Faculty Strategies for Balancing Workload When Teaching Online

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Abstract: As institutions of higher education increase their online course offerings due to market demands, faculty workload becomes a concern. This study surveyed 38 faculty members and interviewed 14 individuals, with a variety of backgrounds, who responded to an online survey. Findings suggest that faculty use design, support, teaching, and time allocation strategies to balance their workload. This study has practical implications for instructors, instructional designers, and administrators.

A large number of institutions are now offering online programs to meet market demands for convenience and flexibility and to compete in the world economy. For some public and private institutions, online education is another form of income without having to construct more buildings (Maguire, 2005), and has become a substantial type of revenue with growing enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2008). These market demands are pressuring instructors to move their traditional courses to the online environment or create new online courses. Therefore, instructors are required to change the way they think about teaching, adapt their course design, and modify their teaching strategies for this new environment.

Effective online teaching calls for intentional design and a need to create a sense of presence. Creating a sense of presence involves a different mindset – an awareness and understanding of how to "be there" for the online learner (Lehman & Conceição, 2010). Designing, delivering, and evaluating online instruction often entails a distinctive type of workload in comparison to face-to-face instruction depending on the different components of the design process (such as content type, course format, strategies, instructor role, technology, and support) and influencing factors (such as number of courses taught, learner enrollment, level of instruction [undergraduate/graduate], etc.).

Online teaching workload has become a concern for both new and experienced instructors. This concern is frequently the result of pressure from the administration, a perception that the online environment is omnipresent and operates 24/7, a lack of understanding of the elements that comprise the online learning environment, inexperience in designing online instruction, and a lack of awareness of the importance of being present with learners online. With the increasing growth of online offerings and institutional demands, instructors are at a loss and feel overwhelmed by not understanding how to deal with this workload concern.

Until now, it has been difficult for instructors to find information and strategies they need to address this workload situation when teaching online. Most of the information found in publications is based on opinions and anecdotes shared by instructors, designers, or administrators (Betts, 1998; Bower, 2001; Carnevale, 2004; Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2002; DiBiase, & Rademacher, 2005; DiSalvio, 2007; Ehrlich, 2003; Euben, 2003; Hardy, & Bower, 2004; Thompson, 2004; Wilson, 1998). There is a dearth of empirical research in this area (Conceição & Baldor, 2009). The purpose of this study was to investigate what strategies faculty members in institutions of higher education use to balance their workload when teaching online.

Methodology

Data collection involved purposeful sampling of 38 online survey responses and 14 in-depth interviews from instructors who met the following criteria: work at 2 and 4-year higher education institutions, have taught totally online at least one course, and were willing to participate in the study. We used snowball sampling to recruit participants for the study. We recruited instructors from diverse disciplines and with a variety of experiences teaching online to provide a broad perspective. These experiences ranged from teaching undergraduate to graduate level courses, from new to experienced instructors, from 6 to 16 weeks course duration, from 10 to 100 course enrollees, from ad hoc instructors to full professors, and from public to private institutions.

We used the constant comparative analysis method, which focuses on comparing incidents to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories to analyze data (Creswell, 2008). The aim was to use the responses from the online survey and interviews to explore emerging incidents and categories related to strategies used by faculty members to balance their workload when teaching online. Coding of data involved looking for themes and patterns based on our main research question: What strategies do faculty members in institutions of higher education use to balance their workload when teaching online? Participant interviews were used to triangulate data. We were able to cross examine the data from different perspectives.

Study Background

Study participants included new and experienced instructors from the disciplines of education, health care, natural sciences, computer sciences, business, and humanities. For this study, participants, when answering the survey or interview questions, were asked to select one online course that they had taught. Out of 38 responses, 47% of respondents selected an undergraduate online course, while 53% selected a graduate online course. Courses varied in duration from four weeks (5%), eight weeks (5%), 15 or 16 weeks (84%), and other (5%). Enrollment varied from 10 to 100 individuals in an online course. Study participants' experiences teaching online ranged from teaching the online course once (32%), twice (18%), three times (16%), and more than four times (34%). The 14 individuals who participated in the in-depth interviews also responded to the survey.

Findings

Findings revealed four major strategies used by faculty to help balance workload when teaching online: design, support, teaching, and time allocation.

Design Strategies

Design strategies included pre-planning, anticipating course responsibilities, prioritizing course activities, anticipating student learning needs, and reflecting on and revising courses already taught.

Pre-planning involved creating a table with planned hours to be spent during the entire course, designing the course ahead of time and remaining flexible to modify content and

activities during the course, drawing on past experiences to create and revise courses more efficiently, employing co-teaching, and using a cohort program model to reduce workload.

Anticipating course responsibilities depended on the number of jobs held and the nature of the online course. Faculty members, who taught for more than one institution, found themselves using more than one learning management system, and because of the number of jobs held used planning ahead as a strategy to anticipate course responsibilities. Faculty members who taught their courses with a colleague or had large course enrollment used the following strategies to reduce workload: created guidelines for co-teaching, shared responsibilities with learners, based course design on a textbook and its activities, and taught compressed courses during shorter semesters versus regular semester length.

Prioritizing course activities was an important strategy to balance faculty workload. This was accomplished through consistency in course design, automation, and balanced distribution of course activities. Having consistent design in the scope and sequence of the course modules allowed for a predictable course pace. Automation was achieved through the use of the quiz feature in the learning management system and the use of a quiz bank from the textbook. Balancing course activities within the online courses and other courses being taught helped prioritize faculty tasks ahead of time, yet allowed for flexibility during the delivery of the course.

When designing online courses, the majority of our study participants stated that they placed themselves in the role of the learner. This helped them *anticipate student learning needs* and preempt problems. To do this, they offered an online or optional face-to-face orientation as a way to get to know the students, build trust, and form a learning community. Some faculty also used visuals, audio, and video to assist content learning as a way to anticipate student learning needs.

For experienced faculty members, *reflecting on and revising past courses* were strategies that helped them reduce their workload when having to teach the course again. Some of the techniques used to keep track of their reflections included compiling notes into a notebook or a folder as the course progressed or at the end of the course, conducting mid-course evaluations, and documenting learner feedback, observations, and comments. This process of reflection and feedback helped faculty members become more efficient and effective in their online teaching for subsequent courses.

Support Strategies

Support strategies for faculty in our study were dependent on their level of experience in online teaching, type of course taught, and student need. These strategies were one-on-one support, peer support, institutional support, and external support. Faculty members who were new to online teaching or were teaching sophisticated online courses sought one-on-one support. *One-on-one support* included intensive training, instructional design assistance, content expertise, technology support, and Americans with Disability Act (ADA) and copyright compliance help. For courses with high enrollment, faculty utilized a teaching assistant.

Faculty members who were experienced with teaching online often used *institutional support* such as the help desk for short turnaround request for assistance in designing their online courses and support for their students by referring them to the help desk as needed during the delivery of the course.

Some faculty members relied on *peer support*. For that, they drew on their peers' experiences for new strategies to reduce their workload. Faculty also relied on *external support*

from other organizations (such as historical society and centers), web sources (such as YouTube), and conference sessions and networking.

Teaching Strategies

Faculty used a variety of strategies before and during their online course to balance their workload. These strategies involved administrative, facilitative, and evaluative tasks.

Some *administrative tasks* started even before the course began during orientation activities with students. These orientation activities included introductions through the exchange of personal information, informal conversations, and clarification of course expectations. During the online course delivery, administrative tasks involved communication, management, and support. Communication happened through announcements and postings in non-content related areas of the course. Management included assigning students to groups or teams, dealing with the technology, and monitoring student participation. Support consisted of providing technology assistance or helping students overcome learning difficulties. In all of these cases, workload was determined by student experience, technology use, and enrollment. To manage workload, faculty members sent weekly announcements to clarify course expectations and inform course changes, provided rapid responses to emails, offered specific virtual office hours for support, and used a calendar and the learning management system progress report to monitor student participation. For some faculty, these tasks were better managed when working from home rather than being distracted or interrupted at work.

Facilitative tasks involved faculty members interacting with students or encouraging them to interact with each other. To manage workload, faculty used the following teaching strategies: limit the number of postings during discussions, make use of group work to share class leadership with students, avoid group work when there was high enrollment, assign students to teams for project development, and involve students in sharing new ideas for class activities.

Evaluative tasks included evaluating student work and receiving formative course feedback. Strategies to manage workload related to the evaluation of student work involved using group grading rather than individual, peer grading, developing a grid for easy grading, printing assignments for grading from anywhere, and automating quiz grading through the learning management system. For online courses that required individual grading, one faculty member used two computer screens where one screen contained the source text and the other screen contained the target text to be graded. Another strategy that seemed to be a common method was the reuse of saved student feedback statements in a Word document for efficient grading. Formative course feedback was sought through mid-course evaluations for course improvement.

Time Allocation Strategies

Time allocation strategies were a major concern for all of our study participants. Faculty members took between 10 to 120 hours to design their online courses for the first time. This time varied depending on the discipline, support received, course enrollment, and technology used. Once the course was designed, faculty members spent 4 to 20 hours per week for teaching during course delivery. To manage their time, they needed to be organized, disciplined, distinguish between work and personal life, and yet be flexible.

Organization was essential for managing workload. To help with this organization, faculty members blocked out specific time for their course design and delivery prior to the

course. This helped them know ahead of time how many hours they would spend on their online courses. For one faculty member, it meant being able to concentrate on focusing on actual teaching during course delivery, while for two others it meant being able to better balance their workload between their co-instructors and cohort groups. This pre-course organization also helped them allocate time for their non-course administrative, research, and service responsibilities.

A number of faculty members found that by carefully organizing their time, they were able to responsibly meet these commitments. Organization also took the form of scheduling specific time for virtual office hours. Three of the faculty members found this practice a time-saver for answering questions and meeting learner concerns. Two of them used the strategy of anticipating and setting aside time for periods when there would be either heavy grading or heavy discussion. This helped them more efficiently pace their need for involvement, thus avoiding major work tasks during the week of student assignment feedback.

Discipline was also essential, and in a number of cases, involved blocking out specific time during the day or weekend for learner responses and then sticking to it. One faculty member, for example, blocked out time each morning or evening to check on the online course. Another one checked the online course on a regular basis during the week and on the weekend. Yet, another faculty member checked the online course every day and, in addition, closed the office door when online, to prevent distractions. Discipline for two other faculty members was particularly important as a strategy for managing workload. Both taught for multiple online institutions and needed to be able to understand and work with several learning management systems and be knowledgeable about the policies and procedures of each institution.

Distinguishing between work and personal life required that faculty members set boundaries, so that their online work did not overwhelm their personal life. One faculty member, who has two small children and teaches exclusively from home, initiated clear boundaries by working during the children's naptimes. This faculty member knew that these times would have few distractions. Faculty members also found it important to set boundaries by managing student expectations through explicit communication about email response and assignment feedback. For example, several faculty members announced that they would respond within a specific time frame so that students would know exactly what to expect. Another strategy used was to complete course work when most alert after returning from the teaching institution to the home environment.

The selection of appropriate technology for online courses was a way to create *flexibility* during the course delivery. By creating PowerPoint slides, developing lectures in podcasts, and selecting YouTube video resources ahead of time, faculty were able to concentrate on their course teaching and save valuable time during the course delivery. Once created, these resources could be uploaded to the learning management system and result in time allocation flexibility for subsequent course offerings. Another strategy that saved faculty time was the use of a Word document template with examples of comments for learner assignment feedback. By using the template, faculty members were more efficient with their time.

Practical Implications

Understanding what strategies faculty members use to balance their workload when teaching online can be beneficial for instructors, instructional designers, and administrators. When instructors identify strategies for managing workload ahead of time, they can better plan

courses during the preparation stages of their online courses and during course delivery. Also, depending on the course discipline, enrollment, and other academic workload, instructors can allot time prior to the beginning of the course and be more efficient during the delivery of their courses.

For instructional designers, understanding strategies that best work for faculty, they can assist instructors in organizing, prioritizing, and anticipating the various aspects of the course design. For administrators, by understanding faculty workload for online offerings, they can make better policy decisions and identify sound procedures for different disciplines and course enrollment.

This study can have practical implications for online educators, administrators, instructional designers, and policy makers interested in modifying the fields of educational technology, distance education, and instructional design as they relate to teaching improvement. The results of this study can influence leaders in higher education to address pragmatic concerns of online teaching and to meet the changing needs of our educational market demands.

Conclusion

As online education grows at a rapid pace in higher education settings due to market demands, instructors are being pressured to move their face-to-face courses to the online environment or create new online courses. When instructors undergo this type of pressure, they must look at their teaching from an open perspective, adapt their course design, modify their strategies, and rethink the ways in which they can prioritize and manage their workload. Our study of higher education faculty members, from a variety of backgrounds and experiences in online teaching, shows that instructors are using design, support, teaching, and time allocation strategies to balance their workload. If instructors become aware of what it entails to teach online, from design to delivery, and try to prioritize their online teaching workload in relationship to their other activities, they can become more efficient and effective in their position and personal life.

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