Chapter 11

Online Courses and the Job Satisfaction of University Professors

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents findings related to job satisfaction and the adoption of online courses from a qualitative study involving interviews with 32 university professors. Professors were able to identify things they like and dislike about teaching online. The findings indicate that while work satisfaction is a very personal judgment, there are some patterns and themes that did emerge. For example, many professors were concerned about the lack of personal interaction with students, while others were getting job satisfaction from experimentation with new ways of teaching. Opinions ranged from professors who enjoyed teaching online and would like to teach all their courses in that manner to those who did not want to teach online again. The study also examines how professors’ views changed over time.

INTRODUCTION

Several sources have documented the growth in the number of online courses and made predictions that this growth will continue (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Government of Canada, 2001; Lewis et al, 1999). Given the newness of this teaching format and the predictions that its use will become more common, it is timely that research be undertaken regarding university professors’ job satisfaction in online courses. The research question which guides this research is: How does the adoption and use of online courses by professors impact on their job satisfaction? With the possible development of a faculty shortage, job satisfaction may become more of a concern for university administrators. This paper is an initial foray into this topic and provides a basis for further research and analysis.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant change is required by individual professors as they adopt the use of online courses. McFadden, Marsh, and Price (1999) claimed that the major obstacle to the integration of online courses is that they significantly alter the role of the instructor. Online courses are a disruptive technology in the sense that they require different pedagogical methods, which may not yet be fully understood. In many ways, these methods are a break from the past and require professors to rethink their teaching practice. Conrad (2004) conducted interviews with university instructors who were engaged in online teaching for the first time. She identified four areas in which online courses changed instructors’ roles: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. Conrad observed that professors were experiencing difficulty in adjusting to the role change as they transferred to online teaching.

Lehman (2006) investigated the role of emotion in creating a sense of presence online. Lehman developed a framework that covers seven key areas that professors and instructional designers should attend to when designing and teaching online courses: understanding the participants, knowing the environment, being a team player, developing formats and strategies, creating interactive activities, integrating support, and monitoring for quality. Ketterer and Marsh (2006) predicted that professors and institutions will have to be more flexible in terms of instructional models in light of new information and communication technologies. They claimed that traditional instructional models will be “increasingly problematic” with new technology. This will result in new models being developed to improve service, reach more students, satisfy adult learners, and comply with changing government policy.

Given the nature of the change which occurs when professors move to teaching online it is useful to examine this phenomena within the broader context of how change occurs in other environments. One of the most widely used theories related to change is Rogers (2003) theory of diffusion of innovations and it provides many concepts which are useful in this study of the adoption of asynchronous online courses. It was chosen as the conceptual framework for this study because it is a comprehensive theory drawing on research conducted over a wide variety of fields. The theory identifies the variables which influence the rate of adoption of an innovation and besides being used extensively in the field of education it has also been use by those doing research in many other fields. For example, it has been used to study the adoption of public health practices, the use of new agriculture methods, the introduction of innovations into cultures, such as the snowmobile into northern cultures, and the introduction of various tools from one culture to another. In business, the theory has been utilized to explain management practices, organizational behaviour, and the marketing of new products.

One theme in Rogers’ (2003) theory of diffusion of innovations is the special challenges presented by disruptive or discontinuous innovations. He argued that truly disruptive or discontinuous innovations—that is, those requiring a dramatic change from past behaviour but which result in dramatic new benefits—require special adoption strategies. Rogers and others such as Moore (1999) recognized the importance of communication channels and the role of the “innovators” and “early adopters” 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 highlighted the difficulty of getting a product across this barrier into mainstream usage. Given the difficult in relation to the adoption of disruptive innovations identified in both the research and theoretical literature, the focus of this paper is on the important issue of professors’ job satisfaction.