The Changed Role of Professor in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research paper examines how the role of a university professor changes in asynchronous online courses and makes analytical comments about the significance of these changes. Semi-structured interviews with 32 professors who have taught online courses provide insight into the perspective of early adopters of this relatively new technology. The findings highlight several issues such as: the skills needed, the flow of information, the less centralized role of the professor, variations based on personality, the pre-planning required, and how previous experience impacts on the degree of role change required.

Keywords: Change Theory, Diffusion of Innovation, Early Adopters, Online Courses, Online Pedagogy, Online Teaching, Role of Professor, Web-Based Courses

INTRODUCTION

Online courses are a relatively new and evolving way of offering educational opportunities, teachers are still discovering some of the ways their role changes in an online educational environment (Inglis, Ling, & Joosten, 2002; Legutko, 2007; McElrath & McDowell, 2008; Shotsberger & Vetter, 2000; Tisdell et al., 2004). The evidence at this point is that the nature of the change required by individual adopters is significant. McFadden, Marsh, and Price (1999) claim that the major obstacle to the use of online courses is that they alter the role of the instructor. The online course is a disruptive technology in the sense that it requires different pedagogical methods which may not yet be fully understood. In many ways it is a break with the past and requires professors to rethink their teaching practice. Also the changes are not yet stabilized as advancements are being made in both hardware and software. High-speed connections, which facilitate multimedia and video, are becoming more common, as are wireless connections and smaller, more powerful devices (Hedin, 2006; Nicholson, 2002; Yin & Trindad, 2005). Also, social software (e.g., blogging, audio and video conferencing, instant messaging, wikis, social bookmarking) is starting to be integrated into online teaching (Alexander, 2006; Bryant, 2006; O’Reilly, 2005; Tapscott & Williams, 2006; Weller, Pegler, & Mason, 2005). This research focuses on asynchronous online courses, it does not include classroom courses that have an online component and it does not include formats such as learning through gaming or other types of immersive learning environments. The experiences of universities and individual professors who are currently offering asynchronous online courses provide

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some valuable insight as to what lies ahead for others as they move toward the increased use of these courses.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the role of university professor changes in asynchronous online courses and make analytical comments about the significance of these changes. The research provides insight into how new technology is changing the work of professors and in doing so may help in the development of strategies to better prepare professors and universities to offer online courses. The degree of role change required by professors is an important aspect of adoption because innovations that require greater role change are often slow to be adopted (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000; Moore, 1999; Rogers, 2003). From developing an understanding of the nature of these role changes, strategies can be developed to help facilitate adoption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While recognizing this interdependence between social, organizational and individual factors, this paper will focus on the change required by individuals in the adoption of new technology. Before examining literature specifically related to the adoption of online courses, it is useful to look at literature related to how individuals make decisions about the adoption and use any new technology.

Several theories and models have been proposed to explain individual adoption of technology. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was developed by Davis et al. (1989) to provide an understanding of the factors that influence an individual’s decision to use new software. Two aspects of this model—the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness—are similar to the “perceived attribute of an innovation” variable in Rogers’ (2003) theory of diffusion. During the adoption stage, individuals are looking for information about what the innovation is and how it works, as well as “evaluating” information that looks at the advantages and consequences of the innovation. Rogers (2003) identified five characteristics of innovations: (1) relative advantage; (2) compatibility; (3) complexity; (4) trialability; and (5) observability. Another commonly used model to understand individuals’ decisions to use technology is the Task-Technology Fit Model developed by Goodhue (1995). As the name of the model suggests, potential users make a decision about the technology based on how well it fits the characteristics of the task.

Another influential aspect of Rogers’ (1995, 2003) work, in addition to the identification of the variables that determine the rate of adoption, is the categorization of individuals according to their propensity to adopt innovations. The “innovators,” as Rogers defines them, are the most venturesome group and perform an important role by initiating new ideas and approaches within a social system. The “early adopters” are respected, and often opinion leaders within their social system and are more judicious in their innovation decisions compared to the “innovators,” who are sometimes seen as too rash and daring. The “early majority” is a large and critical group in the adoption of innovations that deliberates for a longer time before deciding to adopt. The “late majority,” another large group, are more skeptical and cautious about innovations. Finally, the “laggards” are the last to adopt an innovation and usually look to tradition and past practice to guide their activities rather than being influenced by what others are doing.

The innovators and the early adopters play a critical role in the change process. In many cases, the recommendations of a respected peer can substitute for trials, thus speeding up the adoption process. Moore (1999) identified the “chasm” that exists between the early adopters and the early majority and the difficulty of getting a product across this barrier into mainstream usage. Because of the difference between these two adoption categories, it is difficult for some new products or practices to make the transition into mainstream use. Bandura (2006) also acknowledged the importance of innovators and early adopters in the further adoption of new ideas. His social cognitive theory recognizes
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