

World Conference on Educational Sciences 2009

Instructor Competencies for Online Courses

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Received October 25, 2008; revised December 16, 2008; accepted January 4, 2009

Abstract

With the great demand for online courses, there is a great necessity to determine the roles and competencies of teachers who plan to deliver online courses. Several authors of different countries and many of these scholars emphasis on these roles and competencies in many aspects describe the roles and competencies of online instructors. Thus, it is important to be aware of the studies done abroad to develop or determine the new roles and competencies of online instructors. This study aims at gathering the findings and suggestions of these studies and depicting the common roles and competencies. In this context, 14 studies were examined and the roles and competencies determined in these studies were gathered. The most repeated ones were selected by the author.

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Keywords: Online Education; Online Instructors, Competencies and Roles;

1. Introduction

There has been a rapid increase in the offering of online courses at especially higher education level in the last decade. The improvement in the wvw and access at home makes it most likely that there will be a long-lasting development in online courses (Goodyear & et all, 2001).

When schools and universities put in more online classes, the managers often force instructors to teach those classes, even if the instructors are not ready or unqualified (Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2002). From time to time online courses are added for financial reasons and the instructor's needs are not taken into consideration. The result could put in danger the reputation of the institution.

Universities desire to offer quality education whether it is online or face-to-face. There are many people questioning the quality of online teaching and thus it is necessary to identify how to prepare instructors for teaching online classes. Instructors of online classes need hardware and software training, but also need to be taught specific online teaching methods so that they will know how to effectively teach quality online courses (Goodyear & et all, 2001; Smith, 2005).

The trouble was that many instructors are inadequately prepared to teach web-based classes. The achievement in online learning depends on instructors acquiring new competencies that are required to work with students online. That is why universities should determine what objectives ought to be defined for the instruction, how instructors should be qualified (Goodyear, et al., 2001).

Turkey, having the biggest Open Education Faculty in the world has not focused the online roles and competencies of instructors yet. The National Education Basic Act in 1973 in Turkey described the quality areas that teachers should have as background knowledge, field knowledge and teaching profession knowledge. In accordance with this act, Ministry of National Education has determined the competencies of instructors afterwards. However, rapid changes and new technologies impinged on education, expectations and needs of learners resulted in alternative educational approaches as distance education. To meet these expectations and needs, Turkey has put some applications such as open basic education school, open high school, open faculty into practice recently. Such applications have attracted students from all over the country. On the contrary, beside the competencies of teachers determined by MNE, there is an immediate indispensability to define the competencies of instructors

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delivering these courses. Despite this rush for online courses, the emphasis to define the competencies of instructors delivering these courses is neglected. Thus it is important to define or determine the roles and competencies of online instructors. Therefore, this study will help researchers who desire to determine online instructor roles and competencies in Turkish context.

The competencies of online instructors are described by several authors of different countries and many of these studies emphasize on these competencies in many aspects. On the other hand, though the term “online instructor” is fresh for Turkey, there are not sufficient studies on this issue. Thus, it is important to be aware of the studies done abroad to develop competencies of Turkish online instructors. This study aims at gathering the findings and suggestions of these studies and via meta-synthesis method depicting the common competencies suitable for Turkish online instructors. Therefore, studies related to the issue were selected and examined and findings, results and suggestions are gathered afterwards.

2. Roles and Competencies of Online Instructors

Role consists of the rights and duties associated with a post assigned to a post-holder. From a functional perspective, a role is composed of behaviours that reflect responsibilities defined in job descriptions, such as designing and delivering learning activities, assessing learning outcomes (Thomas and Biddle, 1979). On the other hand, competence refers to a state of being well qualified to perform an activity, task or job function. According to Richey et al., (2001) a competency involves a related set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable a person to effectively perform the activities of a given occupation or function in a way that meets or exceeds the standards expected in a particular profession or work setting.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) consider the transition to online learning means developing new approaches to education and new skills in delivery. Gustafson and Gibbs (2000) argue that teaching online requires strategies that develop new ways to engage students to discuss and reflect together. Several classifications seek to explain the roles of the online academic. Berge (1991) makes a list of suggestions that the instructor must be aware of in the course. These suggestions are grouped into four areas: pedagogical (use of discursive resources as to facilitate learning), social (incentive of human relations among members of a group), managerial (establishment of general procedures for discussion and development of activities) and technical (transparency of technology for an adequate relation between the system, the software and the interface selected). Palloff and Pratt (1999) work with the four areas as Berge. Lentell (2003) mentions that instructors need to have knowledge and a basic conceptual understanding of their field. They have to be effective listeners and communicators, to be a coach, facilitator, mentor, supporter and resource. They have to listen, to shape, to give feedback, to motivate, to direct, to appreciate – broadly to support developmental and problem solving. Simpson (2002) describes two areas of instructor support, academic and non-academic: first one deals with supporting students with the cognitive, intellectual and knowledge issues of specific courses or sets of courses. The second one is the support of students in the affective and organizational aspects of their studies. Charlier (2002) defines the roles of the instructor as expert, mentor, group and student counsellor.

3. Method

The main purpose of this study is to gather the results of the studies that investigated the roles and competencies of instructors who are delivering online courses. In this context, the researches conducted on determining roles and competencies of online instructors were analyzed in terms of their results. A meta-synthesis of these studies was carried out, and the roles and competencies determined in these studies were gathered.

In general, meta-synthesis is a type of qualitative study that uses the findings from other qualitative studies linked to the same or a related topic as data. The sample for a meta-synthesis is made up of individual studies selected based on relevance to a specific research question posed by the synthesist. Meta-synthesis is an analysis of the findings of these studies. Sandelowski, Docherty, & Emden (1997) define metasynthesis as “the theories, grand narratives, generalization and interpretive translations produced from the integration or comparison of findings from qualitative studies”. That is, meta-synthesis is the synthesist’s interpretation of the interpretations of primary data by the original authors of the constituent studies, unlike the meta-analysis, which is aggregative and reduces data to a single unit, it entails a comparison, translation, and analysis of original findings from which new interpretations are generated, encompassing and distilling the meanings in the constituent studies.

4. Findings

14 research studies and book parts regarding the roles and competencies of instructors delivering online courses were examined in the context of this study. The studies were analyzed in two stages; in the first stage, the roles determined were gathered and the most repeated roles were isolated and in the second stage, the competencies attributed to these roles were gathered. On the other hand, only some of the studies selected determined the competencies. The roles that were determined in the studies were shown below (Table 1)

| The Researchers | Determined Roles |
|----------------------|--|
| Thach | instructor, instructional designer, technology expert, technician, administrator, site facilitator, support staff, editor, librarian, evaluation specialist, and graphic designer |
| Williams | Administrative manager, instructor/facilitator, instructional designer, technology expert, site facilitator/proctor, support staff, librarian, technician, evaluation specialist, graphic design, trainer, media publisher/editor, leader. |
| Goodyear & et all | content facilitator, technologist, designer, manager/administrator, assessor, advisor/counsellor, process facilitator, researcher, |
| Berge | technical, managerial, pedagogical and social |
| Palloff & Pratt | technical, managerial, pedagogical and social |
| Lentell | knowledge experts, effective listeners, communicators, coaches, facilitators, mentors, problem solvers, designers, supporters and resource co-ordinators. |
| Cornelius & Higgison | technologist, manager, co-learner, designer, knowledge expert, researcher, facilitator, assessor, adviser-counsellor, e-tutor and mentor |
| Piskurich & Sanders | human resource development manager , analyst , designer, implementer, instructor, evaluator, organizational change agent |
| Ljoså | the sculpture, the entertainer, the coach and the manager |
| McKeachie, | expert, formal authority, facilitator, socialising agent, person, ego-ideal |
| Abdulla | intellectual roles, social roles, managerial roles, technical roles |
| Barker | adviser, facilitator, moderator, mentor |
| Simpson | academic roles (roles regarding cognitive competencies), no-academic roles (management and sensory) |
| Denis & et all | content facilitator, metacognition facilitator, process facilitator, advisor/counsellor, assessor (formative and summative), technologist, resource manager/administrator, designer, co-learner, researcher |

According to Table 1, it can be seen that, almost all the studies had revealed on different perspectives of online instructors. Some authors made some various classifications. The classifications of Simpson and Ljosa were striking. However, some roles such as manager, instructors etc were reached by almost all authors. The authors determined many of the roles, but the most repeated roles were taken in to consideration in this study. As seen in Table 1 , some of the roles were repeated in several studies. For instance technologist and manager roles of an online instructor were mentioned in 9 studies, the assessor, facilitator, instructor and advisor roles were determined in 6 studies. In studies, it is seen that, an online instructor should perform researcher, content expert, supporter role as well. The most repeated roles attributed to online instructor are figured as follow (Figure 1):



Figure 1. Roles of Online Instructors

In the second stage of this study, the competencies attributed to the roles in examined studies were gathered. Below there the competencies that instructors should have during an online course (Table 3). Although all the studies have defined the roles of instructors, in few of them the competencies were determined. The repeated competencies were listed as follows:

Table 3. The Competencies Attributed to the Roles

| | |
|--|---|
| Create an effective online syllabus | Maintain focus on core content |
| Summarize key points in a discussion. | Structure content available to learners |
| Foster learner centeredness | Monitor progress and provide feedback |
| Decide when not to contribute. | Make the transition to the online learning environment |
| Ensure active participation of all learners. | Posses adequate technical skills |
| Guide discussion in keeping with lesson objectives. | Use technology at an operational level |
| Help the learners articulate their learning concerns and needs. | Understand the capabilities and limitations of the available technologies |
| Help learners take responsibility for their own learning. | Assess what tools can be used for in learning |
| Help establish a sense of learning community. | Make appropriate use of tools and techniques |
| Understand the student's perspective, expectations, | Diagnose learners' technical issues and challenges |
| Describe clearly the risks and boundaries of the learning space. | Select appropriate media according to intended learning outcomes |
| Make appropriate contributions and encourage initial participation. | Have knowledge of using use different media |
| Encourage sharing one's own learning with students. | Ability to edit and update distributed learning resources. |
| Intervene to provide direction, manage disagreements. | Respect the intellectual property rights of others |
| Encourage, motivate students and establish a sense of equality. | Specify activities to be performed by students. |
| Demonstrate self-confidence and a willingness to be open. | Select appropriate media and modalities |
| Create a student-centered environment. | Provide for easy access to on-line resources. |
| Use on-line techniques to assess learning outcomes & processes | Ensure that the learning activities are consistent with the technology constraints and capabilities |
| Ensure authenticity of student work Appreciate ethical issues | Establish activities with appropriate pacing- time scale |
| Evaluate the effectiveness of on-line programs and materials | Specify and create mechanisms or tools to monitor student progress |
| Use on-line resources to collect information on on-line teaching and learning | Effective management of time |
| Conduct research on on-line teaching and learning | Ability to construct timetables or schedules for learning activity/courses |
| Develop theory or models of on-line teaching and learning | Enable students to participate readily in the online environment |
| Induct on-line learners into your community of knowledge production and research | Construct appropriate learning tasks |

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the roles and competencies needed for delivering online courses. This study has provided a list of roles and competencies for online teaching derived from several researches. With in this framework in 14 research studies and book parts the roles and competencies of online instructors were determined. The authors did several classifications. When the roles and competencies examined, it is clear that, an instructor should not only have instructional skills or competencies, s/he should have technical and technological skills as well. As a result of this study, it can be said that;

- For online courses in instructors should be selected according to these roles and competencies.
- Instructor training for online courses should be planned in accordance with these roles and competencies.
- These roles and competencies may be re-developed considering Turkish culture.

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