

Chapter 5

Getting Time to Teach: The Adoption of Online Courses by University Professors

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case follows the journey of a researcher as he examines the issue of university professors' time when they teach online courses. It is based on a case study involving semi-structured interviews with 32 university professors who had taught online courses at a Canadian university. The findings indicate that the use of online courses is significantly impacting the amount of time it takes professors to develop courses, teach, and assess students' learning. The researcher also discovers how teaching online changes the daily routine of professors in a number of ways. Some of the increased demands on professors' time may be of a transitional nature given the newness of the means of teaching and the still evolving practice in this area.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

As a Ph.D. student with an interest in technology and change within the teaching profession I started to wonder why teachers and university professors were so slow to adopt the use of new technology in their teaching. Based upon this curiosity I decided to do a little bit of research related to the background of online courses and their adoption by university professors.

I found that the emergence of online courses is closely linked to the development of the Internet. As professors and students started to use e-mail and other applications of the Internet, some professors began integrating online material into their

teaching. With the advent of the WWW, professors began constructing Web pages for their courses and to integrate tools that allowed them to offer courses online.

In 1995, Murray Goldberg, in the Faculty of Computer Science at the University of British Columbia, started to experiment with the use of Web-based applications. In the process of designing an online course he realized that, because of the technical skills required and the time and costs involved, it would be difficult for sophisticated online courses to gain widespread acceptance and use (Goldberg, 1996). In order to alleviate this barrier Goldberg designed WebCT, a courseware package that made it easier for professors to design and build their own online courses. This software eventually became one of the most popular of its kind. The small company started at the University of British Columbia was purchased by Universal Learning Technologies in 1999, which in turn merged with its major competitor Blackboard Inc., in February 2006. Other learning management systems are also currently available and some, such as Moodle and Sakai, use an open source distribution model. The use of new technology often brings with it structural and organizational changes (Bijker, 1995; Hughes, 2005; Winner, 1985).

One factor which influences professors' willingness to adopt the use of online courses is the amount of time involved in making the transition and teaching in this format. Understanding how the use of this relatively new format for teaching impacts on professors' time is valuable to professors considering adoption and those in administrative positions implementing strategies to encourage adoption. The preliminary research revealed that this topic is particularly important given the evidence that online courses are increasing in number (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Government of Canada, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2004) and indications that this trend will continue in the future as technology becomes even more pervasive in society (Ertl & Plante, 2004; Thompson & Foth, 2003).

Setting the Stage

After this initial examination of the development of online courses and determining that it was a topic worthy of investigation I decided to do a more detailed examination of the literature on this topic. Before doing my own research it was important to see what research had already been done in this field and what contribution I could make to the study of this topic. The increased amount of time it takes to develop and teach online courses had been discussed in the research literature. MacDonald and Thompson (2005) found that offering a quality online course requires a "significant investment of time and energy" (p. 19), particularly in organizations that are still in the process of establishing proper support services. MacDonald, Stodel, Thompson et al. (2005) suggested that the use of "learning objects"—small instructional units that can be reused in a number of different learning contexts—may be part of a

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