

Chapter 56

Investigating Online Instructors' Experiences With Constructivist Pedagogy in a Private University

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ABSTRACT

This study supports the significance of professional development for online instructors to design and develop online courses. Data collection from an e-survey of 100 instructors, a focus group, and review of online course syllabi revealed that instructors who teach fully online courses lack on-going university wide support for training in using the learning management system (LMS) to launch their courses, as well as knowledge of research-based pedagogies such as constructivism, to teach their courses. In particular, instructors want more training and support in order to teach effectively in an online environment. Results include the need for university wide training and support for online instructors, available centralized resources, software training for instructors, especially adjuncts, a course in online pedagogies such as constructivism, peer mentoring for instructors, formal and informal sharing opportunities, and support for the online students themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last three decades of Internet explosion, universities were beginning to provide limited training and support to their online instructors. Restauri (2004) reports, two prevalent online instructor models were used at this time: 1) an individual model for which universities relied upon faculty to develop online courses on their own with limited institutional assistance and 2) a team or institutional approach for which universities hired additional staff to assist and support instructors throughout the online course development and offering process.

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Regardless of the support model chosen, courses were not necessarily designed to maximize learner engagement or challenge students to actively construct knowledge or make meaning based on past individual or social experiences. In fact, many online instructors exercised academic freedom when designing their online courses. The American Association of University Professors states (2016), "Academic freedom is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning" (p. 14). As a result, online course design was inconsistent; and learning theories, such as constructivism, were not necessarily incorporated. "Constructivism is a learning theory that posits that learners actively construct knowledge and make meaning, based on their experiences, individually or socially" (Narayan, Rodriguez, Araujo, Shaqlaig, & Moss, 2013).

When instructor training was provided, it was the use of technology, not learning theory that received the most attention. Restauri (2004) notes, technical support provided to instructors included workshops, one-on-one training in person or via the telephone, computer-based tutorials, demonstration courses, website help centers, reference lists, and listings of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

Student feedback through course evaluations suggest that online courses should be designed using strategies that create an active learning environment where students work collaboratively and independently on projects, papers, wikis, blogs, discussion board posts, and other forms of communication. The inclusion of introductory audio and video segments that allow students to meet their instructor and learn about the content being covered were deemed important as were video segments providing real-world examples of key concepts. Small and large group audio and video conferences were popular since they allowed sharing of information, clarification of content, and building of an online learning community.

All the aforementioned strategies are specific to constructivism. Constructivist activities empower students to learn independently and with each other by incorporating their current knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Constructivist activities allow students to become senders and receivers in the learning process, not just receivers. As a result, applying constructivist learning theory can generate dynamic online learning opportunities. These dynamic learning opportunities, however, place more responsibility for learning on the student. Haymore-Sandholtz, Ringstaff, and Dwyer (1997) state, "With this added responsibility comes freedom for individual exploration (p. 143)." As a result of this freedom, students take ownership of their learning.

This freedom, however, requires instructors to evaluate their teaching. Brown (2014) states,

One of the essential components of the constructivist teaching approach is to inspire instructors to consistently evaluate how any given activity is contributing to the student's increased understanding (p. 2).

When instructors regularly provide reinforcement, garner feedback, and evaluate course activities and assignments, students are provided opportunities to take charge of their own learning and share their knowledge while improving their critical thinking skills.

Statement of the Problem

As colleges and universities hire faculty to design and teach new online courses or revise existing ones, it is clear that professional development specific to pedagogy is critical to creating quality online courses. Gold (2001) posits,

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