Faculty financial incentives/disincentives in online education

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ABSTRACT

Proponents of distance education courses posit that they provide high quality instruction with impressive learning outcomes while at the same time allowing considerable flexibility and wide spread accessibility. Others argue conversely that, even with the impressive technology available for online courses, such courses cannot fully replicate the educational experiences in a face-to-face setting. Further, it is often argued that the financial incentives for online instructors are insufficient to produce optimal behavior by these instructors.

The purpose of this paper is to explore a potentially sinister effect related to financial insufficiency. Namely, even if an instructor is willing to devote the extra time to initially prepare and then deliver the course, is it reasonable to presume that the instructor will also provide a "core dump" of all of his/her proprietary teaching materials as a part of the online course development? If not, can it be argued that the educational content of the online curriculum materials themselves are weaker than under a face-to-face format?

Keywords**:** Online Instruction, Face-to-Face Instruction, Financial Disincentives, Proprietary Teaching Materials, Online Curriculum Educational Content

INTRODUCTION

While online courses at the university level are experiencing explosive growth, discussion continues on the efficacy of online courses viz. traditional face-to-face courses. Proponents of distance education courses posit that they provide high quality instruction with impressive learning outcomes while at the same time allowing considerable flexibility and wide spread accessibility. Others argue conversely that, even with the impressive technology available for online courses, such courses cannot fully replicate the educational experiences in a face-to-face setting. These critics point out that online presentation of technical materials can be cumbersome, that either synchronous or asynchronous discussions can seem artificial, that it can be difficult if not impossible to provide the same nuance level online, and that testing reliability and verification can be suspect. Further, it is often argued that the financial incentives for online instructors are insufficient to produce optimal behavior by these instructors. Typical financial discussions center on:

- The extra time on a class-to-class basis necessary to deliver a successful online course.
- The considerable startup investment to prepare and upload curriculum materials suitable to the online environment.

The purpose of this position paper is to take this financial insufficiency discussion one step further. Namely, even if an instructor is willing to devote the extra time to initially prepare and then deliver the course, is it reasonable to presume that the instructor will also provide a "core dump" of all of his/her proprietary teaching materials as a part of the online course development? If not, can it be argued that the educational content of the online curriculum materials themselves are weaker than under a face-to-face format?

FINANCIAL DISINCENTIVES

In a recent faculty survey, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, see Johnson, Seaman and McCarthy (2009), reported that 'the majority of online faculty members surveyed reported that the compensation earned for teaching online courses was inadequate" (It may be true that these same faculty also feel under compensated for face-to-face instruction. This, of course, does not negate a potential financial disincentive associated with online teaching). While not the focus of this position paper, it is entirely possible that the minority of online faculty members who did not report under compensation find benefits associated with online instruction.

Compensation to faculty for teaching an online course would likely depend upon whether the online teaching qualifies as part of a faculty member's inload teaching responsibilities or whether the online course is compensated as an overload. In either case, if the workload to prepare and deliver the online course is greater than for a face-to-face twin course, would fairness argue in favor of premium pricing for the online delivery?

In fact, increased workloads for online courses have been well documented; see, for example, Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd (2004) and Lazarus (2003). Cavanaugh (2005) provides evidence that "the amount of time spent teaching online was over twice the amount of time spent teaching in-class" and that "per student, the time spent online was over six times larger than the time spent teaching in-class". Similarly, faculty consistently report "additional responsibilities and time commitments" on a per class basis predicated on various communications with students, synchronous and asynchronous discussion boards, processing student postings, technical glitches, etc. , see for example Shieh (2009). The discrete nature of the class-to-class progression in a traditional course is, to a large extent, replaced by a semi-continuous engagement, supported by technology, throughout the term of the online course. The end result is that the number of hours to deliver the online course often materially exceeds the time commitment for the traditional course.

Also, there are considerable incremental startup costs to preparing materials for an online course, even if curriculum materials for a face-to-face version of the course already exist; see , for example, Chung-Herrera and Krentler (2008). For example:

- The developer must master the particular online shell environment, e.g., blackboard, to be used.
- Materials in note form that will be used by the instructor as a guide for classroom discussion in the face-to-face setting must be "pretty paged" to create professional postings to the online course documents.
- Handwritten materials which form the basis for classroom lectures must be formalized to be comprehensive and self-contained prior to posting.
- Curriculum materials that would otherwise be put on a blackboard/whiteboard during class need to be transcribed to a medium suitable for online posting – many times these items could include mathematical equations, intricate images, complex charts, etc., which would be time consuming to prepare in an uploadable format.
- Development time will increase if high quality audio visual components are to be required in the online course.

While this short list is not meant to be exhaustive, it does illustrate the meaningful incremental costs to develop an online course. In some cases, it is expected that the instructor will provide this development work as a part of the online course assignment; in other cases, a monetary stipend (often equivalent to the fee for one overload course) is provided as a developmental budget. Even with the development stipend, online instructors might wonder if the per hour pay for development and course uploading is less than the per hour rate earned by the local butcher, baker or candlestick maker!

Are these startup costs mitigated to some extent if the online instructor is able to leverage the developmental work by teaching the same online course multiple times? Of course, best practices would argue that it is often appropriate for course content to change term-by-term, so at most only a percentage of the materials could be reusable. Even if there are leveraging opportunities based on repeated usage, the situation remains murky. Can the instructor be sure that he/she will be assigned future sections of the online course? If not, will the new instructors have access to the developed materials? If so, how will the developing faculty member feel about subsidizing the next instructor? Finally, the cynical online instructor will ask, "What leverage is present if I am able to re-use previously developed curriculum materials for an online course with an outsized class-by-class workload?" This point is analogous to the old joke whereby the merchant attempts to make up losses on each unit sold with an increase in volume!

It is important to interject that a complete discussion of the financial disincentives to online teaching should go well beyond the mercenary aspects discussed above. While it is not within the scope of this paper, it is perfectly appropriate to address larger normative issues surrounding the financial aspects of online teaching. For example, if educators are convinced that online delivery improves learning outcomes, should they not pursue this approach in the best interest of the students? If so, would the development and delivery of the highest quality online courses be among the most fundamental job responsibilities of educators?

Miller (2009) confronts a similar conundrum in reacting to mandatory furlough days for instructors predicated on budget cuts at the university. Miller wonders:

> "If I could somehow reduce my workdays, I would confront another dilemma: Should I? Don't I owe every student my full effort? How can I do anything that might even slightly reduce the quality of my students' education?... Didn't we all sign some sort of Hippocratic oath in which we vowed to educate as much as possible?"

Upon consideration, Miler concludes:

> "I guess I should simply ignore my supposed furlough and nobly maintain my professional honor by continuing to work as usual. But — and here comes another dilemma — if other professors and I shoulder our normal hours, aren't we also undermining higher education? In that case, the Legislature and the new governor would be forcing our administrators to take a meat cleaver to our budget while people like me help conceal the butchery from students. Continuing to work as usual would amount to pretending that we were seriously overpaid and underworked before heroic, cost-conscious legislators prompted the university to prune our wages and our workdays."

These normative issues are very worthy and sensitive issues which will be addressed in future research. While the furlough issues may not be exactly identical to the financial disincentives discussed herein, there is the common element – a faculty member faces a financial disincentive (working without pay during the furlough period) and chooses the path to minimize the financial disincentive.

Above, financial disincentives to online teaching which have been well known in the literature have been reviewed. Below another less well known financial disincentive under which an online course could be <u>educationally weaker</u> than a companion face-to-face course is introduced.

FINANCIAL DISINCENTIVES – A MORE SINISTER EFFECT

It is quite common in elective courses, particularly in business administration, for instructors to include as part of the curriculum materials proprietary knowledge based on years of teaching experience, past business exposures and/or ongoing consulting activities. This material expands upon and brings to life the subject matter that is presented in textbooks and cases. The instructor has likely progressed through many variants of the classroom materials, based on successes and failures in the business world coupled with considerable academic training. Given the developmental history of the materials, it would be reasonable to expect that the instructor attributes considerable value to these proprietary curriculum resources. Furthermore, the instructor likely revels in bringing these insights and perspectives to his/her face-to-face classes, knowing that huge value added is being provided to the students.

How might this instructor be expected to incorporate these proprietary elements into an online course, if at all? Even with a developmental stipend, the instructor might well feel under compensated for the administrative dimension of the work to prepare materials for uploading (as discussed above), let alone for the "release" of highly proprietary materials. Given the hours, days and even years of background development in these proprietary materials, might the instructor hesitate to include these materials in the online course development? If faculty were asked to value these proprietary materials, what would the value be – the equivalent of 5 overloads? 15 overloads?

Even if online administrators are willing to entertain premium stipends for proprietary materials, instructors could still hesitate knowing that they may well be relinquishing ownership and control of the materials. For example, the developed online course pack could be provided to other assigned instructors who would benefit from these previously proprietary materials. Will this, rightly or wrongly, irk the course developer? Might the developer worry that the new instructor will be unable to do justice to these very special curriculum materials? As a culmination, would his/her reaction be to not include the proprietary materials in the course pack? If so, the curriculum materials for the online course would be inferior to the materials used by the same instructor in the face-to-face twin course, if the proprietary materials are not included in the former, but used in the latter.

In a related circumstance, Bennett (2009) discusses how university professors have reacted to the recent development of internet websites which provide class lecture notes to all:

"As a result, thanks to technology, one of the core functions of a university - distributing information through its professors - is no longer entirely in its control. It's a potentially unsettling development for universities and professors, and it has found its way into court, as professors take on commercial note services and grapple with how much to limit the recording and even filming of their lectures. And as it grows easier to publish online and as more and more people gain ready access to the Web, the issue seems likely to only grow."

"Lurking in the background, McSherry argues, is also the issue of intellectual control. Academics today are increasingly itinerant - tenure is harder to come by, and even tenured scholars are more likely to switch institutions than in the past. And protecting intellectual assets like lectures - both from the university and from students - takes on a heightened importance. Part of what the university hires a professor for is his lectures, material that has often been honed over years of delivery, feedback, editing, and research."; see McSherry (2001) for further discussion.

In many ways, this situation is identical to the intellectual property issue in preparing online course curriculum. How much of a stretch would it be to presume that faculty reaction in both cases could be similar – a very *careful* handling of proprietary curriculum materials?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Whether or not the sinister effect on online courses due to omitted proprietary materials is present is an empirical issue. Future research could address this issue via a confidential faculty survey – online faculty could be asked directly if they release all proprietary teaching materials to the online course pack. Another approach to study the potential magnitude of this financial disincentive problem would be to establish if the effect could be present in many potential online courses or relatively few. For example, the effect would likely be virtually non-existent in an elementary mathematics course in which protocols are well established and best practices have not changed in centuries. On the other hand, in an entrepreneurial studies course, modes of analysis are fluid so that proprietary judgments and experiences are at a premium, and to omit such materials from an online course would be devastating.

A promising area for further research could center on setting compensation policies for online faculty so as to incent those faculty to release proprietary materials. Extant research typically centers on compensation approaches to address the additional workload to physically prepare and deliver the online class, but does not directly address the disincentive associated with the proprietary teaching materials; see, for example, Schifter (2000) and Wolcott (1977).

Further, when faculty handbooks discuss faculty teaching materials, the emphasis is typically on the legal ownership of the materials, not an incentive system to encourage online faculty to release the materials. Is it possible that a similar "problem" has been "solved" in a different setting? For example, when MDs and other researchers join the faculty/staff of a teaching hospital, they typically execute a contract with the hospital outlining the sharing rules for any invention that the MD may develop during the life of the contract. The contract anticipates any future invention, even if the MD and/or the hospital are not aware of what such an invention may be when the contract is signed. The contract addresses compensation, accepting sponsored research funding, academic publishing of research results, licensing and 3rd party use of the invention – issues that correspond directly to faculty concerns regarding proprietary curriculum materials. Further, the terms are set up so as to incent the MD to actively pursue research that could lead to commercially viable inventions. The analogy here, of course, is that proprietary teaching materials in the case of online faculty are isomorphic to medical inventions. A future research project will survey provisions in these medical contracts to determine what configuration of contract provisions would be most appropriate for online faculty contracts.

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