teaching online?”

Michel: *“Strangely, no, they did not. Some of them told us that they slowly became jaded to the pitfalls of online teaching; they intentionally allowed open enrollments to their courses. That way, they were able to hire TAs to do all the student support and the grading. They discovered that once their courses had been designed and launched, there was actually little work left for them to do. They’d of course keep an eye on things but the TAs basically ran the courses. Over time, they said they’d become course managers rather than professors and I recall one colleague saying, quite dramatically, that online teaching was not unlike a drug: once he was hooked, he couldn’t stop because of the “rush” he got from having more time to do research.”*

Bill, intrigued, said, *“Did you conduct any longitudinal, follow-up research?”*

Michel: *“As a matter of fact, we did. We started expanding our research to faculty in other universities and we started noticing a significant number of professors who had gotten involved early on but who were now starting to ‘opt out’ of online teaching. They said they started having doubts about the quality of learning taking place in these forum-based courses; I remember one lit [literature] professor saying his “suspension of disbelief” in online teaching had been tested “beyond belief!” We started getting feedback about how they’d started feeling they had relinquished a task which they never should have, that is, teaching, kindling learning in the minds of their student. They felt that students needed the kind of contact that only they could provide. One faculty member said, and I remember his very words: “In my field, it’s all about the stories, the anecdotes; that is how we transmit our knowledge and professional culture. It’s more of an oral culture. But that is just not happening online. Besides, if I had time to write down everything I could say in class, the students would never have enough time to read it!” Other faculty said they felt a yearning to get back in front of a class again. That surprised us. And when we probed deeper, we realized that a good number of early adopters in other universities were also no longer teaching online - that they had moved on.”*

METAREFLECTION. Bill had been listening quite intensely. What Professor Laforce was describing did not come as a total shock to him but there were many “insider” elements that did surprise him. He’d started his career when online learning was in its infancy (all of 20 years ago) and he’d spend much of his working life convincing faculty to migrate online. Yes, they felt inadequate; yes, they were outside their comfort zone; yes, they had to be coaxed and coddled to go online but they did go online. He had become used to being his Dean’s golden boy, never looking back. The statistics were there to show what a good job he had done with his team. And that’s what mattered right? The stats? But he was getting an uneasy feeling as he listened to Professor Laforce. Where exactly was this conversation going?

The third week of the second semester

During that week, Bill asked Larry if the next meeting could take place in the computer lab located in the Tech Support area. He wanted to run a demo and everyone needed a computer. Larry said, “*Sure*” and emailed everybody about the change of venue.

The usual suspects assembled for the meeting in the computer lab. Larry noticed that everyone seemed determined to find a solution to their current problem and he was banking on it. He started by saying that Frances and he had discussed the program and, in light of the upcoming periodic review, had begun work on a proposal which would include some kind of online learning provision. They simply would need some technical input from the Tech Support Team.

Bill had sent them all a link to the article published by Professor Laforce as well as his website providing further information on his work.

“As I trust you’ve seen, Professor Laforce’s work is germane to our current quandary. He has convincingly argued in favor of what he has termed “blended online learning design,” which, in a nutshell, has faculty using a virtual classroom and developing a basic website. The combined technologies complement one another. Given the kind of environment he wants to create for his graduate courses - dialogue-rich, spontaneous, open to knee-jerk reactions – an environment which he says is crucial to some kinds of skills development, he uses a synchronous technology, a weekly webinar that leverages all the advantages of an on-campus seminar. And to that he adds the asynchronous, LMS-based, online learning working space more conducive to reflective contributions. By combining both learning spaces, he claims he is minimizing the effort required to “get up and running,” that is, lower upfront design through the use of the virtual classroom and a quality learner experience. Coincidentally, he emphasizes that faculty buy-in is at an all-time high. Moreover, courses can be scaled so administration is happy. When I asked him about student buy-in given the set weekly webinar, he said that since he had begun using this approach, student enrollments have been consistently up, withdrawals virtually nil and, not only do they not mind the synchronous time component, they say it reduces the isolation they usually feel in online learning. They say they make time for the virtual classroom webinar in their schedules and even look forward to it every week. His arguments make sense and he reports on several programs implementing this approach.”

Larry looked incredulous: *“OK, what’s the catch?”*

Bill responded, *“I don’t see one.” “What do we need to get going?”* Bill added, *“Well, we can start out small if you like, one course and then go from there. Since students are part-time and are only taking one or two courses a term, that seems to be doable. And the cost of getting going is minimal. It costs about \$500 to get access to a virtual classroom. If it works, we can scale up and the cost will go down. The reason it is so cheap is because students link to us. That’s it. At the graduate level, students all have Internet-ready computers and most of them have headsets. That’s all we need to get going.”*

Frances asked: *“Ok, what about teaching materials?”*

Bill said *“I checked out the SPTP during the week. I see that, for every course currently being given, a website has been created that contains reading materials, PowerPoint slides, and active forums.”*

“Yes, we do!” says Frances, looking at Mary.

“We do too!” says Mary.

Larry added: *“Actually, Bill, these sites have been used mostly as info dumps, pardon the expression. Rather than having to go to the trouble and expense of photocopying*

course notes and handouts, we've gone digital. Students really enjoy the ease of access and its one less task for us to think about every year, although because these are grad courses, we are constantly updating our reading materials, using open access material when possible. And some of us use the forum fairly extensively, providing feedback on assignments and sharing sites that might be of interest to students. Students also add materials to the site via the forum. And we have a Bulletin Board in the Forum to share news and update events during the Term."

Bill responded: "OK, then you have all the ingredients for blended online learning design. Let me just show you how the virtual classroom works. So put on the headset connected to your computer and log in to the site already in your browser. I'll walk you through how it works. Once you get the hang of using the microphone and uploading slides, you'll be on your way. But don't forget, the virtual classroom is for dialogue! If you want to lecture, you can go into the classroom any time you want, record your lecture and the students can access it when they wish. So, let's try it!"