

Chapter 50

What Are Tutors' Experiences With Online Teaching? A Phenomenographic Study

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks an understanding of how tutors perceived the online part of a blended learning course in the context of teaching English as a foreign language at a German university. To gain knowledge about the ways in which the tutors experienced the phenomenon, a phenomenographic methodological framework was employed. Identified were four different ways of conceiving the online course as: A) a one-way street of communication: to provide students with extra materials to practice individually and for asynchronous communication, B) an add-on to on-campus classes; C) a distant relationship between students and online tutors; and D) an opportunity for tutor's professional development and team communication. The phenomenographic approach allowed to reveal variations of tutors' perceptions of teaching online with a view of enhancing the university curriculum. The findings may have implications for university teachers and educational designers.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, different forms of technology enhanced learning have gained popularity in educational institutions worldwide (Conole, 2008; Vogel & Oliver, 2006; Yang & Chen, 2006). E-learning, online learning, networked learning or blended learning are all terms used to describe forms of teaching and learning which are supported or made possible by modern technology and the Internet.

It appears that, worldwide, blended learning is becoming increasingly popular at higher education institutions where it becomes part of the conventional campus based courses (Ellis et al., 2006). Blended learning, a combination of face-to-face and online learning, “offers the possibility of recapturing the traditional values of higher education while meeting the demands and needs of the twenty-first century” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 5). Online teaching is defined as teaching that is conducted electroni-

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What Are Tutors' Experiences With Online Teaching?

cally (in the case of this study, in a university virtual learning environment) while face-to-face teaching is defined as teaching that is conducted in a physical classroom (on campus classes at the university). However, does having the technology automatically mean that universities, students and educators can learn and work online and profit from mixing face-to-face with virtual classes? How do educators experience their new roles as online tutors? It seems that higher education institutions struggle with the implementation of e-learning beyond projects and with engaging many students and staff in e-learning (Salmon, 2005).

In Germany, in particular, there are some universities which have barely integrated e-learning, and others which have been establishing complete E-Learning Centres to support teaching and learning with new media and the Internet (Bremer, 2010). Embedding e-learning in higher education enjoys extra financial sources on federal and state level, e.g. Higher Education Pact 2020 which promotes among others online study courses, e-learning and eCampus initiatives. The State of Hesse where, the study was undertaken, spent 8.2 m Euro on e-learning projects in the period 2011-2013 and in 2014 3.3 m Euro for 39 projects on 11 universities in Hesse (Hessian Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts, 2014).

However, technology enhanced learning poses not only many opportunities but many challenges to the different university levels, e.g. educators, departments, administration (Bremer, 2010). Teaching online seems to be creating tensions by “introducing a new activity into existing institutions with established roles” (Natriello, 2005, p. 1890). It seems that many e-learning initiatives at German universities do not continue after the pilot phase (Bremer et al. 2010).

Since the blended learning course investigated in this paper was a new experience for the University of Applied Sciences and the tutors, at the end of the course, knowledge was sought about the challenges, demands and rewards of being an online tutor on a blended course. To address this need, a phenomenographic study was undertaken to seek an understanding of how the tutors experienced and perceived their work, the online environment and their interaction with the students. The knowledge gained about the perceptions and experiences of the online tutors is valuable for the course evaluation and for the next iterations of this course as well as other courses at the institution. The study also aims to contribute to understanding the impact of use of technology on the tutors' role. While the primary audience for the research comprises the course management and tutors, it can also be interesting for other educational designers.

In the following sections I will first offer a brief literature review on the role of online tutors and their experiences. Then, I will describe the context of the study and will introduce the theoretical framework as well as the methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, I will discuss the findings and their implications. Note that while the terms ‘teacher’, ‘lecturer’, ‘educator’ and ‘tutor’ are used interchangeably in the general parts of the paper, depending on which sources are being referenced, the role of the educator in the specific case being discussed is termed as ‘tutor’ as this best reflects the role undertaken by the staff on the course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical analysis of literature on online teachers' roles and experiences began as a broad search for research on online teaching. The scope was narrowed down to the topic of university teachers' perceptions of online teaching. To further reduce the vast number of search results another criterion was applied:

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