Instructor Experiences in Traditional, Online, and Hybrid Continuing Education Courses

A Case Study

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About the Author

Dr. Leah Flores Goerke is the director of the Commanders' Professional Development School and course director for the USAF Senior Materiel Leader Course at the Ira C. Eaker Center for Professional Development, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

Dr. Goerke served 20 years as an Air Force officer, educator, engineer, and program manager with 11 years of engineering and acquisition program management experience to include program management activities in three major weapon system program offices. Duties included the application of policies, practices, regulations, and laws concerning acquisition management and sustainment processes and initiatives. Her experiences ranged from programing and budgeting responsibilities in major weapon system programs, to conducting nuclear airblast simulation analyses in a laboratory environment. She has served the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Department of Defense (DOD), and Air Force organizations that govern, interface with, and influence life cycle management of national and DOD assets.

Dr. Goerke has 17 years of military and civilian experience as an educator, serving as an Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corps instructor, Air Command and Staff College instructor, and Eaker Center instructor. As a traditional and online instructor, she taught various subjects ranging from national security to leadership development. As the director for the Commanders' Professional Development School she is responsible for orchestrating all activities for developing and executing precommand education programs for wing commanders and vice commanders, group commanders, and senior materiel leaders.

Abstract

Instructors of military continuing education courses transitioned two traditional classroom leadership courses to fully online and hybrid formats that combine online and face-to-face instruction. No evaluation of instructor experiences during the transition was conducted using research-based practices. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine instructor experiences during the course transitions using research-based practices. This study was grounded in Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson's adult learning theory and Terry Anderson's and Gilly Salmon's online learning theories. Data from interviews with four instructors who taught the courses were examined using axial coding and thematic analysis. Three emergent themes were found that spanned all of the categories examined and the responses of all instructor participants. The first emergent theme pertained to the lengthy time it took to design online and hybrid versions of the traditional courses. The second emergent theme addressed the challenging task of creating a comparable level of interaction with students in an online setting. The lack of sufficient professional development emerged as a third theme. The findings of this study would suggest traditional courses could be transitioned from traditional to online and hybrid delivery with particular attention to allowing sufficient time for course redesign, incorporating interactive online teaching strategies, and providing robust professional development for new online instructors. This endeavor may contribute to positive social change by equipping online instructors to provide more learning opportunities for the military and civilians serving abroad.

Introduction

Because of declining budgets and reduced personnel resources, senior military officials are encouraging the use of online technologies to provide cost effective solutions for military professional development.[1] As a result, military course providers are rapidly transitioning traditional classroom courses used to online and hybrid formats that combine online and face-to-face instruction. Little comparative research has been published that addresses the viability of online delivery formats as a replacement for traditional military continuing education courses. To address this need, two military continuing education courses were examined in this study.

Consistent with the services' visions, instructors at the Military School (pseudonym), a major provider of military continuing education courses, initiated the development of online versions of two traditional courses in 2011. Course 1 (pseudonym) transitioned to a fully online course, and Course 2 (pseudonym) transitioned into a hybrid course that combined face-to-face classroom instruction with online coursework. These courses are currently a part of professional development programs for military officers and management-level civilians selected to assume midlevel leadership roles in base organizations.

From 2009 to 2011, the Military School instructors offered these courses exclusively as two-week traditional courses for male and female military and civilian personnel who were assuming midlevel management responsibilities. The students temporarily relocated to the Military School from their home military bases to complete the courses. The first week of the traditional course focused on general leadership and management topics including doctrine, leadership and management principles, and critical thinking skills and their applications. The second week included specific topics such as military personnel support, manpower and organization, operations, and civilian personnel support. The Military School offered the courses two to five times a year to classes ranging in size from 10–25 students.

Beginning in 2012, the Military School instructors piloted online and hybrid versions of these courses. In 2012, Course 1 instructors transitioned the entire two-week course to online delivery. In 2013, Course 2 instructors replaced the first week of the course with 40 hours of online coursework addressing general leadership topics. The second week of Course 2 was replaced with five days of traditional

face-to-face classroom instruction at the Military School that covered the job-specific leadership topics.

Literature Review

Online Learning Theory

Terry Anderson proposed that the use of technology to deliver courses online introduces new challenges such as online community building and virtual interaction in the absence of physical social cues.[2] Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt went so far as to state that instructors must abdicate "our tried and true techniques that may have served us well in the face-to-face classroom in favor of experimentation with new technologies and assumptions."[3] Gilly Salmon postulated that creating a sense of community online is vastly different than managing group dynamics in the face-to-face classroom.[4]

To address these challenges, Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson emphasized the importance of aligning several factors including self-direction to create successful computer-based instruction.[5] Anderson's theory of online learning focused on learner interactions with other learners, the instructor, and the content covered in the course, suggesting that successful online learning depended on at least one of these types of interactions operating at a high level.[6] In Salmon's theory, learning-centered e-moderators who emphasized collaborative learning and community building replaced content-centered instructors in the online classroom.[7]

Instructor Experiences

Recent comparative literature examining instructor experiences when teaching in a hybrid or online environment were analyzed. Five studies addressed various elements of teaching in traditional, hybrid, and online learning environments. Peggy E. Steinbronn and Eunice M. Merideth found that instructors perceived a high amount of transferability from traditional to online instructional methods that already incorporated technology to some degree to include student-to-student electronic discussions (i.e. chat forums, social media) and email communication with instructors.[8] However, they found that lectures and hands-on student activities such as practical lab work,

student presentations, and collaborative student projects used in traditional courses transferred less well to courses offered online. Laura Alonso Diaz and Florentino Blazquez Entonado found no significant difference in the perceived roles of teachers in online and traditional courses.[9] Similarly, C.E. (Betty) Cragg, Jean Dunning, and Jaqueline Ellis reported that similar interactional techniques were used by professors teaching traditional and online courses.[10]

Nanette P. Napier, Sonal Dekhane, and Stella Smith identified a number of success factors and challenges instructors experienced when transitioning courses to a hybrid delivery mode.[11] Most notably, striking the right balance between traditional and online elements was identified as both a success factor and a challenge. Similarly, Pamela Lam and Sarbari Bordia reported that instructors cited personal interactions and student support as the keys to online learning success.[12]

Method

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate hybrid and online delivery of two Military School courses after they were transitioned from traditional delivery by analyzing instructor interview data. A qualitative case study design was used to examine instructor experiences as they transitioned two traditional classroom continuing education courses to online and hybrid delivery formats. The results of this study may provide insight into more effective ways to transition courses from traditional to hybrid and online delivery. The study may also add to the sparse body of research literature addressing civilian and military continuing education, while, at the same time, offering senior military leaders, faculty, and support staff insights in a military education setting. The following research question was used to guide the study: What are the Military School instructors' experiences as they transitioned two military continuing education courses from traditional delivery to online and hybrid delivery?

Research Design

Setting and sample. Interviews were conducted with four Military School faculty members who taught the two courses under study to better

understand their experiences as they transitioned the two courses from traditional to hybrid and online delivery. Two out of the four instructor participants taught the courses prior to the transitions. The other two instructors were hired during the course transitions. All four instructors taught the courses after they transitioned to hybrid and online delivery, and were civilians employed by the military. This sample was consistent with samples from similar studies examining instructor experiences during course transitions from traditional to online and hybrid instruction.[13] Table 1 provides additional participant demographic information.

Table 1. Instructor participant demographics

Instructor	Gender	Number of years teaching	Number of years teaching online	Number of online courses taught
P1	Male	30	7	2
P2	Female	10	1	6
P3	Male	15	1	2
P4	Female	20	2	2

Protection of participant rights and role of the researcher. Protection of participant rights is imperative for any research study. Approval to conduct the research study was granted by the Department of Defense's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Military School senior leadership prior to interacting with instructor participants. Each instructor participant was provided with an interview package containing the IRB approval, cover letter, informed consent form, and interview guide. The cover letter emphasized the voluntary nature of the interviews, the anonymity of their responses, and data protection procedures. The instructor participants were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they could cease participation at any time during data collection without consequence. All four instructors signed their informed consent forms and agreed to participate.

The researcher was a course director in a department of the Military School but had no affiliation with the courses under study. Although the researcher taught both online and traditional courses at the Military School, the researcher did not teach the courses under study. The

researcher was not the supervisor of or in the management hierarchy of any of the instructors responsible for the courses under study.

Data collection. Instructor narrative data was collected using the interview protocol at the appendix. The questions were based on a questionnaire developed by Maryanne Chester who examined instructor experiences while transitioning to online instruction in a civilian post secondary education setting.[14] The interview questions were modified to capture the Military School instructors' experiences while undergoing the transition from traditional to online instruction. Three Military School instructors with doctorates reviewed the interview questions and made suggestions for improvement. These suggestions were incorporated into the interview guide as appropriate. Sixty minute interviews were scheduled and conducted with each instructor participant outside of the instructors' work centers, but convenient to minimize disruption to the instructor participants' schedules. At the beginning of each interview, permission was given from each instructor participant to record the interview as back up to the written notes taken during the course of these conversations. Each taped interview was transcribed within 24 hours of the interview. The tape recorder during the second interview malfunctioned. However, sufficient notes were taken during the interview to transcribe the participant's responses.

Data analysis methods. Transcribed interview data was examined using axial coding methods.[15] Codes were assigned to each relevant interview response and subsequently grouped into categories. As different codes and categories emerged, each transcript was reviewed iteratively until a common set of categories was determined.

To determine validity and trustworthiness of qualitative data, Marguerite G. Lodico, Dean T. Spaulding, and Katherine H. Voegtle recommended conducting a peer review of the coded data sets and having participants check their transcripts for accuracy.[16] Both approaches were used in this study. A Military School faculty member with a doctorate with expertise and experience in using qualitative research methods completed a peer review of the coded instructor

participant interview transcripts. This faculty member was not affiliated with the courses under examination and was not in the supervisory or management chain of the interviewed instructors. With the permission of the instructor participants, the coded transcripts were provided to the peer reviewer with no identifying data. No additional changes to the interview guide were recommended by the peer reviewer.

A copy of each interview transcript was provided to the individual instructor participants to have them check the accuracy of their transcript. Participant 3 made minor grammatical edits and provided additional detail to the transcription of the interview for interview questions 2, 3, 5, and 9. The revised transcript was used in the qualitative analysis of this study. Participants 1, 2, and 4 made no changes to their transcripts.

Results

Sharan B. Merriam's axial coding method was used to examine the instructor interview transcripts.[17] The data set was iteratively reviewed and relevant responses were coded. Categories emerged as coded data coalesced into common content areas. Responses shared by two or more of the four instructor participants were included in the analysis. Categories were noted and tied to relevant research literature.

Challenges

Instructors identified acclimating to online technology, establishing instructor-student interaction, and redesigning the content as challenges that had to be addressed when they transitioned to teaching online. Instructor participants were also asked how they addressed the challenges. A sample of instructor participant responses to question 2 in the interview guide at the appendix are shown in table 2. Responses to other interview questions were considered if the instructor participant identified an experience as a challenge.

Table 2. Instructor challenges

Category	Sample responses
Technology	Initially it was (me and the students) getting used to technology (P1). Having the (technology) orientation sessions (P1). The instructor can work the facilitation and interacting with the students and the producer worked problems with one student or a couple of students that were having challenges (P1). Making sure there were instructions online if (students) are having computer issues (P2). Not being able to see the students with the technology that we have (P3). Technology is great when it works, but when it fails having a backup is a challenge (P3).
Interaction	Getting students engaged (P1, P3). Try to engage the students at least every 3–5 minutes (in a webinar) with some sort of activity (P1). Keeping it more of a facilitation than instruction (P1). You have defined a new way, approach of engaging students (P2). We had to come up with unique icebreakers to get people talking (P2).
Course design	Cutting down the amount of material that you would typically teach in a resident classroom (P1). We had to organize it well (P1). Making sure that the areas that needed to be covered . . . was friendly . . . for the students to interact and move through the curriculum (P2). Translating and communicating what you actually want the students to do . . . that can be a challenge (P2).

Comments about the need to overcome technology challenges were prominent in this study, and supported recent qualitative research investigating the transition to online instruction. Kari Chiasson, Katherine Terras, and Kathy Smart found that instructors spent a significant amount of time learning how to use the online instructional technologies while transitioning their traditional courses to online instruction.[18] Greg Jones et al. reported doctoral students initially having difficulties with the online technologies involved.[19] In Napier, Dekhane and Smith's study, instructors noted students taking an undergraduate computer course had low computer skill levels, and concerns about using the online software.[20]

Three out of four instructor participants found interaction with their students as challenging during the course transitions. Their comments were consistent with qualitative research studies investigating the transition to online instruction in other venues. Matthew J. Koehler et al. found it challenging to establish comparable levels of online student interaction with instructors and other students.[21] In Napier, Dekhane and Smith's study, instructors identified interaction with their students as challenging.[22] In contrast, Diaz and Entonado

reported more interaction between instructors and their students in an online version of an education class than the face-to-face version.[23]

Designing a course that establishes clear expectations and instructions for the online coursework was challenging for these instructor participants. Similar issues were found in recent research. In Chiasson, Terras, and Smart's study, instructors transitioning a computer course to online instruction found challenges when establishing online assignment expectations and due dates.[24] Jones et al. reported instructors having difficulties while transitioning a doctorate program to hybrid delivery due to miscommunication with their students on expectations and details.[25]

Course Planning and Preparation

Categories of course material preparation, teaching strategies, and professional development were prevalent among the instructor participants when they were asked what they did to plan and prepare for online or hybrid course instruction. A sample of instructor participant responses to question 3 in the interview guide at the appendix are shown in table 3. Responses to other interview questions were considered if the instructor participant identified an experience pertaining to a change in course planning and preparation.

Table 3. Course planning

Catergory	Sample responses
Course design	It is a virtual classroom. You've got to have a convert, plan (and have) everything set up so as you go through the actual teaching that it flows seamlessly (P1). The quizzes, the reading material, the videos, the lessons. Every opportunity is preplanned, outlined and choreographed (P2). The most time consumed was converting the materials (P4).
Teaching strategies	Sometimes when you are in a resident course, you can go in one direction. But when you are online, it is pretty structured (P2). I find I ask a lot more open ended questions when I'm teaching (online) (P4).
Professional development	We had some faculty development (P2). One of the local universities came in and shared their lessons learned (P2). The schoolhouse hosted a course (P2). I took a course in Atlanta and read some (P3).

The category of course design was also found in other qualitative research studies comparing traditional, hybrid, and online instructor experiences. Instructors in Chiasson, Terras, and Smart's study

reported spending a significant amount of time converting traditional course material to online content.[26] Napier, Dekhane, and Smith commented on the extensive time needed to completely redesign a traditional computer course to a hybrid format.[27] Online instructors in Diaz and Entonado's study restructured courses to balance content-based lectures with online activities.[28] Instructors in Lam and Bordia's study identified instructional design as the most essential element in online course development.[29]

Shifting to new online teaching strategies, and preparing for online instruction through professional development were categories in instructor participant responses. The findings supported Chiasson, Terras, and Smart's recent research of instructors shifting their teaching strategies from lecturing to facilitating during online instruction.[30] Napier, Dekhane, and Smith stressed the importance of shifting to new interactive teaching strategies and preparing for hybrid course instruction through professional development.[31] Lam and Bordia reported instructor use of new online teaching strategies that engaged students taking these courses.[32]

Teaching Strategies

Categories of student-centered instruction and experiential learning were prevalent among the instructor participants when they were asked what teaching strategies were necessary for success in online and hybrid courses. A sample of instructor participant responses to question 7 in the interview guide at the appendix are shown in table 4. Responses to other interview questions were considered if the instructor participant identified an experience pertaining to online and hybrid teaching strategies.

Table 4. Teaching strategies

Category	Sample responses
Student-centered	It is a virtual classroom. You've got to have a convert, plan (and have) everything set up so as you go through the actual teaching that it flows seamlessly (P1). The quizzes, the reading material, the videos, the lessons. Every opportunity is preplanned, outlined and choreographed (P2). The most time consumed was converting the materials (P4).
Experiential learning	We have students take the information and use it (in their work centers) and come back (to the online classroom) and reflect on it (P1). Sometimes when you are in a resident course, you can go in one direction. But when you are online, it is pretty structured (P2). I find I ask a lot more open ended questions when I'm teaching (online) (P4).

The categories of student-centered instruction and experiential learning were also found in qualitative research studies comparing traditional, hybrid, and online instructor experiences. Instructors in Napier, Dekhane, and Smith's study based their selection of teaching strategies on methods that engaged students.[33] Lam and Bordia found that successful instructors chose instructional strategies that balanced virtual and direct student interaction.[34] Steinbronn and Merideth found online instructors used questioning and feedback teaching approaches to encourage interaction.[35]

Professional Development

Categories of self-study, external sources, and internal sources of professional development were prevalent among the instructor participants when they were asked what professional development courses did they take to help transition from traditional to online or hybrid instruction. A sample of instructor participant responses to question 8 in the interview guide at the appendix are shown in table 5. Responses to other interview questions were considered if the instructor participant identified an experience as pertinent to professional development.

Table 5. Professional development

Category	Sample responses
Self-study	I didn't take any specific courses (P1). It's just a matter of continuing to do it (and) practice (P1). Internet resources (P2). Self-study (P2). I read some (P3). My masters was online so I did a lot of talking with my instructors (P4). Just practice (P4).
External sources	We were allowed to attend . . . conferences (where) there were workshops (P1). Local university (P2). I took a course in Atlanta (P3). Blackboard came in 2010 (P4). They had some folks come in from AUM (local university) (P4).
Internal sources	I set up a course for our faculty here (P3). I teach the (Military School's) Academic Instructor Distance Learning Course (P4). (Learned from) subject matter experts at (the Military School) (P2).

The findings shown in table 5 were consistent with research addressing professional development needs for online instructors. Napier, Dekhane, and Smith's research prescribed the necessity of proper training for faculty members transitioning courses to hybrid formats.[36] Lam and Bordia detailed the need for professional development and proposed a model for training online instructors.[37]

Instructional Materials

Categories of course objectives and course design were prevalent among the instructor participants when they were asked how they developed online or hybrid instructional materials to address learning objectives from a traditional course. A sample of instructor participant responses to question 10 in the interview guide at the appendix are shown in table 6. Responses to other interview questions were considered if the instructor participant identified an experience as pertinent to the development of online and hybrid instructional materials.

Table 6. Instructional materials

Category	Sample responses
Course objectives	We used the same learning objectives. We just used different means of achieving the learning objectives (P1). The course objectives all the way down to the lesson materials had to be modified and adjusted for a different type of student engagement (P2). We really didn't modify the objectives. We just modified the way we got to those objectives (P4).
Course design	We had 9 hours (webinar time) that we had to redesign and put a course that had 40 hours into. So you had to boil it down to what was really important (and put the rest) in readings and synchronous stuff (P3). We went back and did a lot of 'what is the meat' . . . and then created readings . . . exercises or group assignments or discussion board questions to support those objectives (P4).

Instructor participants had varied perspectives on course objectives during the course transitions. P2's view was consistent with Napier, Dekhane, and Smith's finding that transitioning a traditional computer course to a hybrid format was viewed by instructors as a complete course redesign.[38] P1 and P4's views supported Chiasson, Terras, and Smart's, where instructors reported using the same course objectives during the transition of a traditional course to online instruction.[39] Instructor participants' responses pertaining to course design workload supported the results of a study by Chiasson, Terras, and Smart in which instructors reported spending a great deal of time putting course materials online.[40] Instructors in Napier, Dekhane, and Smith's study also reported spending a significant amount of time redesigning course materials for online instruction.[41] Student workload and synergizing asynchronous and synchronous

activities were of most concern in the transition of course materials to online delivery.[42]

Discussion/Conclusion

Three emergent themes were found that spanned all of the categories examined and the responses of all instructor participants. The first emergent theme pertained to course design. While transitioning their courses from traditional to online and hybrid instruction, instructor participants spent a significant amount of time converting the course material, organizing the course for intuitive navigation, and creating clear course expectations and assignment instructions. The second emergent theme addressed teaching strategies. During the transition instructor participants found creating a comparable level of interaction with their online students challenging. However, the participants overcame these challenges by incorporating student-centered teaching strategies using facilitation and questioning techniques in their online classrooms. Finally, the need for professional development emerged as a third theme. Instructor participants initially relied on self-study to prepare for online instruction and redesign of their course materials. Eventually, external sources of training were utilized and an internal instructor training course was developed to assist the instructor participants.

The scope of this research study was limited to two courses. There were four other Military School courses that transitioned from traditional to hybrid or online instructional formats in the same time-frame; however, the tow courses under examination provided the largest sample. This delimitation was intended to minimize the impact of potential extraneous variables by keeping the courses within the same department of the Military School. Extending the study to the other four courses would introduce different course content and involve different sets of instructors.

This research study focused on the analyses of two courses in one Military School department. Future research is needed across other Military School departments and courses to build research-based best practices on using various course delivery modes. Specifically, single methodology and mixed methodology studies can be conducted that focus on quantitative evaluations of student satisfaction ratings

and qualitative analysis of instructor experiences for all Military School courses transitioning to hybrid and online delivery.

Without access to continuing education courses at the Military School, military and civilians serving abroad might find it more difficult to keep pace with professional development, thereby impacting readiness and ultimately national security. Budget cuts and personnel shortages are simultaneously limiting the ability for military members and civilians to travel to the Military School to take traditional continuing education courses. Consequently, the Military School is turning to hybrid and online delivery to offer courses to military members and civilians. The study findings suggest traditional may be successfully transitioned to online and hybrid delivery modes when there is particular attention given to providing adequate time to redesign courses, incorporating interactive student-centered teaching approaches, and providing robust instructor professional development programs for new online instructors. Successful transitions to online and hybrid learing opportunities may allow military members and civilians to continue their professional development despite budget cuts and resource shortfalls.

Appendix: Interview Questions

[Interview questions 1–9 developed using the interview guide from "Challenges Faced by Instructor Who Transitioned to Postsecondary Online Education" by Maryanne Chester.][43]

1. How long have you been teaching? How long have you taught online and/or hybrid courses? How many online and/or hybrid courses do you teach currently?

2. When you transitioned into teaching online and/or hybrid courses, what challenges did you experience? What factors contributed to those challenges? How did you address those challenges?

3. How did you change your course planning when the decision was made to transition your course to an online or hybrid format? How did your preparation and teaching change during and after your first online or hybrid course?

4. What are the benefits of teaching an online course? What are the benefits of teaching a hybrid course? What are the benefits of teaching a traditional course?

5. What are the limitations of teaching an online course? What are the limitations of teaching a hybrid course? What are the limitations of teaching a traditional course?

6. What do you think differentiates teaching an online course from teaching a traditional classroom course in terms of teaching strategies and skills? What do you think differentiates teaching a hybrid course from teaching a traditional classroom course in terms of teaching strategies and skills? What do you think differentiates teaching a hybrid course from teaching a fully online course in terms of teaching strategies and skills?

7. What types of teaching strategies and skills are necessary for instructors teaching online and hybrid courses to use to support student learning?

8. What, if any, professional development courses did you take to help you transition into online and hybrid instruction? What else could have been provided to further support your learning and understanding of online instruction?

9. How can the educational institution support instructors when courses are transitioned from traditional to online and/or hybrid instruction?

[Questions 10–11 were added after peer review of the interview guide.]

10. How do you develop online and/or hybrid instructional materials to address learning objectives from a course that was previously offered as a traditional classroom course?

11. Identify instructional strategies and course design strategies that you believe are central to student success in online courses and hybrid courses.

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