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PAGES: 110-114

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/156478>

Dual mode academics: A comparison of conventional and distance education experiences

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INTRODUCTION

The recent surge in programme offerings at the postsecondary level has resulted in attention being paid to comparisons between the experiences of those academics who have carried out their roles in conventional environments and of those academics who are faculty members in distance education institutions (e.g., Athabasca University). There are those who argue that the two milieus differ significantly with respect to carrying out the typical roles and responsibilities of academics while the opposing view is that any disparities are minor and can be accommodated by straightforward adaptive strategies. Much of the debate about this issue has surfaced as a result of many universities and colleges moving to a dual-mode model and which has brought to the forefront the impact that this phenomenon has and will have on the professional lives of their academics.

One way to shed some light on the effect of this recent development is to seek out the experiences of those academics and scholars who have engaged themselves in both environments. Their experiences would constitute at least a starting point for further discussion. In this paper, a report of a phenomenological investigation into this phenomenon is presented. Four academics with numerous years of experience in both settings were asked to reflect on their individual experiences with the goal of discerning a set of common observations and assessments about their experiences.

A quick perusal of the literature reveals a number of reports that have focused attention on the pressures that post-secondary institutions are being subjected to as a result of the sharply increasing role that distance education is playing in the fulfillment of their mandates (Duderstadt, 1999; Olcott et al., 2000; Spector et al., 2001). The common theme that these authors note is how postsecondary institutions are responding in order to provide an alternative to the traditional ways by which they have offered their programs. Much of this pressure has resulted from advances in communications technologies and, although this form of an alternative delivery of programs is by no means new, its presence has been making greater inroads into post-secondary education in dramatic fashion over the last decade. The challenge that has been put forward is how this non-traditional form of instruction will be integrated into the larger institutional framework. One aspect that requires scrutiny is the effect that the on-going merging of these two organizational frameworks to provide post-secondary instruction will have on the professional lives of academics. As Olcott (2000) states:

"In this new environment with information as the premium currency, the traditional norms of the academy clearly are being challenged . . . the problem, however, is that many faculty members and administrators, who generally come from the academic ranks, do not want to embrace any fundamental changes that challenge the status quo." (p. 263)

Additionally, in the last few years, a number of authors have begun to address the ramifications of this move by focusing specifically on the traditional factors of instruction,

institutional service and professional development. To a large extent, the focus in these reports has been on the transitional concerns that are faced by those academics who are moving or have moved from the traditional classroom to online instruction. Instructionally, the redefinition of the academic's role has been addressed and an analysis of the competencies that are necessary for successful on-line instruction has been put proffered (Cyrs, 1997; Goodyear et al., 2001). A broader perspective has also been introduced that reflects an emergence of what is described as the "virtual professor" (Jones & Schieman, 1996; Jones, 2004a), an academic who is a full-time faculty member with a postsecondary institution but who not physically tied to a building or office. The discussion in these papers attempted to anticipate the type and degree of restructuring of the academic's role in distance education environments (dual/single mode) from the viewpoint of fiscal realities, of the loyalty factor for the academic's home institution and of the effect on all aspects of faculty professional development given that the individuals may reside anywhere in the world.

To acquire a more fine-grained analysis of these issues, a qualitative study to investigate the experiences of experienced academics who have held full-time positions at both conventional and single-mode distance education post secondary institutions on the three factors of instruction, institutional service, and professional development was carried out.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological methodology to address the research questions. Four experienced academics who met the criterion of significant service (five years or more) in each type of environment (conventional, distance education[single/dual mode]) were invited to participate. A description of relevant professional characteristics and experience of the participants is provided below:

Table 1
Characteristics of participants

Participant	Gender	Area of expertise	Level	Total years of experience	Years of experience—conventional institution	Years of experience - distance education institution [dual mode/single mode]
1	Male	Educational technology	University	35	26	3/6
2	Male	Counseling psychology	Community college	16	5	8/3
3	Female	Cognitive psychology	University	18	12	0/6
4	Female	Educational administration	University	13	7	1/5

A long interview protocol was the protocol to elicit responses from the participants. Not surprisingly, a group of participants with such comprehensive experience resulted in salient and substantive views and, as the participants were prompted to try to "bracket" their experiences and recollections, it was not an exceedingly burdensome task for them to do so and, on few occasions, was extensive probing required to narrow their comments and observations.

RESULTS

Analyses of the interview transcriptions revealed a rather surprising trend. Specifically, all 4 participants opined that their experiences in a conventional post-secondary setting were rather facilely assessed because of the long-established reference points and structures.

"When I joined the faculty at the University, it became apparent very early on what prevailing scholarly values were fostered and how one might work within the existing structures to act on those values. This covered the entire gamut of professorial roles and responsibilities and the decision making called the more for strategies on how to access to resources than anything else."
(Participant 3)

"The culture, if one wished to use that term, was already fully developed and the task was less to discover how to operate and more how to make the necessary contacts to take an active role." (Participant 1)

On the other hand, when reflecting on their academic efforts in a distance education milieu, several observations and comments suggested that on many factors, including the three of interest in this study, both a number of certainties and ambiguities were cited.

"What has unsettled me – well, maybe more than unsettled—since taking the full – time position at this distance education institution has been a lack of adaptation on the part of the support structures—administrative, financial, even telecommunications support—to fashion themselves in such a way as to meet the needs of virtual faculty. For example, if I wish to set up the virtual meeting on the Internet for a group of 4 individuals – let's say a dissertation oral defense – the preliminary steps are straightforward. I go to a services web page, select the proper options and fill in the necessary information. However, things break down if there is a technical problem during the conference in that there are no well-delineated procedures for handling these types of situations. On campus, the AV people are right there to help you with glitches like this but at a distance delivery institution, that same level of support isn't necessarily there and it can seriously undermine the quality of the program." (Participant 2)

With respect to the institutional service factor, 3 of the 4 participants stated that their impression was that they were not being sought out or nominated for membership on certain committees for reasons other than their experience and seniority. For all four, their role as a virtual professor was interpreted to be a debilitating factor because they were not "visible" in that they were not interacting face-to-face on a daily basis with their colleagues and, in particular, with senior administrators who were establishing those committees.

"I happen to live in a time zone that is less amenable to synchronous meetings. For example, it is 11 o'clock in the evening here when it is 2 p.m. at the home institution. I'm quite sure that I have been passed over for important committees because my availability is in question. And I don't like that. Of course, this would not have been a problem at my previous regular institution." (Participant 1)

The sample quotations indicate that there exists some trepidation and anxiety about how roles and responsibilities are carried out when functioning within the virtual university or college setting. Table 1 below contains a summary of how the participants assessed their ability to fulfill their role as academics in both settings:

Table 2
Summary of responses

	Conventional institution	Distance education institution
Institutional service	Well-structured Easily navigated	Not clearly defined
Instruction	Highly systematized Resource rich	Clear purpose but more ad hoc decision-making Entry-level competencies of learners
Professional development	Much control Well-trodden paths	Concern for resources Concern for institutional support

The distillation of the original observations into themes suggests that the factor of professional development is the one that is of most concern to the distance education faculty. This shouldn't be surprising as all faculty need strong support from their institutions to carry a research, to publish and to promulgate their findings at conferences. At the same time, the obstacles to maintaining a sense of collegiality was problematic because of the virtual nature of the academic's status which can deleteriously impact on the sharing and generation of ideas for everything from instructional resources and strategies to musing on an idea for research to the writing of proposals for grants. Indeed, a theme that is common in the literature for distance education students –that is, alienation – was also a topic that was raised but, in this instance, it was the sense of this disconnectedness or alienation for the virtual professor.

CONCLUSION

It appears from these experiences and reflective observations that the institutions that offer both a single-mode and a dual mode alternative track to post-secondary distance education should consider a reassessment and, more than likely, a restructuring of the role of the distance education professoriate (Jones, 2004b). Also, it is clear that many of the changes that are required are substantive but could be implemented if the governing bodies at the institutions generate an expanded version of the institutional mission statement and address how the institution will confront and hopefully mitigate the anxiety about the three factors in question for those academics who have opted to pursue their scholarly goals via a non-traditional path.

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