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The Urgency to Train Online Instructors

Background

Dr. Rebecca Armstrong and Dr. David Hart met while going through their doctoral program at a very prestigious online university. One of the requirements, during the didactic segment of their program, was to attend three residency workshops. These residencies were a precursor for the critical culminating project, the doctoral dissertation. The third and final residency took place only a few weeks before beginning the dissertation segment of their program.

It was during this final residency that both Armstrong and Hart discovered they lacked the basic understanding of qualitative research, their chosen dissertation methodology. While both had excelled in their doctoral programs, this newfound revelation had a sobering effect because both were approaching their dissertation with a quantitative methodology mindset. This process brought up several questions as to why they were at the end of their didactic program without understanding the basics of their chosen dissertation path.

Shortly after completing the doctoral program, Armstrong and Hart began hearing from students, recent graduates, and faculty from various U.S. universities, similar perceptions, and concerns about how unprepared they were upon commencing their dissertation. This echo of worries about being ill-equipped to complete the doctoral program has continued over the past six years. This stream of information piqued the interest of both Drs. and they endeavored to discover common elements as to why students appeared to be lacking the fundamental understanding of qualitative methodology from online learning, a core element of a qualitative dissertation. Armstrong and Hart questioned whether this was a result of online education vs. face-to-face learning. As a result, they set off to better understand the missing elements of the online teaching and learning experience.

The Change to Virtual Learning

On January 20, 2020, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 appeared in the United States. Over the following two months, lives as Americans have known were transformed in drastic ways in an attempt to reduce spreading the contagion. Higher educational institutions quickly began converting from a traditional face-to-face model to 100 percent online learning. This sudden change, while technologically possible, presented several other concerns for both learners and educators. Data reflects that 66.3 percent of students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions had no distance education courses (National

Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). In addition, numerous educators have had no experience taking an online course and/or teaching in a remote setting.

Through no fault of their own, many educators in postsecondary institutions were forced into a paradigm shift with online learning, of which they may have little to no knowledge. Empirical evidence illustrates a distinct difference in teaching requirements between traditional and online environments (Kumar, et al., 2019). However, literature also points to a lack of comprehensive training for those educators who pursue teaching in an online setting. Even established online colleges and universities can become more student-centric with enhanced pedagogy for their instructors (Maldonado, et al., 2017; Martin, et al., 2019).

This need for immediate college and university action across the country brought to light the overall lack of preparedness for a sudden transition of this magnitude to online education. In many cases, institutions were not technologically ready to move thousands of students to an online platform. Furthermore, most traditional instructors lacked training in the necessary delivery and student follow-through that is necessary for a quality student/instructor online learning experience.

What is Missing?

Often, post-baccalaureate online institutions and schools that are primarily traditional with an online option in their curriculum place their primary emphasis on an instructor's knowledge of the subject matter, institutional policies and requirements, and technical training. However, very few institutions focus on the differences between teaching in a traditional vs. online environment.

The transition from instructing in a traditional setting and moving to distance learning is not intuitive or a direct pedagogical conversion. The demographics and student characteristics, first and foremost, are uniquely dissimilar. The average age of undergraduate online learners in a four-year institution is 34 years while the average age for undergraduate students in a traditional setting is <25 years (Classes and Careers, 2018; NCES, 2018). Eighty-four percent of online students are employed full-time whereas, 26% of undergraduate students enrolled in an entirely on-campus setting work 35 hours per week or more (Amour, 2019; NCES, 2018). Furthermore, 22% of students in a four-year traditional undergraduate program are parents, in contrast to online learners with, 83% who have dependents (Cruse et al., 2019; Online Schools Center, 2020).

Because the student characteristics of undergraduate students are different between traditional and online learners, even experienced online educators may

be unaware of how to effectively interact with those undergraduates who transitioned to online learning with little forewarning. This necessary adjustment was not the students' choice, and therefore, many students may have entered this forced conversion with a lack of confidence as well as a sense of negativity and significant feelings of loneliness. As hundreds of postsecondary institutions moved to distance learning in March 2020, the various online formats provided to students varied greatly. Furthermore, consistency between same-type course formats and student delivery were not always in alignment. Numerous schools chose to replicate the classroom and moved their students to a video conferencing structure through either synchronous models with a live classroom following the same class schedule as the traditional course. Some institutions allowed instructors to pre-record classes, which makes for an asynchronous learning experience but will enable students more flexibility. Other institutions utilized their current integrated learning management platforms that make available blended course rooms with centralized course materials, student tracking, and multimedia options, to name a few features.

Regardless of which form of online education an institution chose and because of the immediacy of the conversion, traditional instructors had little to no time to transition efficiently, and their primary focus was on the technical aspect of getting the students and instructors connected. From early student feedback, the technology was less of a concern; however, the human element of the course room lacked authenticity and connection between students and instructors and, students and their peers.

With online education, the instructor engages in more upfront preparation than in a traditional course (Schmidt, et al., 2016). The instructor must consider the new operational aspects of their course room. It is likely that students live in different states, time zones, and perhaps in different countries. Thus, the synchronous, live-course room may be disadvantageous for some learners. Preparing a complete syllabus, dates of deadlines, reading requirements, project requirements, and other items will help the students plan their schedules accordingly.

The instructor will need to become skilled at the various facets of the institution's online learning platform. An educator learning curve may need to exist in order to manage the multimedia and text-based elements efficiently. Therefore, the instructor needs to allocate appropriate time to practice and become familiar with their new resources. Understanding the online platform will enable the instructor to seamlessly manage their course room and provide the students with diverse learning opportunities.

The elements of time, chronemics, and student interactions are crucial in any online learning platform (Dixson et al., 2017). The length of time between a student's question or assignment submission and the instructor's response can

either be acceptable or cause student anxiety. Because of a lack of body language and the ability to communicate openly in all aspects of a class room, students' in online learning environments perceive instructors' response times individually. Educators and students alike will benefit from the practice of transparency and consistency in online course rooms and follow a philosophy of less response time is more meaningful to students. The more information a student is provided in the beginning, the better they can manage their expectations. Moreover, is often easy for an instructor to overlook quiet students who do not ask questions but manage to make all course deadlines. However, these students can also be the "forgotten ones" who will become isolated, disgruntled, and prime candidates for dropping out of their online programs. Instructors need to connect with each student in their course room.

Engaging students with multimedia course segments aids in keeping students engaged and improves student interest. In addition, instructors should encourage peer-to-peer course involvement. This can be done numerous ways: designated course assignments, group projects, team competitions, etc. Inspiring students to utilize available technology through class chat rooms, discussion boards, audio and video assignments will help bring connection and a more traditional environment to the online course room.

Conclusion

In summary, there is a lack of purposeful directed pedagogy for online instructors and there is a need for small group online instruction. For the sake of consistency and commonality, members of each learning group would benefit from possessing similar characteristics. For example, each cohort should contain students with similar educational interests (e.g., Mental Health, Business, etc.) so that the instruction can design course rooms tailored specifically to each student's needs. A sense of cohesion among instructors and students is thereby created and can serve as a pillar in the online learning environment.

Drs. Armstrong and Hart have identified areas of concern that exist as educators transition from a traditional teaching format to one that possesses the nuances of learning from home, reliance on modern technology, and a sense of independence. Instructors are certainly able to adjust to new teaching styles as social necessity dictates. However, they must be provided with the essential tools that will allow them to progress with changing educational demands and to remain adept at educating curious minds.

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