Instructor Satisfaction with Teaching Business Law: Online Vs. Onground

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ABSTRACT

Our study presents the results of a satisfaction survey of business law instructors who have taught, or are teaching, online and/or onground. The authors used the framework suggested by Berge to examine the level of instructor satisfaction, using his four role categories: pedagogical, social, technical, and managerial. Their study found that for 73% of the categories’ aspects, instructors were generally satisfied with online instruction. With regard to the classroom experience, instructors were generally satisfied across the board with regard to all aspects. In comparing the level of satisfaction with online and onground instruction, they found statistically significant differences between the two methods of instruction. In all four areas measured, instructors were more satisfied with classroom instruction than they were with online instruction of business law courses.

Keywords: Business Law, Online Instruction, Pedagogy, Role Categories, Satisfaction, Teaching Business Law

INTRODUCTION

While there have been a number of studies of student satisfaction with online instruction (Schulman & Sims, 1999; Russell, 1999; Ryan, 2000; Shelley, Swartz & Cole, 2007, 2008), there have been far fewer concerned with the topic of instructor satisfaction with online teaching; and, few, if any, concerning instructor satisfaction with the online instruction of business law and the comparison to onground teaching of the same or similar course. Those studies that have been done tend to focus on the relationship of institutional supports to instructor satisfaction (Fredricksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 1999; Almeda & Rose, 2000; Hiltz, Kim, & Shea, 2007).

To date, studies have demonstrated that, when instructors perceive that the institution where they teach values their online instruction; they too are satisfied with online instruction. Indicators that the institution values online instruction include the level of instructional technology available, the degree of peer support, academic recognition, and financial rewards. When these motivators are in place, instructors

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find the online experience to be flexible, more conducive to thoughtful and tailored instruction, more interactive, attractive to a more diverse student population, and generally more valuable as an instructional platform than classroom instruction.

Other studies which have looked at changing perceptions of the educational process on the part of the instructor in the online environment, have generally found corresponding increases in the level of satisfaction with the platform as the instructor becomes more accustomed to it (Conrad, 2004). Instructors who initially are resistant to teaching online become enthusiastic because the online format allows for the discovery and initiation of new learning tools; and, as a result, the instructor feels a renewed commitment to teaching. This is not unusual. Linda Harasim (2000) reported that experiences with the virtual learning environment gives instructors a renewed enthusiasm for teaching in part because of the student engagement in the online learning process. Some instructors also experience an improvement in onland (classroom) instruction because of the online experience. Shea, Pelz, Fredericksen, and Pickett (2002) surveyed two hundred and fifty-five faculty teaching online in the SUNY system and found general satisfaction with the online format and a belief that the online experience would improve classroom instruction.

Fjermestad, Hiltz and Zhang (2005) are among those who support the call for additional empirical studies of faculty satisfaction with online learning. The need to pursue an investigation of faculty use of, and satisfaction with, online learning tools in part led us to explore instructor satisfaction with teaching business law online. Our study looked at instructor satisfaction with online teaching, not only from the perspective of the instructor’s evaluation of institutional facilitation of the experience, but also from the perspective of the instructor’s evaluation of the students’ learning experience.

In any comparison of online and traditional classroom instruction, there are obvious and fundamental differences. Traditional or classroom-based courses are taught in real time with the students and the instructor present. In the online format, the class is taught in a “cybernetic” environment, instruction does not have to be in real time, the students are not present in one place, and the instructor monitors most of the activity from a distance.

The fundamental differences between online and traditional instruction pose major challenges and concerns for course instructors and educational institutions. Online teaching forces the instructor to assume a new teaching role and necessitates a reappraisal, or at least a redefinition, of the traditional teacher-student relationship. In fact, online teaching requires the instructor to rethink and reorganize the existing teaching paradigm. The institution must develop new methods of monitoring the quality of instruction without interfering with that instruction.

In most cases, conveying the basic content to the students in the online format is straightforward, but in some ways more complex because the instructor cannot gauge the level of understanding at a particular moment using a particular delivery tool. The comment is often made by instructors that they can see when the “light comes on” from looking at a student’s face. An even greater challenge is getting the instructional quality of the online course to match, or exceed, the instructional level of the traditional class. It is not sufficient for the online instructor to have an understanding of the technological skills and course development tools alone. He or she must have a strong sense of course design and an understanding of good pedagogy as well. Good pedagogy is generally accepted by educators to involve: 1) a high level of learner activity, 2) a high level of student interaction, 3) a format for motivation and, 4) a well-structured knowledge base.

Discussing the challenges to the instructor and developer of online law-related courses, Kathy Marcel noted that the best online courses were instructor-facilitated, student-centered and highly interactive (Marcel, 2002). The design of an online law course, as with the design of any online course, is critical. The instructor’s
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