The Lived Experience of Online Educators: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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Abstract

Assuring that quality is provided in rapidly expanding online programs is important to ensure student retention, maintain accreditation, and create a positive reputation. Although several studies have been conducted on the topic of online teaching, little research has been published on the lived experience of online educators that has utilized a hermeneutic, interpretive approach in gathering data. Therefore, a research expectation of this study was to ascertain an understanding of online educators' experiences that could serve as a basis for developing strategies that would promote better practices in higher education. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological design, a purposeful peer-nominated sample of 11 online educators from various geographic locations throughout the United States was obtained. Through the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming, five key themes emerged from 11 respondents' narrative accounts, including: (a) flexibility and convenience, (b) time- and labor-intensiveness, (c) communication skills, (d) learner-centeredness, and (e) continuing education and training. These identified themes were important in illustrating online educators' experiences, which provided new perspectives and recommendations for the development and promotion of successful communities of online learning.

Keywords: Online teaching, qualitative study, hermeneutic phenomenological study, higher education, distance education

Introduction

The greatest influence in higher education over the last decade concerns the use of information technology. The World Wide Web is the leading technology that has triggered changes in teaching and learning (Schiffman, Vignare, & Geith, 2007). Reports have estimated that by the year 2025 there will be between 30 and 80 million online students in the world (Hosie, Schibeci, & Backhaus, 2005). Experts emphasize that a major determinant to the success of online education is faculty willingness to embrace the technology and incorporate new pedagogy to develop stimulative teaching experiences for their learners (Kim & Bonk, 2006; Ko & Rossen, 2004). The literature also suggests that preparing educators to use instructional technology effectively is essential to create successful online education (McKeachie & Svinicki; 2006). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the lived experience of online educators and their multiple perspectives through the process of a hermeneutic phenomenological design.

Background of the Study

A systematic review of the literature about online education has offered a wealth of information about factors that must be considered in the planning and implementation of e-learning (De Gagne & Walters, 2009). The implications of online educators' experiences as a part of the teaching and learning process, which includes issues affecting the professional development needs of online educators was also revealed. Faculty's assessment of online teaching practices constitutes an important dimension of the online environment. In a seminal work by Olcott and Wright (1995), they found that for "faculty to accept and participate in technology integration initiatives, their perception of both the availability and quality of training opportunities in the online environment must be positive" (p. 5). This notion is critical given that

faculty are the driving force of an institution and their perceptions weigh largely on the value of online learning programs and have a strong impact on the institutions that support them.

According to a recent survey conducted by Allen and Seaman (2007), online enrollments continue to increase at all types of institutions of higher education. For example, in the fall of 2006, nearly 3.5 million students in the United States took at least one online course. Consequently, a majority of academic leaders expect student demand for online learning to continue to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Schiffman et al., 2007).

Researchers have found that traditional "brick and mortar" institutions lack the structure for nontraditional students looking to attend college (Hosie et al., 2005). A thorough review of current literature that addresses educators' experiences with the online learning environment highlights the importance of new strategies to promote active learning in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2005; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; De Gagne & Walters, 2009). Therefore, findings from this qualitative study would fill the gap in the literature reviewed in regard to what concepts, skills, and attitudes online educators think are important and what academic leaders can do to help them achieve a successful online teaching experience.

Purpose and Research Questions (RQs)

Given that education may be described as a planned teaching and learning experience, educators must understand the reality of such an experience. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine experiences of educators who teach online at institutions of higher education in the United States. To explore the perceptions of online educators and to provide better understanding of their experiences, six Research Questions (RQs) were examined in the study:

> RQ1. What concepts do online educators think are important in teaching online?

> RQ2. What knowledge, skills, and attitudes do they perceive as essential in teaching online?

> RQ3. What differences in terms of faculty role do they perceive between face-to-face instruction and online teaching?

> RQ4. What strategies do they use to facilitate active learning?

> RQ5. What ethical and legal issues do they face in online teaching?

> RQ6. What do they think academic leaders can do to help them achieve successful online teaching?

To answer these questions, we chose a hermeneutic phenomenological approach that focuses on how individuals interpret their world within their given context. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach captures participant's narrative accounts, which reflects how they interpret and express their experiences through interviews (Polit & Beck, 2004).

Methods

This study adopted a hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology to illuminate the meaning of lived experiences of online educators. This qualitative study springs from the paradigms of naturalistic inquiry that is interpretive, or inductive, in nature (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Sample Strategies

The aim in sample selection with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach was to choose participants who had online teaching experiences that were the focus of the study and willing to share their experiences, and who were representative enough of a specific population to enhance the possibility that certain phenomena might be captured. Determining adequate sample size in qualitative research is the researcher's judgmental call in that a sample size of 12 may be big enough to derive significant outcomes for the intended study, while a size of 5 can be big enough to reach the point where no new information is obtained. It was projected that 6 to 10 participants would be an adequate sample size for this study with which to effectively address the research questions and uncover multiple realities. However, as the study progressed, this projected size varied depending on number of the descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, the number of study participants was determined when no new data emerged from the interviewers.

It was important to maximize the likelihood that each participant could add information that would allow for the discovery of meaning. Therefore, probability sampling, or a random sample, was not the best way to select participants who would make good informants (Polit & Beck, 2004). In keeping with this strategy, we used the purposive snowball sampling method, sometimes referred to as "nominated sampling" (Polit

& Beck, 2004, p. 306). This method mainly relies on the nominations of others already in the sample. While this strategy is cost-efficient and practical, a weakness of this approach is the probability of restriction to a small network of acquaintances (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

Whereas a purposeful peer-nominated sample of online instructors was used, inclusion criteria for participants asked for at least 2 years of online teaching experience at institutions of higher education in the United States. The research tools included a researcher-developed demographic questionnaire and two interview guides. Each participant was informally invited for interviews and once verbally agreed upon, a formal invitational e-mail letter was sent. A total of 11 faculty members meeting the inclusion criteria participated in the study.

Due to the nature of the research questions and the importance of assessing the flexible context, the interview was designed to ask participants to answer open-ended, essay style questions about their experience of teaching online. The questions were written based on a review of the literature and the identified gaps. The questions on the interview guide were designed to elicit information about what the experience is like for faculty who teach online, what knowledge, skills, and attributes faculty think are important when teaching online, what differences they perceive of their roles in face-to-face teaching and online teaching, what strategies they use to facilitate learner engagement, and what ethical and legal issues they face when teaching online. Lastly, they were asked how their leaders can help faculty teach online more effectively and efficiently.

In this study, participants were given the option of either phone or e-mail interviews at their convenience. Ongoing e-mail correspondence and follow-up telephone interviews enhanced some degree of interaction between the researchers and the informants. Interviewing was time-intensive and the actual interview session itself varied in length with an average of 1 hour. Participants were assured of anonymity in any written reports and their responses were to be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

After receiving the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we identified and contacted potential participants who met the criteria for interviews. In the letter of invitation, each invited study participant received a written explanation of the study purpose and the procedure, as well as an informed consent form. Participants who agreed that they had read and understood the information on the consent form then completed a demographic questionnaire. We contacted them via telephone or e-mail to arrange time for the interview. If the email participants did not answer the interview questions within 5 to 7 days, a friendly reminder, through e-mail or phone, sought their participation. Each of the participants was provided with a list of questions and their responses were saved as a Word document file on a computer. The data are presented based on the collective answers of the participants, and are reduced to include only the information relevant to the purpose of the study. After the first round of interviews, follow-up interviews were performed to seek clarification and explore the topic in greater depth.

Demographic Data

Respondents consisted of 11 participants who agreed to be interviewed for the study. Of this sample, four of the participants preferred a telephone interview, while the rest participated through e-mails. All of the telephone interviewees agreed to be audio-recorded. In terms of gender, of the 11 respondents in the sample, 10 were females and 1 was a male. Most of the respondents were between 41 and 60 years of age. Notably, all respondents were at least 30 years old, and they were from various geographic locations throughout the United States. Five of the respondents taught at more than one institution concurrently, while six of them taught at only one institution. Teaching by the respondents covered a wide range of subject matter. The highest frequency was in Nursing (n=4), followed by Education (n=3), Business (n=2), Psychology (n=1), and Technology (n=1). Seven of the respondents were teaching graduate level courses (63.7%), two were teaching undergraduate courses, and two were teaching. All 11 respondents were doctorally prepared, 7 of whom (63.6%) having previously taken at least one online course. The average years of teaching both face-to-face and online was 12.3 with a range of 2 to 28 years ($SD = 6.9$) whereas the average of online teaching experience was 7.3 years with a range of 2 to 11 ($SD = 2.95$).

Data Analysis

The goal of qualitative analysis is to reduce a large amount of textual data to meaningful concepts while identifying themes and categories in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction refers to "the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming that data" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). Whichever technique is used for data analysis, the three Cs of analysis, which includes the element of *Codes*, *Categories*, and *Concepts*, is a useful tool for data reduction in qualitative studies (Lichtman, 2006). Lichtman has broken down this process into six steps:

Step 1. Creating initial coding. Even though there is a small amount of data, it should always start with initial coding. Upon completion of initial coding with one transcript, another transcript is selected and the same process is continued.

Step 2. Revisiting initial coding. A large number of codes that were developed in the previous step may need to be collapsed, renamed, and modified if necessary.

Step 3. Developing an initial list of categories or central ideas. The codes modified in Step 2 are reorganized from one long list of codes into several lists of categories with related codes as subsets of the categories.

Step 4. Modifying the initial list. The goal of the three Cs is to recognize important concepts from initial codes and categories. In this step, several lists of initial codes should be revisited and modified through an additional rereading process.

Step 5. Revisiting the categories and subcategories. Once initial codes are collapsed, the list of categories and subcategories must be revisited to remove redundancies. This step requires researchers' judgment about what is important and what is not.

Step 6. Moving from categories into concepts (themes). This final step is to identify key concepts or themes that reflect the meaning to the data collected. As a rule of thumb, five to seven concepts are the maximum number that can be found in a set of data. (Lichtman, 2006, pp. 167-170)

Using Lichtman's (2006) six-step process, we were able to organize and process data to reach a logical saturation point. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim onto computer disks within a week of the interview. Verbatim transcription and e-mail responses produced a written version of the interviews, which became the descriptive material or texts. Following this process, we read the text over and over to get a sense of the whole and began the interpretation of the data. Interview data were clarified through questioning and checking the accuracy of transcription, while the interpretation was also reviewed by another coder or rater for consensus on the themes emerging from the interviews. Through the hermeneutic process, five common themes were developed from smaller patterns of fragmented ideas, which contributed to developing concepts. In the discussion of the research findings, we have used a number of quotations to support the measure of the interpretation's credibility.

Limitations of the Methodology

The following limitations were inherent in the research design. Every reasonably possible measure was taken to assure objectivity and representation of the study. A limitation in this study lied in the fact that qualitative reports are more likely to run a risk of misrepresentation of certain aspects of reality because of the potentially large variances between participants' and researchers' points of view, between lived and narrated lives, and between reality and representations of reality (Sandelowski, 2006). Another limitation in the course of research was that the interview samples cannot be representative of all online faculty members, and thus objectivity may be impeded by researchers' familiarity with the research group (Polit & Beck, 2004). Unarguably, research is always influenced by the researcher's subjectivity, especially in method and methodology in interpretive studies. In this study, attaining a firm grasp of the phenomena through a comprehensive literature review was essential; consequently, the researchers strived to not overlook clues or contradictions. While staying open to contradictory findings, we sought out, when necessary, alternative explanations and suggestions of data collection and analysis from colleagues.

Findings

Five key themes arose from the analysis of the texts of the interviews. Following are the themes illuminated through the rich quotations of the respondents' experiences of online teaching: (a) Online teaching offers flexibility and convenience; (b) online teaching is time-consuming and labor-intensive; (c) strong communication skills are essential; (d) much of online teaching is learner-centered; and (e) online teaching requires continuing education and training.

Key Themes

Theme 1: Online teaching offers flexibility and convenience. The most common theme identified by the interviewees was about online teaching being *flexible* and *convenient*. Interviewees expressed that online teaching allows them to do things that they could not do if they had an 8-5 job. They appreciate the opportunity to teach at any time of the day or night and, for some interviewees, to teach at more than one school. An online learning environment, by its very nature, makes it possible to meet students from all over the world; many of the interviewees value this ubiquitous environment. The following observations

and comments capture these themes.

I love flexibility

> I enjoy the experience of teaching online tremendously! It is wonderful to work at my own convenience throughout the day. My work can travel with me wherever I go and I love that my office is in my home. That means that I can be a wife, mother, student, and faculty member, all at the same time!

> I like the ability to do this at anytime and anyplace. I can take my laptop on a trip and do the lessons in the evening at the motel. Or, if I wanted to live in Europe for a year, I'd just take my little laptop, find a little village and snuggle in.

> I can work at anytime and anyplace. For example, one week after giving birth to my child, I was able to start teaching via online at home. This helped me to teach the course without any major changes in school workload.

It's exciting to meet learners from diverse groups

> I like the variety of backgrounds my students bring to the class. I also like the flexibility I gain in when I post, grade, and respond to assignments. I work varying hours, so I can keep up with my class during these varying times.

> It's a job that I really love and it allows me to meet students that I normally would not. I am online most of the day and take my work on the road to vacations.

> What I enjoy the most about teaching online is the opportunity to share learning experiences with such a diverse population of learners. Given the global community we have online, learners bring wonderful ideas and cultural diversity to the shared learning experience, which illuminates the engagement in very meaningful ways that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

It's a rewarding experience

> In general, it is very very [*sic*] rewarding, and quite challenging. As adult learners, students have many life events that "get in the way" of things they may often need to do for school.

> It is fantastic! I love the challenge of helping adults who are working full-time have a meaningful and rich academic experience. There are many challenges students face and I love facilitating and encouraging them toward success.

Most of the interviewees shared their positive experiences about the many advantages that online teaching can provide in terms of flexibility, convenience, freedom, gratification, and learner diversity. However, as some participants underlined, these advantages should not overshadow the importance of being self-disciplined within the framework of university standards and expectations.

Theme 2: Online teaching is time-consuming and labor-intensive. It was noticeable that the participants perceived online teaching as a positive experience. However, several negative emotions emerged with regard to the time-consuming and labor-intensive perspectives. Addressing these constraints, the interviewees emphasized the importance of having excellent time-management and organizational skills. Participants explained their experiences in the following texts.

It is a lot of work

> It's very convenient for me. But it's also very labor-intensive…It does require a lot more time for me to be personable, to interact with them through different visual cues, different sounds, pictures, and ways of presenting the material and that is very labor intensive.

> It is invigorating and exhausting all at the same time…Online teachers are allocated the same teaching responsibilities as face to face but I would think the work load is two to three to one.

It is time-consuming

> It is very addicting but enjoyable at the same time because you feel like you need to constantly check in with your students in a 24/7 format. There is no down time when teaching online unless you set advanced boundaries, such as no replies after midnight or weekends, etc. You must be committed to teach online because of the 24/7 commitment and isolation factors.

> There's a major difference in time. Online teaching takes much more time because you are grading papers with track changes and sending them back. Sometimes, it's easier when you're just in a classroom and hand the paper in and then you can just grade and write on it.

Setting the boundaries is important

> I'm not available, you know, 24/7. So, I tell them when I am available, when I am in my office, that they can call me, they can email me at these times and I'll get back to them. And I also tell them that I am not available on the weekend, you know that is my family time. They really seem to respect that I have a life outside of that.

> I expect my students to give me at least 24 to 48 hours because I know they shouldn't expect me to be available 24 hours and 7 days. So, I set the limit up front but I think it's a lot like a war… I mean war in a way, in responding those emails and also giving comments on their papers…I have to use the track change and respond to comments online version, and every comment has to be typed in the document so it tends to be very time consuming if you really want to run the group projects or reveal quite intensive scholar papers.

Time management is critical

> It is incredibly rewarding and I highly recommend it as a profession…You should add your workload slowly so you don't get in over your head, and learn to be an excellent time manager.

> When you are an online teacher you have to have good organizational skills. You cannot be a procrastinator!

A majority of the participants agree that online teaching requires more time and energy in relation to preparation, learner assessment, course design, management, and evaluation. They identified various strategies to overcome these challenges, which are efficient time-management, prioritization, organization, and computer skills. Some interviewees expect better recognition from their administrators regarding the extra time and labor involved in online courses. Such acknowledgment is likely to trigger greater support that would improve work quality while increasing faculty's satisfaction.

<u>Theme 3</u>: *Strong communication skills are essential*. A number of participants discussed the importance of having strong communication skills. Because online learning environments vastly rely on written communication, while lacking non-verbal indicators, it is critical for instructors to maximize the communication efforts when using online discussion platforms. This insight overlaps with the theme *You have to know how to maintain a good interaction with your student* that was expressed in the following ways.

> Attributes needed for teaching online is the ability to manage the actual class load and have strong communication skills. The best in-person instructor may fail online if he or she doesn't understand how to communicate the content in a meaningful manner.

> Most definitely the ability to communicate online effectively… You need to be able to reach across an email and really help someone - help them know there is a real live person on the other end of the email.

> You've really got to be a good communicator and you need to encourage your students. They like feedback. They need to know how soon you can give them feedback. If you can't give them feedback for 5 days, they need to know that so they won't be hammering you.

Continual feedback is a must

> The ability to give complete feedback is essential. Feedback such as "nice job" is pretty useless to a student. Giving detailed feedback is needed. I like to include examples.

The first is accessibility. As an instructor, I need to dedicate time, usually each day, to be on the website and download, grade, and upload assignments. Students should never be waiting long periods of time for feedback. Also, detailed feedback is a must.

The words '*prompt' 'effective'* or '*meaningful'* were often expressed by the interviewees when referring to 'communication' and 'feedback.'

> Providing prompt feedback, I believe, is the most important for effective teaching. Since students do not meet faculty, online feedback is the only way in which students feel connected.

> Learners don't have a specific time and place to talk to an instructor and get clear direction, so you must give near-immediate and thorough feedback and answers to questions.

Many of the faculty members acknowledge that communication is the key to success in online teaching, not only for the purpose of exerting social presence (Aragon, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005), but also of imaging good role models.

Theme 4: Much of online teaching is learner-centered. One of the dominant themes throughout dialogues with the interviewees was their emphasis on pedagogy. Participants strongly felt that online teaching requires the reallocation of power from the instructor to the learner. Some described their role as a _guide to the side_ (Kim & Bonk, 2006; Ko & Rossen, 2004; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006).

> I love how my role is redefined in this environment. I am not a lecturer delivering direct instruction each class. Instead, I am a one-on-one guide, providing feedback, and pats on the back along the way. I firmly believe that we learn best in this environment and I love that the online modalities encourage this type of learning.

> I have not always enjoyed teaching online because I had to learn how to do it. It might be because I have learned how to do it so that it is very student, learner centered. When I first started out, I was trying to teach too much like I was teaching in a classroom. Now, I teach completely different.

> The roles of faculty have changed, particularly in the asynchronous online classroom, from the dispenser of information to the learning facilitator and coach.

In addition to suggesting that online teaching is more individualized or personalized than face-to-face teaching, interviewees emphasized that online faculty must develop interpersonal relationships with their students by respecting individuality while maintaining a learner-centered mindset (Weimer, 2002). One of the interviewees summed this sense of acknowledging student voice as follows:

> I think you have to have a great sense of empathy, especially for doctoral students. They are fragile. They are prone to lack of sleep and good food and they get more frustrated than the average person as a result of that. You have to be able to have a good caring and compassion and tell them the sun will come up tomorrow and your next chapter will start coming around.

As illustrated, the theme of _learner-centeredness_ has resonated across a number of texts, the interviewees underlining the ability to understand students learning needs and to customize instruction to meet such needs.

Theme 5: Online teaching requires continuing education and training. Some of the interviewees' quotes reflect the necessity for ongoing training and opportunities for the faculty member.

> I usually attend summer workshops and implement new online teaching strategies for the following fall classes. By attending workshops, I was able to get some updated information and skills that are useful for teaching development and competency.

> Things that help me when teaching online include but are not limited to institutional support in the form of training, keeping up with the research in my field, and effectively communicating with learners.

> What we do for our faculty is we do faculty development. We have a wonderful tech team here…We're very fortunate that we have like brown bag lunches where we do some education for our faculty and we'll do some faculty development several times a semester. So, we're fortunate that way that we do try to build this in to the schedule.

Within this theme, several participants expressed the importance of _mentoring_ in the early stages of online teaching practice. One suggested that it is necessary to find a good mentor, ideally two: one who knows the content of the course, and the other who knows the technical system such as how to post, when to respond, and who to call for help. One of the interviewees also recommended:

> When you are assigning new faculties that teach online, you need to have them paired with an expert teacher. Don't just take a new faculty and give them an online course...don't be hanging them out to dry by thinking that they can go in to an online course and just start teaching because that is just horrible and it sets them up against their students.

A sub-theme within this key theme was "*faculty peer review is a valuable learning opportunity as a means of providing professional support and fostering collegiality.*"

> I help the new instructors get adjusted. I would hope that people who oversee my work would give me some honest and forthright suggestions about how I'm doing. We have a peer review once a year. We might do it more often.

The transcripts in the interviews indicated that definitions and expectations in professional development widely ranged from simple technical support to a more structured system, such as faculty peer-review evaluation.

Limitations of the Research Findings

Information collected in the study was of a self-report nature that, depending on the subject areas being queried and may be prone to some inaccuracy as a result of less accurate recall, lack of information, or discomfort with self-disclosure. Additionally, the subjective nature of knowledge production may have caused concerns with the idiosyncratic conclusion, since the results were more likely to be biased by the researcher's personal viewpoints. Therefore, the generalizability of findings may not extrapolate to other people or other settings.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Discussion and Implications of Findings

All of the research questions were also answered by the interpretations of the interview data. In answering the six research questions, the implications of this study range from unremarkable to significant. For example, the concepts of learner-centeredness and social presence (Aragon, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005) were regarded as highly essential components in teaching online, and this argument was fully discussed in the existing literature. Similarly, understanding the theory of andragogy (Knowles, 1968, 1980) was important to teach adult learners online. While identifying special characteristics online faculty felt essential, we argue that these identified attributes must be taken into consideration when planning and implementing faculty development programs.

The results of this study concur that it is essential for instructors to acknowledge a reallocation of power and strive to instill a safe learner-centered learning environment (Weimer, 2002) when teaching in an online environment. The implications of this role change speak to the need for reevaluation of the faculty role in online education, which is ongoing as there is a wide spectrum of perspectives about this phenomenon among the research participants.

When asked about strategies to facilitate active learning, the participants identified the integration of experiential learning. Experiential learning, acquired through activities of internships, practica, teaching assistantship programs, and cooperative learning, has been well defined in academic institutions (Gabriel, 2004). However, current study findings did not reveal how traditional activities of experiential learning could be applied or modified in an e-learning environment.

Exploring the ethical and legal issues online faculty face, we found that there is little difference between on-ground and online teaching. Although plagiarism is a common problem in any academic environment, dealing with students who do not participate in online class and students who self-plagiarize posed a unique dilemma for online faculty members. One of the participants in this study was particularly concerned about the fact that the definition of plagiarism varies, depending on students' academic culture or institutional environment. In terms of legal issues, faculty members were aware of potential pitfalls that might become problematic. However, this study found that the scope of their knowledge level seems to be narrow, which was not addressed in prior literature. For example, while the participants identified the copyright issue, few of them were aware of the concept of fair use in online education, which indicates a knowledge gap to which online educators should pay attention.

The final research question was about administrative support that can promote successful online teaching. Although the interviewees identify several areas of improvements, they also acknowledge that it is quite limited in what leadership can do as far as helping them to be better online faculty. The results of

this study suggest that online faculty need to be provided with mentors who know the content of the course, as well as the technical support structure, such as how to post, when to respond, and whom to call for help. For new online faculty, a streamlined orientation program is essential, but this may not always be feasible due to time constraints. Administrators can facilitate such a transition to the online learning environment by implanting a well-designed mentoring system. Within the mentoring relationship, novice online faculty will obtain the necessary knowledge and skills while becoming comfortable with the culture and environment of online education.

In regard to the disagreement between academic leaders and instructors about the time and effort needed for online teaching (Allen & Seaman, 2005), an important finding of the study was that online teaching requires more time and effort than face-to-face education. Therefore, administrators in higher education institutions should realize that overloading instructors' workload by increasing the size of classes or the number of courses assigned to an instructor is counterproductive. In fact, all findings point towards the opposite. Implications for practice emerging from this research are that online faculty members must be taught how to teach online, whereas resources and support must be available and accessible for faculty for them to improve their skills.

Recommendations

Online teaching can enhance the traditional approach to learning; however, educators must understand how to adopt and maximize this new mode of instruction. Based on the results, the researchers provided the following recommendations for preparing and assisting instructors who teach online.

1. The practice of online teaching must transparently demonstrate mutuality, respect, and trust to foster a transformative learning environment. No relationship can exist without caring for and understanding the learner.

2. All stakeholders involved in e-learning must work collaboratively to define and establish new landmarks and transitions into new faculty roles.

3. Along with an orientation program, administrators must consider providing a mentoring system for a smooth transition to the online learning environment.

Suggestions for Future Research

Educators have a responsibility to develop a new methodology and reshape existing models in the context of an environment where learners intermingle. We have identified some topics of interest important to online teaching and offered suggestions which would benefit from more research.

1. This study suggests that faculty's knowledge level about legal issues related to online teaching appears to be narrow or limited. Interviews with a larger population about specific legal-related questions should be conducted to fully explore the degree of the knowledge gap.

2. This study determined what knowledge, skills, and attitudes are considered important to online teaching, but it did not specifically address how important these aspects are for teachers who make the transition to online learning.

3. Similar research should be conducted with online students as the target population to determine if their perceptions are aligned with the areas identified in this study by the online educators.

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