

## Chapter 27

# The Role of Leadership and Communication: Re-Conceptualizing Graduate Instruction Online

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores concerns and challenges associated with the transition to online graduate instruction from the traditional face-to-face format. The author discusses several catalysts for the transition to virtual teaching; the ethics of being present; impediments to learning and communication online; and participant concerns. The chapter also considers online knowledge and meaning-making, online communities and associated uncertainties. Finally, considerations for leadership and communication moving forward are addressed.*

### INTRODUCTION

The pursuant exponential expansion of virtual instruction offers an appropriate opportunity to reflect about the effectiveness of this medium from a leadership and communication perspective as it compares to the traditional face-to-face experience. Conceptual in nature, in this chapter I examine the role of faculty as instructional leaders of graduate online teaching and learning. I first consider two significant pieces of the backstory leading to the implementation of online instruction. Next, I speak to concerns regarding the ethics of ‘being present’ in the graduate seminar

tradition, specifically: instructor presence, interpersonal (social) presence, and cognitive presence while discussing some supplementary perceived impediments to authentic leadership, communication, and learning online. I then consider the (re)-conceptualising of online knowledge acquisition and meaning-making, understandings around the idea of communities and perceptions of relationships online, as well as on-going uncertainties about online instruction and learning. Finally, I envisage possible pathways for instructional leadership and communication moving forward in the virtual realm.

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## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Synergy of Two Catalysts**

As economic difficulties related to the recent recession continue to be a challenging global phenomenon, universities in Ontario, Canada have not been exempt from associated financial woes. At the most basic level, financial resources have not kept pace with escalating expenditures, compelling universities to do substantially more with substantially less (Metcalf, Fisher, Gingras, Jones, Rubenson, & Snee, 2010). The latest victim of diminishing fiscal resources appears to be a heretofore untouchable- the graduate seminar (of Masters and Doctoral programs). In recent years, venues at-a-distance have been on the increase as colleges and universities seek to broaden their student base and their financial bottom line by expanding student access to their programs (Dobbins, 2009). Serving these distant centres with traditional face-to-face graduate seminars, however, has necessarily incurred significant auxiliary expenses for institutions, for example: rental of off-site venues, travel expenses (hotel/meals/gasoline for faculty), and loss of considerable faculty work hours unavoidably spent in travel. As a consequence, in an effort to stem the financial bleeding, many universities initially thought to replace much (and in some cases, all) of their face-to-face graduate teaching with an on-line model (Chau, 2010). Was the purpose and rationale of the new technology-based on-line model for graduate teaching driven by an ever-strengthening economic component in that graduate education was being viewed as a standardized commodity, with keeping expenses in check emerging as a primary university goal (Power & Vaughan, 2010)? Would such a strategy represent a permanent divergence from the ideological and towards more pragmatic ends- that of servicing a university's bottom line (Braddock, Mahony, & Taylor, 2006)? If so, how could faculty reconcile the experience of on-line teaching and learning as

authentic if academic freedom was subjugated to the vagaries of increasingly aggressive fiscal influences? In the short term, this conversion to online appeared to accomplish the desired economic goal in that it reined in faculty expenses (Rich, 2015). There was, however, an equally significant and perhaps unforeseen circumstance that was soon to enter the expenditures fray that would signal an unanticipated consequence.

Lifestyles today have become increasingly demanding and multifaceted. A key component of that complexity appears to rest with the explosion of interest in social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, for example) and the Internet. No longer tethered by telephone lines, a vast array of revolutionary cordless devices now offer the facility and flexibility to contact anyone from anywhere at any time. Interactive electronic devices and their ever-expanding resources permit instant access to the Internet, not only to keep in touch with others but to search and acquire information on a broad variety of topics: travel mapping, meal options, online purchasing, music, health care, and even the acquisition of a university/college degree. Indeed, almost anything anyone can dream up, can be searched and utilized, all from the comfort of home or, from any place, at any time. The limitless capacity of the electronic world as the leading interactive information highway of people, places, and things now seems as intrinsic to life as breathing, especially so for our younger generation (Dobbins, 2009), our 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2006), who have known only an intensifying cordless world- the one of sophisticated cell phones, progressive electronic devices, and seemingly unlimited data and information exchanges available via the Web, online and the Internet.

With the explosion of the virtual world, computer programs for teaching graduate and other coursework (for e.g. undergraduate massive open online courses, MOOC, Prensky, 2014) began to be widely accessible with students clamoring for a virtual learning experience (VLE) which, from their perspective, adapted more easily to their

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