

How the faculty of distance education changes

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Abstract

How do faculty change as a result of teaching a distance learning course? What new knowledge, skills, and attitudes do they develop as a result of their experience? How does work in distance education affect their teaching, service, and scholarship?

This study looks at how six professors in an Arizona business school changed as a result of teaching via distance. All taught in an international MBA program delivered jointly by Thunderbird, The Garvin School of International Management and ITESM, the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores of Monterrey, Mexico.

Introduction

How does teaching via distance change faculty? What new knowledge, skills, and attitudes do they gain from the experience? How does it affect their classroom teaching, service and scholarship?

This study examines the cases of six professors who teach at Thunderbird, The Garvin School of International Management, a graduate business school that was ranked number one in international business education by U.S. News and World Report. All taught in the Global MBA program jointly delivered to Latin American executives by Thunderbird, The Garvin School of International Management and ITESM, the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores of Monterrey, Mexico.

In its first year of operation, the Global MBA program had 115 students at four locations in Mexico. The majority were Mexican executives employed at about 90 firms. Half of the Global MBA courses were taught by Thunderbird faculty located in Glendale, AZ, while the other half were taught by ITESM professors in Monterrey, Mexico. Groups of students met at locations in Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara on Fridays and Saturdays for seven sessions to receive the class broadcasts via satellite. Two way interactive video connected students in Monterrey with the other sites and Glendale, AZ. The “invisible” students at the other sites could watch the professor and the lead class in Monterrey, and communicate with them via the intranet. Other class activities were conducted asynchronously over the intranet, in discussion groups, chatrooms, and via e-mail. Classes met on Friday or Saturday for seven sessions (Grosse 2001a; Grosse 2001b). Today the Global MBA program has over 150 students at nine sites in Mexico and Peru. For more information on how U.S. faculty members perceive online courses taught to Mexican students at the university, see Feinberg and Vinaja (2002).

Methodology

The information for this study came from interviews with six Thunderbird faculty members who taught in the Global MBA degree program. Two full professors, three associate professors, and an assistant professor participated in the interviews. Half of these had tenure. They taught the following courses in the distance learning program.

Advanced Managerial Finance
 Business Communication
 International Finance and Trade
 International Negotiation and Bargaining
 International Political Economy
 Managerial Accounting and Profit Planning

The survey instrument appears in Figure 1. Interviews took place in the faculty member's office, and lasted from 60-90 minutes.

Interview Questions

1. What is your title?
2. Are you tenured?
3. What courses do you teach at Thunderbird? In GLOBAL MBA?
4. When did you teach your first distance learning course? What course? What technology did you use? What other distance learning courses have you taught?
5. Did you have to be persuaded to teach in GLOBAL MBA? Why did you agree?
6. What was your attitude toward distance learning when you started teaching? Now?
7. What major differences did you find between teaching in your regular classroom and in the distance classroom?
8. What adjustments did you have to make in your teaching?
9. What carries over from your distance learning work over into your regular classroom?
10. What new knowledge, skills, and attitudes did you develop as a result of your experience?
11. What's the most important thing(s) you've learned from teaching in Global MBA? What do you learn each time you teach Global MBA?
12. Why do you continue teaching in the program?
13. How has your role as a faculty member at Thunderbird changed?
14. How does Thunderbird view your teaching in the Global MBA program?
15. What short and long-term rewards did you receive?
16. What impact has your work in distance learning had on your teaching, service, and scholarship?
17. How has your professional life changed since you first taught via ALN?
18. What were the greatest challenges you faced?
19. What do you find most interesting about the experience?
20. Now which do you prefer-teaching via ALN or face-to-face in the traditional classroom?

Figure 1 Interview Questions

Differences between traditional teaching and distance education

The six faculty identified the following differences between teaching in a traditional classroom and via distance.

Added complexity with distance
 Additional planning needed for distance
 Slower pace of instruction in distance
 Reduced flexibility due to teaching on tv



Lack of feedback from one-way satellite tv
 Reduced interaction on tv instruction
 Technology's capabilities to reach students at a distance
 Online discussion groups added to learning
 Benefits of asynchronous aspects aided instruction

Adjustments in teaching

Clearly, teachers must make adjustments in their methods when using asynchronous instructional networks and other technologies. As Dillon (1989) found, “instructional telecommunications require changes in familiar teaching patterns and practices as faculty find they often must relinquish a degree of control over the teaching-learning process.” Rockwell, Shauer et al (2000) also recognized that “instructors need to transform their teaching style, i.e. method, to better suit the new milieu.”

In this study, the faculty commented on how they had to adjust their teaching methods for distance learning. For example, they realized they had to be more entertaining and theatrical on satellite TV. One person observed, “In order to engage student interest, you’ve got to do things you don’t normally do. It’s a very visual medium. That’s the area I have to work on most, being an extrovert, an entertainer on camera.” Back in the traditional classroom, he applied what he had learned about expressive body language in the satellite TV and used more facial expressions and hand gestures to liven up his face-to-face classes.

In their distance classes, the faculty enjoyed using chat and online discussion groups to communicate with their students. Online discussion groups were a useful forum for student questions and exchange of ideas. Almost all of the faculty considered the online discussion groups to be a positive feature of distance learning that allowed them to have longer, more focused discussions than in the regular classroom. In the discussion groups, students had time to think, read each other’s comments, and then review their own answer before posting it. The faculty felt that this made for better quality discussions. The asynchronous aspect of the distance learning courses helped faculty to get to know their students better, as they used e-mail more for communication. Instructors also got more information about how students were doing, and a better learning result.

One of the greatest adjustments facing distance faculty is the time needed to prepare and teach a distance class. It took the Thunderbird faculty more time to learn to use the different technologies, breakout groups, and online assignments. One professor monitored six online discussions and read 300 postings. Global MBA faculty also managed onsite facilitators as part of their duties. For one professor this involved fully scripting the facilitators’ time with the students, planning onsite discussion, assignments, and mini-tests, and providing guidelines for grading assignments. These were additional activities that he didn’t have to do for his regular class.

Research by White and Myers (2001) also found that teachers using WebCT required significant time to learn the program, adapt materials, upload course data, and train students. Worry about the additional preparation time ranked as the issue of greatest concern for the teachers. A survey of National Education Association (NEA) members (Abacus Associates, 2001) showed that half (53%) of distance learning faculty spent more hours per week preparing and delivering the distance course than for a similar traditional class. Just 22% spent fewer hours on their distance class. Another survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (2001) found that distance learning instructors generally believed that course preparation took anywhere from 66% to 500% longer than similar preparation for a traditional class.

In the distance class, faculty developed more professional PowerPoint slides and videoclips because they had technical assistance and the need to have them ready two weeks before class. Some recycled the higher quality slides and videoclips in their on-campus classes.

The Sloan Consortium Report (Lorenzo and Moore, 2002) acknowledged that online faculty carry over some benefits of online instruction to the regular classroom. In the present study, the professors identified aspects of the distance education experience that transferred over to their regular classroom

which included better PowerPoint slides, online discussion groups, posting of student work, and increased confidence from teaching the Global MBA students.

Adjustments in course design and testing

Most faculty members used basically the same course outline and content in their Global MBA and traditional classes, with minor adjustments to fit the format of the distance class. One faculty member did not see much difference in the curriculum except for the deliberateness and slowness that the format of the distance education class required. His problem sets and assignments were virtually unchanged.

Another professor used the distance class to break out of the tightly structured format of the course he taught on-campus, where all professors had to follow the same syllabus and give identical final exams. He welcomed the freedom of the Global MBA course structure, with seven weekend classes delivered via satellite, and a myriad of asynchronous ways to interact with students.

In terms of content, one instructor gained valuable stories and examples from the Global MBA students' negotiation experiences that she used later in her traditional classroom to illustrate key points and cases. Most agreed that nothing was different about the testing in the distance learning class. However, one found that electronic correction of papers was challenging. Another wished for online testing rather than mailing in the tests from Mexico to Arizona.

Developing new knowledge, skills, and attitudes

For the most part, faculty gained new knowledge from their distance learning experience. Four developed a better understanding of how distance learning and various technologies worked, while three learned more about Mexico, its people, business environment, and culture.

Faculty also honed their skills in teaching via satellite TV, using online discussion groups, e-mail, PowerPoint slides, and building a virtual community. One learned how to handle large volumes of e-mail as a result of the course. Several became more comfortable in front of the camera. They considered learning to teach on television in a time-controlled environment to be a valuable skill. Others valued the experience of learning how to direct online discussion.

Two faculty members believed that they didn't gain any new skills. One reported that nothing of his teaching style was different, only cosmetics had changed as a result of distance education. The other used pre-existing skills, and added nothing new.

Changes in attitude

Five out of the six people radically changed their attitudes toward distance learning after teaching in the Global MBA program. This reinforced findings by Beaudoin (2002) of faculty attitudes after a transition to distance education. In the present study, only one instructor still had serious reservations about class size (over 150) and the number of campuses (nine) involved. The individual was also disappointed in how little the distance learning experience counted toward tenure and promotion.

One faculty member was initially skeptical about what could be achieved via distance learning, but his experience changed his attitude. He was surprised at how much his Mexican distance students had learned. "In eleven years of teaching, I'd taught at top five business schools like Dartmouth. I looked at the final exams and couldn't believe what I saw. They were the best in all my years of teaching."

Another professor remarked, "I've developed great respect for distance learning, Thunderbird's IT team, and the Mexican executives." Another changed his opinion about what's possible in distance education. As a result of his Global MBA experience, he was impressed with the ability of technology to deliver learning value and realized that "we need not have synchronicity in distance and time to be effective teachers."

One professor still had mixed feelings about the use of technology for instructional delivery. Although impressed with the students, she had a problem with their being too comfortable at times in the satellite TV classes and how some paid their bills, used the phone, and wrote messages during class.

While one of the instructors had a very positive attitude toward distance education, he still had lingering concerns about workload and compensation issues. In his experience, working with the facilitators was another problem. When they were good, the system worked well. However, when they were bad, he found that the system became a nightmare.

Another instructor commented, "I'm really sold on distance learning. You can do quality teaching and get high-level material across. At first I thought it was for very low-level material. My idea of distance learning was someone sits at the terminal answering multiple-choice questions, going from module to module. I didn't realize you could teach thinking skills."

One person explained, "I'm definitely more positive toward distance education now. I used to think it was talking heads, now it's interactive video. I'm a fan of that and wouldn't have been before. I incorporate the asynchronous part in my regular class."

Most important lessons learned

Several instructors identified the most important thing that they learned from their distance education experience. For one, it was "that I could do it. Teach in a very challenging situation, and get the highest evaluations of the year from demanding executives, working with imperfect technology." The most important lesson for another was seeing that distance learning could be effective with considerable effort.

Two professors liked the fact that they always learned new things every time they taught in Global MBA. One discovered that the executives had more international experience than originally thought, and brought good international examples to class. Another instructor found the development of good organizational skills (necessary to teach the class) to be the most important lesson learned.

Why faculty continue teaching via distance

The faculty surveyed had a variety of reasons why they continued in the distance learning program. One cited the flexibility of the Global MBA class schedule as a primary motivator. He liked the freedom of teaching class on seven weekends, and the asynchronous nature of the rest of the course. Another liked the flexibility of not having to be on-campus during the week. One professor enjoyed the variety that the distance learning course gave to his normal teaching load.

A recent survey by the American Federation of Teachers (2001) asked members who had taught distance education if they would teach a distance learning course again. A significant majority, 169 out of 200 respondents, said that they would teach via distance again. Only 31 respondents said that they would not. The Thunderbird cases provide further evidence of the positive attitudes that many faculty develop toward distance learning after the experience.

Institution's view of distance faculty

The faculty had different opinions about how Thunderbird valued their participation in the distance education program. One felt that the institution viewed teaching in Global MBA very positively. For another, it was between neutral and plus, but definitely not negative. One professor felt that distance learning was viewed the same way as teaching any other class, neither bad nor good. Overall, another instructor felt that people at Thunderbird valued the regular program more. One person believed that her distance teaching didn't count at all toward promotion and tenure.

Another faculty member believed that his success in the Global MBA meant something to the school and that colleagues and administrators paid more attention to the contribution. With a new compensation package in effect, one professor believed that the university demonstrated its desire to attract and keep the best faculty teaching in the Global MBA.

Faculty rewards

Faculty rewards and recognition play an important role in faculty satisfaction with distance learning. According to Melody Thompson of Penn State University, satisfaction "results when those teaching in

online programs receive the personal rewards, institutional support and professional recognition they need to feel positive about what they do and to do their jobs well” (Educational Pathways 2002). A 1998 report by the National Center for Education Statistics found similar satisfaction levels among distance education teachers and their colleagues who teach on-campus, even though the online faculty had larger workloads. A SUNY study also found that major factors affecting faculty satisfaction involved teaching a more diverse student body and access to more opportunities for research, recognition, collegiality and professional development (Moore 2002).

All six of the Thunderbird instructors received short and long-term rewards from participating in the Global MBA program. Short-term rewards consisted of recognition and praise from Thunderbird’s president, the Global MBA director, and program administrators in Mexico. Each professor received one course release for the first distance class preparation. In addition, Global MBA performance was factored into a faculty member’s annual review. One person received recognition in a three-year review for an outstanding contribution to the school with his successful teaching in the Global MBA program. One professor won a teaching award for outstanding professor, and consequently received greater visibility in the Thunderbird community. In terms of financial reward, teaching a Global MBA course counted the equivalent of 1.5 courses with class size of around 150 people.

With respect to long-term rewards, several faculty members recognized the benefits of gaining technical expertise and being on the cutting edge of new technologies. Others remarked that the distance learning experience had increased their self- confidence. Others reported that they gained increased self-confidence from teaching in the Global MBA. “If I can teach executives in another country at a distance successfully, I can do anything,” one said.

Impact on service

Did the distance learning experience have an impact on the faculty’s service and scholarship? Teaching in the Global MBA had an effect on half of the participating faculty members’ service and/or scholarship at Thunderbird. Three faculty members added to their service record as a result. One served as chair of the Distance Learning Education Committee for TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), and became a member of the TESOL Technology Committee. Another faculty member became Assistant Director of the Global MBA. A third increased her service on technology-related committees at Thunderbird.

Impact on scholarship

Three faculty members reported that teaching in Global MBA helped their scholarship. One professor published three book chapters and three articles related to the distance education experience in Global MBA. As a result of teaching the Mexican executives in the distance program, another instructor has developed excellent resources and contacts for his research in Mexico. Invaluable to present and future research efforts, the professor now has hundreds of former students in Mexico, where good contacts make a difference in accessing information and people. A third faculty member has co-written two case studies on Citibank Mexico at the request of the President of Citibank Mexico, a member of the Global MBA governing board.

Major challenges

Gerson (2000) identified five faculty concerns that created barriers to successful online education at Johnson County Community College: 1) insufficient online technical support; 2) insufficient support for development of DL courses; 3) uncertainty regarding ownership of DL course materials; 4) uncertainty about released time and/or pay for development of online courses; and 5) uncertainty about workload issues. Faculty in the current study identified other challenges that they had to overcome.

Juggling all the different course components presented a major challenge to one professor. Another was challenged by having to remember to look into the camera for the entire satellite TV class. This professor also learned how to take a straight lecture and convert it into something more visual for the television

medium. Still another's greatest challenge was learning to keep the students interested for the long hours of the satellite class. He succeeded by varying the class program with videos, and using body language more effectively.

The biggest challenge for one instructor was organizing himself to teach via distance. Since he liked to be free-flowing in class, the satellite TV classroom presented special challenges. Everything had to be orderly on television, in contrast to the more impromptu traditional classroom. He compared the difference between the distance and regular classrooms with going to the Coast Guard Academy (where everything is strictly regulated) versus attending Princeton (where things flow freely).

Teaching preference

Given a choice, would the Thunderbird faculty choose distance learning or face-to-face traditional instruction? To the question one responded, "live, if I had to make a choice. I like to see the gleam in the student's eye. I like to see the body language!" Another cited a preference for face-to-face instruction with its non-verbals. In all, four faculty preferred face-to-face traditional instruction to the distance classroom.

One person preferred face to face because it let him see the reactions of the students, feel their energy, and receive immediate gratification. He explained, "In distance learning you're throwing this [instruction] out in a void. You don't know the reaction. So I didn't know how I did." He found out a year later, when he received the outstanding faculty award for the GLOBAL MBA program.

In Dillon's 1989 study, faculty considered "lack of contact with students" as the factor that most adversely affected instructional quality and personal satisfaction. Bower (2001) also considered personal interaction with students to be "one of the most gratifying aspects of teaching. An opportunity to see the spark of understanding begin to glow in the eyes, to see confidence build, these are the 'big payoffs' of teaching for many instructors. The technology interface of distance learning often denies them this opportunity."

One Thunderbird instructor didn't have a preference, and recognized that both types of classes had their strengths and weaknesses. Still another faculty member replied, "I'm happy with both of them."

Conclusions

In conclusion, the six cases of the Thunderbird faculty show that significant change occurred in their professional lives in the aftermath of teaching in distance education. They grew in many ways and developed new knowledge, skills and attitudes that they believed would serve them well in their careers. They were able to transfer knowledge and skills from the distance learning experience to their traditional classrooms. They gained organizational expertise, improved PowerPoint slides, and strengthened teaching and presentation skills. They developed greater respect for the technical expertise and business savvy of their Mexican students, and made important new contacts in the process.

Through the Thunderbird experience, they expanded their beliefs about how people learn, and what the limits are and are not. In the process, their own self-confidence as teachers grew. In terms of institutional rewards and recognition, the efforts paid off for most of the faculty, although not always in the ways they expected.

For these six faculty at Thunderbird, The Garvin School of International Management, working in distance education brought about learning, professional growth, and changes.

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