

2011

The Complex and Motivating Factors that Affect Faculty Adoption of Online Teaching

Scott Ragsdale Ph.D.

Harding University, ragsdale@harding.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/computer-science-facpub>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Online and Distance Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ragsdale, S. (2011). The Complex and Motivating Factors that Affect Faculty Adoption of Online Teaching. *Journal of Applied Learning Technology*, 1 (1), 6-9. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/computer-science-facpub/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Computer Science at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in Computer Science Faculty Research and Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.



The Complex and Motivating Factors that Affect Faculty Adoption of Online Teaching

Scott Ragsdale

ABSTRACT - Online program administrators in higher education face a difficult task in convincing faculty to adopt the role of an online teacher. Studies have discovered several issues within the realm of online teaching that are discouraging to potential adopters and prevent many of them from desiring to be involved in online education. On a positive note, research has uncovered several encouraging factors that could motivate faculty to participate. Administrators need to be informed of the negative and positive aspects that cause faculty to either “buy-in” or “opt-out.” Becoming aware of these issues enables online program leaders to develop better faculty recruitment strategies. The factors negatively impacting faculty are referred to as complexities and the positive aspects are identified as motivators.

Keywords/key-phrases: Diffusion of innovation, extrinsic motivator, faculty burnout, faculty buy-in, intrinsic motivator, online program administrator, online teaching barrier, online teaching complexity, online teaching motivator

Introduction

The Internet has provided the medium whereby educational opportunities may be accessed by many people. Because of the accessibility and convenience of the World Wide Web, online education continues to grow and statistics indicate that the number of people learning online will increase significantly in the years to come. This statistical information has prompted a significant portion of traditional and non-traditional colleges and universities to take action due to the belief that student demand for courses will be on the rise (Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009). In 2007, the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) reported that 58.4% of higher education institutions indicated online education was a critical element of their long-term strategy (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009). With significant growth in online education expected and many institutions making plans for the escalation, faculty engagement and participation becomes crucial to a successful online education program (Shea, Pickett, & Li, 2005). Online program administrators perceive that a quality program should be based almost exclusively on the performance of faculty. A primary problem, however, is the difficulty in convincing faculty members to “buy-in” to online education as evidenced in a Sloan-C study which found that only 27.6% of faculty accept the legitimacy of online education (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009).

In order to successfully recruit, hire, and train online teaching faculty, online program administrators should develop strategies that will moti-

vate potential teachers to adopt online education (Green, et al., 2009). Maguire (2005) claims that some administrators are uninformed in regards to factors that would encourage faculty participation in online education; however, they had a pretty good understanding of the factors that would discourage participation. Understanding and responding to the concerns of faculty relating to online education is critical in managing an online program (Shea, et al., 2005).

According to Panda and Mishra (2007), a majority of faculty are undecided in regard to online teaching, which suggests they could either “buy-in” or “opt-out.” To have a better chance of securing faculty adoption, administrators should offer professional development that eases the transition into the online arena. As part of the development process, potential faculty should become aware of the complexities faced by an online teacher and trained in how to manage and overcome the difficulties. Complexities are seen as major barriers to online teaching and can result in faculty non-adoption or burnout later (Bollinger & Wasilik, 2009; Hogan & McKnight, 2007). Though it is important that administrators address the complexity issue with potential online faculty, it is not sufficient by itself to persuade “buy-in”; motivators need to be presented as well (Panda & Mishra, 2007). The following literature review provides detail into both the negative (complex) and positive (motivating) aspects of online teaching because of its direct impact on faculty adoption.

Literature Review

Complex Aspects of Online Teaching

Online education is new and innovative, yet foreign to many teachers. According to Diffusion of Innovation Theory, if the innovation is perceived as being too complex, the innovation does not stand a good chance of being adopted (Shea, et al., 2005). Therefore, it is imperative that administrators are aware of the complexities faced by online teachers, discuss these openly with prospective adoptees, and assure the potential adoptees that they are manageable.

One complexity experienced by online faculty, and viewed as overwhelming, is the amount and levels of interactions with students (Shea, et al., 2005). High volumes of interactivity translates into a greater time commitment and a larger workload on the part of the teacher, which is a major barrier in recruiting new online faculty (Green, et al., 2009). Puzziferro and Shelton (2009) indicate that student interaction complexity is partly due to class size. According to Maguire (2005), faculty workload is an issue for administrators and they have the power to offer release time to teach online courses. Faculty, who are granted release time for online efforts, will believe they can better manage the interaction issue, and therefore, it becomes less of a hindrance to adoption (Shea, et al., 2005).

A second complexity is learning the technology necessary to successfully design, construct, and deliver an online course. Many faculty are intimidated by technology which makes online teaching appear very difficult to learn (Maguire, 2005). Panda and Mishra (2007) found that lack of technical support and lack of instructional design support were two of the top barriers to online adoption. Assuring faculty that the necessary technical support will be available can help ease the anxiety of faculty who believe they will be all alone to learn technical issues (Shea, et al., 2005). Another matter worrisome to faculty and related to technology is the belief that they are responsible in helping students with technical issues during a course. Facing this task along with teaching is disconcerting to prospective faculty, and thus they must be guaranteed that their students will be supported on technical issues by a technical staff (Green, et al., 2009).

A third and final difficulty observed by potential adopters is developing effective skills to teach online (Maguire, 2005). The online learning paradigm is perceived as complex by potential adopters because the instructor is not only responsible for lesson organization but must also take into account the methods to deliver the lesson in an online learning environment (Hogan & McKnight, 2007). Puzziferro and Shelton (2009) reference a

study where 75% of new online faculty received technical training but only 33% received pedagogical training. Administrators should ensure that faculty receive the necessary pedagogical training to be effective online instructors (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009).

Online Teaching Motivators

Although it is very important that administrators have an awareness of the barriers causing faculty disinterest in online education, it is equally significant to understand the elements of online education that will motivate faculty involvement (Panda & Mishra, 2007). One effective motivator administrators can utilize when persuading faculty is allowing them to observe online teaching and learning through viewing examples of the technology and pedagogy utilized in the online learning environment. Faculty should also be permitted to try the new innovation (i.e. online teaching) in a simulated setting before being thrust into an actual class. The greater the opportunity to test online teaching, the greater the chance for adoption (Shea, et al., 2005).

A second motivator is viewing the perceived extra time commitment required in online teaching as unimportant rather than a negative. Shea et al. (2005) queried 913 online teaching professors and found that time issues were not significant. Faculty who spent 30 hours developing a course and faculty who spent 150 hours reported no differences in satisfaction with online teaching. Furthermore, Sloan-C asserts that despite negative findings that indicate online teaching takes more time, nearly all faculty who have taught online wish to repeat the experience despite the extra time required (Moore, 2005).

Another factor administrators can use to motivate faculty "buy-in" is fostering a sense of community among administrators and faculty. To accomplish this, administrators must intentionally purpose to maintain close, consistent contact with faculty. Faculty who feel connected, accountable to, and valued by the institution are likely to adopt online education (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009). A second effective way to create community is utilizing mentoring. New faculty cherish the idea of learning from veteran online teachers and gaining insights and ideas to better their courses (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009). Finally, Green et al. (2009) suggests that administrators seek faculty input on issues regarding the online program, and in doing so, faculty sense they are a valued asset and their feelings of belonging are enhanced.

Yet another tactic administrators can utilize is marketing the strategic benefits online education brings to the institution. Parthasarathy and Smith (2009) found that faculty who perceive online education as contributing to an institutional image

of being progressive and cutting-edge are more likely to deliver one or more of their courses online. Also, if faculty members believe that providing online courses can successfully meet changing market needs, then the chance of faculty adopting online teaching is significantly higher. Therefore, when teachers accept and adopt the role of an online teacher, the institution benefits and as a consequence, they do as well. The benefit to them could be better students or the possibility of being awarded research grants.

A fifth means to acquire faculty participation is providing extrinsic motivators known to be successful. Faculty who believe that online teaching will have a direct impact on their tenure and promotion possibilities will seriously consider online teaching. Other ways to increase motivational levels of prospective faculty is through stipends, overload pay, or salary increases. These rewards help possible faculty to believe that online education is important to the institution and their participation in the online education process will be highly esteemed (Maguire, 2005).

A final strategy and possibly the most important (Maguire, 2005) is promoting the intrinsic motivators of online teaching. Panda and Mishra (2007) found the following to be top motivating factors for faculty acceptance of and participation in the online teaching position: 1) it is intellectually challenging, 2) it provided another useful reason for using technology, and 3) it is self-gratifying. Likewise, Green et al. (2009) discovered that the opportunity to use technology and the intellectual challenge of online teaching were primary reasons why faculty decided to teach online. A final intrinsic motivator that Shea et al. (2005) strongly urges administrators to use when persuading potential faculty is marketing the schedule flexibility (i.e. teach anytime from any place) afforded. Maguire (2005) agrees that highlighting the optimal working conditions online faculty possesses is very instrumental in getting faculty to accept and join the ranks of online teachers.

Discussion

Administrator Importance

Evident in the literature is the importance of online program administrators in creating faculty belief in online teaching as a quality and rewarding mode of instructional delivery. Also apparent from the reviewed research is the problem of administrator non-awareness of the reasons why faculty is encouraged or discouraged to participate in online education. Therefore, leaders of higher education online programs need to become and stay informed of the issues surrounding faculty adoption of online education. Awareness of the issues can lead to administrative strategies that

better persuade faculty to teach online. Faculty must have faith that online teaching will, in fact, benefit their careers and fit their lives. Unless administrators can effectively convince faculty that involvement in online teaching is worth the time and effort, they will be unmotivated to participate (Green, et al., 2009). An administrator may have wonderful ideas and dreams for the online education program, but without faculty, there is no program (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009).

Retaining Online Faculty

The central focus of this paper has been to highlight existing motivators and barriers within online teaching that administrators must recognize when trying to obtain faculty "buy-in." Administrators need to be cognizant of a related issue, online faculty retention, which is critical to the continuance of a quality online program. Recruiting online faculty is a difficult task; keeping online faculty is equally difficult. Bollinger and Wasilik (2009) found that a significant number of university online faculty members experience burnout due to high levels of depersonalization and low levels of personal accomplishment. Hogan and McKnight (2007) agree that feelings of isolation lead to burnout. In addition, they add workload and insufficient recognition/rewards to the list of factors. Administrators are advised to implement strategies to keep online faculty satisfied because high faculty turnover can cause quality to be negatively affected (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009), damage the institution's reputation, and increase expenses (Green, et al., 2009). Hogan and McKnight (2007) assert that administrators should be proactive in addressing faculty burnout and suggest the following: 1) provide clear job descriptions and expectations to reduce role ambiguity, 2) facilitate continuing development activities such as mentoring and advanced online technology training, 3) keep teaching load and number of students manageable, and 4) create clear lines of communication between faculty and administrators. Green et al. (2009) insist that in order to retain faculty, they must feel welcomed, wanted and needed. Online leadership must recognize that high faculty turnover due to burnout is a potential problem that could seriously compromise program effectiveness. Administrators would be wise to create and implement a plan designed to keep faculty attitudes positive, resulting in less resignations from online teaching.

Conclusion

Online education programs in colleges and universities require faculty participation and engagement to be successful. However, many faculty members do not believe that online education is a credible means of delivering coursework. There-

fore, it is essential that online program administrators develop strategies assisting faculty members in discovering the value of online teaching, creating more faculty involvement. A critical part of persuading faculty is in understanding the issues that either encourage or discourage faculty member engagement. Presenting the complex and motivating factors that are involved in teaching online can help better inform potential faculty, thereby creating a better chance that they will adopt the role of an online teacher.

References

- Bollinger, D. U., & Wasilik, O. (2009). Factors influencing faculty satisfactions with online teaching and learning in higher education. *Distance Education, 30*(1), 103-116.
- Green, T., Alejandro, J., & Brown, A. H. (2009). The retention of experienced faculty in online distance education programs: Understanding factors that impact their involvement. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 10*(3).
- Hogan, R. L., & McKnight, M. A. (2007). Exploring burnout among university online instructors: An initial investigation. *The Internet and Higher Education, 10*(2), 117-124.
- Maguire, L. L. (2005). Literature review - Faculty participation in online distance education: Barriers and motivators. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 8*(1).
- Moore, J. C. (2005). *The Sloan Consortium quality framework and the five pillars*. Needham, MA: The Sloan Consortium.
- Panda, S., & Mishra, S. (2007). E-learning in a mega open university: Faculty attitude, barriers and motivators. *Educational Media International, 44*(4), 323 - 338.
- Parthasarathy, M., & Smith, M. A. (2009). Valuing the Institution: An expanded list of factors influencing faculty adoption of online education. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 12*(2). Retrieved Sept 27, 2010 from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/summer122/parthasarathy122.html>
- Puzziferro, M., & Shelton, K. (2009). Supporting online faculty - Revisiting the seven principles (a few years later). *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 12*(3).
- Shea, P., Pickett, A., & Li, C. S. (2005). Increasing access to higher education: A study of the diffusion of online teaching among 913 college faculty. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 6*(2).

About the Author

Scott Ragsdale is an assistant professor at Harding University, where he has taught Computer Science for the last twenty-six years. Prior to his work at Harding, he worked as a computer programmer for Delta Airlines for two years. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Computing Technology in Education from Nova Southeastern University. sragdsal@nova.edu