

Transitioning from Face-to-Face to Entirely Virtual Instruction: Beginning the Journey and Finding Support

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Abstract

Faculty transitioning from traditional face-to-face doctoral teaching and mentoring to completely online might struggle without the proper supports and training. Current models offer faculty guidance in successful transition; however, additional scholarly attention to this process is warranted.

Keywords: online teaching; mentoring; support; professional development

Embarking on an online doctoral education and preparing to teach in an entirely online environment arguably require similar skills, perseverance, and dedication. The two processes are parallel, distinct in their perspective, but identical in terms of their underlying goal. They represent a journey focused on ultimate success. For the student, it is a terminal degree. For the faculty member, it is the student's acquisition of knowledge. In the online modality, both of these goals are often completed without face-to-face interaction and take place in concurrent, albeit vastly different locations throughout the world. There are challenges associated with transitioning from face-to-face

instruction to completely online instruction, while maintaining these two ultimate goals.

Beginning in the 21st century, the shifting paradigm from face-to-face to online instruction has been well-documented (Harasim, 2000). Nearly 15 years later, focus on the differences between virtual classrooms via distance learning and digital learning platforms in relation to face-to-face teaching in traditional classrooms is robust (Chang, Shen, & Liu, 2014). Nevertheless, research regarding teaching and learning in online doctoral programs is still relatively sparse (Gazza, 2014). The current literature describes the differences between face-to-face and online instruction as considerable (Robinson, Phillips,

Sheffield, & Moore, 2014), although additional research is needed to determine if these differences are applicable to online doctoral students, given their unique academic journey. One of the main differences in online education is that the interactions between students and faculty members are primarily text-based (Lapadat, 2002). This is potentially problematic for doctoral students, who require more of a personal connection with a mentor (Rogers & Fleck, 2014). Furthermore, whereas many online faculty members do integrate different audio and video components into the course, written text is the main medium of communication between students, their peers, and the teacher (Bejerano, 2008). This calls into question what types of support online doctoral students and faculty members are receiving. Most doctoral students at traditional universities have face-to-face support from their graduate cohort, whereas online doctoral students often find themselves isolated (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Future research would benefit from a focus on how these primary differences in distance education impact online doctoral teaching and learning.

Many online faculty members report that they entered the teaching profession because they

have a passion for their subject area, but they have found that they lose out on the relational rewards associated with teaching a live audience, building relationships with students, and mentoring due to distance created by space and time (Bejerano, 2008). These differences are particularly relevant to faculty members who are in the process of undergoing a paradigm shift of their own. For a tenure-track professor who is transitioning from a traditional face-to-face classroom to an entirely online classroom for the same brick-and-mortar university, “the goal is to turn a potentially chaotic online classroom experience into something that is structured, defined, and successful” (Paynter & Barnes, 2014, p. 1570). This can be especially challenging for faculty members who are mentoring doctoral students online due to the lack of structure in such a program once students complete their coursework (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Additional research is needed to inform faculty members and students on best practices during these transitions.

One place to start might be Covington, Petherbridge, and Warren’s (2005) triangulated model of support, which includes administrative support, peer support, and professional development. Given the dearth of scholarly

literature on online doctoral education, these more informal sources of support might be of paramount importance for faculty transitioning to online doctoral education. As discussed further below, traditional faculty members should seek out the support of fellow faculty members who have already made the transition to teaching doctoral students online, the department chair, and the college dean when making the transition to becoming a fully online faculty member. It is also essential that faculty members focus on professional development to obtain the requisite knowledge and skills to become successful online instructors to provide the best possible instruction and mentorship to online doctoral students. For example, traditional faculty members who are accustomed to mentoring students face-to-face need to learn how to communicate as effectively at a distance and still maintain personal connections (Rogers & Fleck, 2014).

Covington and colleagues' (2005) three aspects of the triangulated approach to online teaching are particularly relevant in terms of the hallmark tripartite focus of any tenure-track faculty member (i.e., research, service, and teaching). Although it is certainly feasible for a

faculty member to teach and conduct research remotely, the area of service is not quite as easy to complete from a distance. This is especially the case when traditional brick-and-mortar institutions do not have the technology in place for faculty members who are not on campus to participate in meetings. It is important for faculty members to work with their department chairs and colleagues to ensure inclusion and involvement in necessary service-related activities.

Support

In terms of peer support, teaching online can have some drawbacks that most traditional courses at brick-and-mortar institutions do not. For example, one of the biggest concerns for many faculty members who teach online is community of practice, which is a collection of individuals in the online context who have similar interests or share common goals (Pan et al., 2015). Here, individuals can come together to share their resources, develop working strategies, solve problems, and improve individually. Online communities of practice have become an important platform on which many online faculty members rely for support (Tseng & Kuo, 2014). Most of these communities are established by the

university so that faculty members who are now teaching fully online can join the discussion and gain support. However, for those who are transitioning to teaching online for a traditional brick-and-mortar school, those communities may have not been created.

There are a number of ways in which faculty members can create their own community of practice. For example, they might hold monthly Skype meetings with their department chair where they can discuss any issues that might have arisen with their doctoral students. Additional administrative support can come in the form of bi-monthly Skype meetings with the program director of the online program so that they can keep each other abreast about students, share any concerns, and talk about the program itself. Faculty members can also hold informal bi-weekly meetings with other online faculty members to discuss areas of concern, seek guidance, and brainstorm solutions. The focus of all of these interactions is to maintain support and personal relationships that are often lost in online environments.

Professional Development

In terms of professional development, faculty members must learn to navigate the

multitude of online learning tools, which will be an ongoing pursuit given the rapid changes in technology. The plethora of different learning management systems is as varied as the universities and colleges that use them (Mueller, Offerdahl, & Boyer, 2014). Swimming through the possibilities is a dizzying and often formidable process. In addition, the tools that can be used within learning platforms continue to evolve and do so at a rapid pace (Afolabi, 2015). For example, there are many products that are directed at helping faculty members who teach online, but still want to have a face-to-face experience with their students via online lectures. One such tool is VoiceThread, which offers numerous ways of communicating based on the needs of both faculty members and students (Chiciooreanu, 2010). Many online students expect interactivity and an experience that is as close to a “traditional” classroom-based education as possible (Schrum & Hong, 2002). Additional tools, such as Camtasia, Tegrity, Snagit, and Jing, all allow online faculty members to engage with students, help students to engage in the material, and maintain a “face-to-face” atmosphere. This might prove to be especially important for online doctoral students during their coursework as well as once they

finish their course work and transition to a doctoral candidate. At this point, candidates are more independent but still novices, in a less structured academic atmosphere, and likely many miles away from their mentor and peers. This might help to explain the high dropout rates for online doctoral students (Rogers & Fleck, 2014). More research is needed to examine these issues to offer more support to students and faculty members in online doctoral education.

As more university courses are offered, online faculty members have a lot to learn regarding how to use this technology to facilitate effective learning (Edwards, Perry, & Janzen, 2011). The growing scholarly literature, the

information technology department, as well as peers who have undergone the transition of teaching face-to-face to completely online at the graduate and/or doctoral level are excellent resources. In sum, faculty members who are newly branching out to teach exclusively online need to make sure that they are not putting themselves in a silo. Feeling alone, without the support of faculty, can make something like a simple task seem overwhelming. However, by staying abreast of online pedagogies as well as keeping in constant contact with those who can help with the process (e.g., colleagues), the work at hand may no longer feel insurmountable.

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