Balancing Online Teaching Activities: Strategies for Optimizing Efficiency and Effectiveness

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Abstract

Increased demands in professional expectations have required online faculty to learn how to balance multiple roles in an open-ended, changing, and relatively unstructured job. In this paper, we argue that being strategic about one's balance of the various facets of online teaching will improve one's teaching efficiency and effectiveness. We discuss the balancing issues associated with four key online teaching facets: course design/development, delivery of the course content, assessments/feedback, and professional development. We conclude with a template for a strategic professional development plan that addresses these key facets.

Introduction

In higher education, faculty must learn how to balance the demands of multiple roles in a job with responsibilities that can be open-ended, changing, and relatively unstructured (Arreola, Theall, & Aleamoni, 2003; Bean, 1998; O'Meara, Kaufman, & Kuntz, 2003; Rupert & Holmes, 1997). The need for balancing job responsibilities exists for all faculty, whether they are newly minted assistant professors or seasoned full professors. Faculty are simultaneously part of different communities and faculty roles are becoming increasingly more demanding and complex (Ouellett, 2010). Providing guidance and support for this "balancing act" is therefore a crucial component of any faculty development program (McMillan, 2002) and distance learning administrative advocacy is vital.

Although the existing literature on faculty career balance is well-developed, there is a significant aspect of the process that has received surprisingly little attention. This involves the ways that faculty can or should balance their activities within the specific domains of teaching, research, or service. That is, although there is ample discussion of how to develop balance between different domains, within-domain balancing and the various ways to develop that balance most effectively is an under-examined aspect of faculty development.

Teaching online has a large number of responsibilities that faculty must learn to master and

balance. Williams (2003) provided a list of over 40 roles and competencies for online teaching and learning, including those related to teaching practice, technology, and instructional design. Kumar and Kumar (2012) proposed a model for the management of online teaching at the individual course level. Their model includes devoting attention to learning objectives, leveraging technology, and facilitating student engagement. Online faculty development programs emphasize assessing student learning, creating an online community, training on the learning management system, and using instructional design models (Meyer & Murrell, 2014).

Each of these components requires faculty to devote requisite time and effort and to determine optimal balance among them. While many faculty are motivated to teach online for personal and professional reasons (Meyer, 2012), they also express concerns about the time demands that online teaching may present (Giles, Ritter, Zimmerman, & Kaiser, 2014). Teaching online requires specific time management skills that may be different from teaching face-to-face (Collis & Nijhuis, 2000; Levitch & Milheim, 2003) and faculty indicate that concerns about increased workload and time demands are inhibitors to teaching online (Betts & Heaston, 2014; Windes & Lesht, 2014)

Balancing one's online teaching demands requires us to look at how much time we spend on our various teaching activities. The literature is rich with studies that examine the amount of time that faculty spend teaching online versus face-to-face. Some studies indicate that teaching online takes more time (Cavanaugh, 2005; Spector, 2005; Tomei, 2006) while others show that online teaching actually requires less faculty time than face-to-face (DiBiase, 2000; McKenney, Peffley, & Teolis, 2010). While the results are mixed, time allocation strategies appear to be a major concern for faculty (Conceição & Lehman, 2010). Van de Vord and Pogue (2012) pointed out that researchers have come to no clear conclusions regarding the time issue because the demands required with online teaching are so complex.

Whether teaching face-to-face or online, variations in one's teaching workload depend on issues such as course development and set-up prior to the semester; amount of institutional, administrator, and technical support, enrollment differences, and other factors. In an analysis of workload calculations for online faculty teaching at community colleges, Mupinga and Maughan (2008) found wide variations and frequent inconsistencies across institutions.

Balance issues with online teaching can be even more important to consider for junior faculty. Hopewell (2012) discusses the "unique risks" that online teaching presents for tenure track faculty. Because online teaching can take more time, research agendas can be adversely impacted which can result in a negative impact on future tenure and promotion. Furthermore, since online teaching provides more schedule flexibility, faculty who teach online may be perceived to have more "free time" for service. Online teaching presents inherent difficulties in developing or maintaining balance, given that the demands are ever-present and boundaries can be difficult to sustain.

In this paper, we focus on the balance issues faculty face in the online teaching domain. In particular, we argue that if faculty are not efficient and effective at managing their within-domain online teaching demands, then they will have difficulties with balancing their other work responsibilities. Although teachers may vary in the number of online compared to face-to-face courses they teach, and some faculty teach fully online whereas others teach a mixture of delivery modes, our audience for this paper is faculty who primarily teach online and the distance learning administrators who support them.

We first briefly review the major concerns pertaining to faculty balance. Then, based on a review of the literature and our own extensive online teaching experiences, we describe the specific online teaching balance issues that are likely to arise and provide a practical tool for strategic professional development within the online teaching domain. We conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications of within-domain balance for faculty development

as it relates to online teaching.

The Concept of "Balance" Within the Online Teaching Domain

For faculty in a higher education setting, workplace balance is a well-known, but not clearly articulated or understood, concept (Huber, 2001). The general idea of "balance" can be defined by terms such as stability, harmony, proportion, compromise, and related notions of considering all aspects of one's job. More specifically, balance also encompasses the need to find equilibrium between multiple and sometimes conflicting demands. Addressing individual students' questions, checking in multiple times daily, the nature of activities and assessments, and the occasional technology and other trouble-shooting emergency all contribute to the time- and effort-intensive nature of online teaching. However, if teachers spend too much time "hovering" over their online students (such as by frequently checking on and responding to course activity), then the course can quickly become a drain on one's time and effort and negatively impact one's overall teaching balance.

There are multiple facets associated with the online teaching domain (Mandernach, Hudson, & Wise, 2013; Williams, 2003). Among the most important of these are decisions and activities associated with online course design and development, course delivery, assessments and feedback, and professional development. These facets include elements that involve balancing teaching responsibilities within a single course and between all the courses that faculty are teaching in a given term. The multiple activities within each of these facets illustrate the variety of balance issues that faculty face within the online teaching domain (Sheridan, 2006). In the following discussion, we provide examples of how and why balance is necessary for the activities associated with each online teaching facet. With each facet, we offer suggestions for maintaining the efficiency and effectiveness of one's online teaching.

Course Design and Development

With respect to online course design and development, faculty must decide if and when to propose new online courses, when and how often to make updates and modifications to existing course content, and when to incorporate changes or new editions to textbooks. Of course, not all online teachers will have specific course design or development responsibilities. However, if they do, then proposing a new online course and navigating the institutional procedures for this process may not be the best use of teaching time and effort, particularly for tenure-track faculty (Boice, 2000). Ideally, developing a systematic approach to regularly updating online course content is a good idea for faculty (Paoletti, 2003). However, because this can be a time-intensive activity, it would be best to start with following one 's institutional guidelines for online course updates, and then to generate one's own strategy. There are good models for the systematic design and assessment of courses and curriculum (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Weller, Pegler, & Mason, 2005) and faculty might align their individual online course updates with the broader curriculum redesign activities of their programs or departments. Otherwise, it is likely that new online courses or revisions to existing courses often take a back seat to other facets within this domain, except when new editions of a textbook are forced upon the teacher.

New online course preparations can be very time intensive, requiring considerable research, creativity, and planning (Dahlgran, 2008; Meyer, 2012). In order to manage better their time and effort resources, faculty with new online course preparations might choose to rely primarily on resources provided by the textbook publisher the first time they offer the course, adding their own preferences and resources in subsequent offerings. Faculty can also consider using a template and course materials already provided by a course developer (Shi, Bonk, & Magjuka, 2006). How easy or difficult a course delivery redesign will be depends, in part, on institutional support. While not necessarily saving overall teaching time (e.g., Bender, Wood, & Vredevoogd, 2004; Cavanaugh, 2005; Lazarus, 2003), teaching an online course could actually provide faculty with more flexibility (Meyer, 2012). The time saved by not actually having to be in the classroom can then be reinvested into other facets of the

teaching domain.

With respect to online course design and development, we have found that when faculty create video or audio materials, syllabi, or assignments, they should limit the inclusion of chapter numbers, page numbers, or date- and term-specific references or information. This information must be changed with a new term or with new textbooks or editions. Rather, in our experience, faculty should be general when creating course content and utilize calendar tools within their learning management system or a separate schedule "checklist" file for students that can be changed more easily each time a course is offered.

Good models exist for effectively and efficiently developing a new online course, making major revisions to a current course, or changing delivery method (e.g., converting a course to an online delivery format) (Stanton & Bradley, 2013; Wehlburg, 2006). Based on these approaches and our own experiences, faculty should consider doing these activities at times when they will not be revising another course. When faculty find something that needs improving in a course as they are teaching it, they should clearly note the change to be made for the next offering of the course. That is, they should resist the urge to change it now, unless it is an urgent or necessary fix for the current offering. In our experience, being perfectionistic about one's online course content can rapidly devour one's teaching time and effort. Faculty can note changes, updates, or improvements in the current course that will be implemented at the next offering of it. As they prepare the course for its next offering, they can address those changes as part of their other preparation activities. We have found that delaying these changes is the preferred option. For example, devoting one's time to making small changes or improvements in content or delivery will take away from time allotted for giving students meaningful feedback. Online teachers should determine which facets of their teaching are more valuable and schedule their course revisions in a manner that maximizes attention to the more valuable facets.

Course Delivery

With regard to delivering online course content, faculty should balance the number of distinct preparations for each term. Of course, balancing these aspects will depend on how much control faculty will have over their teaching schedule as well as the specific mode of delivery. Understanding what can be controlled is a first step to more effective balancing of one's course delivery activities. Shi et al. (2006) provided several time management suggestions for online course delivery, including strategically integrating technology, clearly organizing and labeling course information, explicitly stating due dates and other time requirements, and being clear about discussion requirements. Most of these suggestions limit student misunderstandings or confusion and, in so doing, provide online teachers with more control over their time demands.

Individual differences in preference and administrative needs often dictate how one will manage various delivery options. Of course, if all of one's courses are taught online, this creates different kinds of issues compared to teaching only some of one's courses online. For example, if teaching a mix of face-to-face and online courses, teachers need to assess the relative balance of facets across both delivery modes. In addition, if one is teaching several sections of the same online course, it may be easier to manage the different facets of the course, compared to teaching several different online courses.

In examining the amount of time that will be spent on each online course, it is important that faculty assume the responsibility for being their own advocates with administrators. Administrators should be reminded of both the within- and between-domain balance issues that faculty face. Administrators are under their own set of constraints and may not always be able to help in this area (Edmondson, 2012; Jenkins, 2013). However, if they are willing and able to help, it is possible for them to alleviate stress for faculty by considering balance issues along with seniority, rank, tenure, history, and expertise when assigning course schedules. This can include number of course preparations and individual faculty preferences

to best manage time in the teaching domain. If possible, faculty should receive (or agree to) no more than one new preparation each year (Felder & Brent, 2007). This is often an administrative issue that may be beyond one's control, but it is essential in the first few semesters of establishing an online course and "working out the bugs." Once all courses have been prepared and taught at least once, faculty may find extra time for other activities in the teaching domain.

Class size also has an impact on balance with the online teaching domain. Even if faculty do not have control over class size, it should be a consideration when determining the types of activities, assignments, evaluations, and feedback they will use. Research indicates that online class size should be limited to 20-30 students as a reasonable number that teachers can handle if active learning assignments are required (Orellana, 2006; Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013). Faculty need to determine if there are activities, assignments, or assessments that can be reduced or eliminated if their class size is larger than optimal. We are not concerned with MOOCs (massive open online courses) in this paper—this is a special case of online teaching that has its own unique issues and challenges. Other reviewers have discussed how to teach such courses efficiently and effectively from a balance perspective (e.g., Daniel, 2012; McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, & Cormier, 2010).

When examining their online teaching responsibilities, faculty must also recognize the needs, challenges, and opportunities of their students. Students who are new to the university, in at-risk demographics, enrolled in courses with high failure rates, or new to online courses may need more support and monitoring especially at the beginning of the term compared to more advanced or experienced online student populations (e.g., Allen, 2000; Grover, 2006; Schrum & Hong, 2002). Advanced or veteran online students may require less one-on-one attention (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012, 2014), so faculty can spend more time developing provocative online lectures and assignments that generate a higher level of critical thinking and challenge for this student group.

Assessment and Feedback

Another facet of the online teaching domain is assessment, grading, and feedback. Activities associated with this facet include the frequency and types of tests, quizzes, and assignments and the amount of feedback detail provided to students. In a survey of fulltime online faculty, Mandernach et al. (2013) found that grading papers and assignments and facilitating discussion threads comprised the majority of teachers' time (over 20 hours of a typical 40-hour week). Unless well-managed, these activities can become overwhelming at certain times, such as at the middle or end of the term. Technology can be a way to leverage efficiency in grading and content delivery, yet it can be time-intensive to implement (Sheridan, 2006). Multiple-choice exams may require more time to develop, but less time to grade if they are administered and graded through an online learning management system. Test banks and grading software can be used to save time and effort. While essay questions and papers might be more easily designed, they can require extensive grading time. Feedback on online class discussions, papers, and essays can be time consuming. Developing a grading rubric (Pezdek, 2009; Swan, Shen, & Hiltz, 2006) can increase feedback while saving time and effort.

Faculty should plan their exams, quizzes, discussions, and paper deadlines by examining their course schedules holistically. In our experience, a good time and effort management strategy would be to stagger deadlines and test dates so that one is not grading for different courses all in one week. If one is teaching multiple sections of the same course, then keeping common deadlines and test dates (which is likely to be the typical practice) allows the teacher to maximize their time and effort efficiency. When developing a balance strategy for online assessments, faculty should also consider the types of assessments and nature and amount of feedback required for students (Sheridan, 2006).

Professional Development

Finally, professional development related to online teaching includes the opportunity to attend conferences and workshops, participate in faculty learning communities, learn new e-learning techniques and methods, and keep abreast of discipline-specific research and pedagogy. While important, professional development is often less of a priority given the other demands in the teaching domain (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2008). Time is needed to attend workshops or learn new online techniques and methodologies. Faculty should focus on learning opportunities that will allow them to be more efficient and effective with regard to the other facets of this domain. For example, if one wants to spend less time grading exams, attend a workshop on rubrics or locate resources online, at one's institution, or from colleagues. Instructional Design Specialists can provide a treasure trove of course design and delivery options related to content, activities, and assessments.

If attending a professional meeting, faculty should set aside time for presentations devoted to online teaching and pedagogy. Such venues might be particularly good uses of time and effort, since faculty have already taken the time to travel to the meeting and should be able to devote more time to teaching presentations than they might normally do when at work (Abram, 2008). Faculty can also advocate for the creation or expansion of e-learning pedagogy-related faculty learning communities at their institution (see Cox, 2004, for an overview of faculty learning communities).

For new faculty, many of the facets and activities we have discussed under the online teaching domain may already be set for them. That is, they will probably be assigned specific courses, provided with course outlines and materials from colleagues who have taught those courses in the past, and experience pressure to teach the courses in the ways that they have been taught previously (Wolf, 2006). In this situation, understanding the multiple ways that their time and effort can be depleted could provide new faculty with a more accurate and realistic preview of the demands of their online teaching responsibilities.

One of the benefits of teaching online is the flexibility it allows for when faculty want to work on their online classes. In our experience, some faculty are most productive in the morning, while others do their best work in the afternoon or evening. Some faculty may prefer to get most of their work done within a few long workdays with briefly checking in on other days, while others may prefer to disperse their workload by working shorter days throughout the week. Certain faculty prefer to "protect" their weekends to allow for balance for personal life, while others find weekends a good time to be productive. Clearly, online work schedules are an individual preference, although we were unable to find any research investigating this possibility. We recommend that one should determine the best times for productivity and then consider the various online teaching facets as they fit within one's own preferred schedule given one's specific workload. By thinking systematically and strategically about the various facets of teaching these courses, online teachers can maximize their efficiency and effectiveness.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Faculty Development

Although researchers have addressed balance issues that online students face (e.g., Romero, 2011), there is very little information about the balance issues faced by online faculty. The primary premise of this article is that to achieve optimal efficiency and effectiveness, online faculty should balance the necessary activities and facets within the teaching domain. This will increase the chances that they do not borrow time and effort from other professional or personal work/life domains. Cultivating strategic work habits that keep these balance issues in mind will better serve online faculty in their professional lives.

Distance learning administrators can play a key role in facilitating this balancing act by guiding faculty to recognize these various facets in online teaching. When considering the

online teaching domain, faculty should systematically and strategically examine ways that will best utilize their designated time and effort. Research has shown that the time and effort required for online teaching varies greatly depending on one's discipline, the nature of the courses one is teaching, and student characteristics (Mupinga & Maughan, 2008). As we have argued, time and effort requirements can also vary within and across one's online courses as they are being taught.

Assuming that one's teaching demands and workload are often externally determined, it is important to assess the best ways to achieve a balance across the different facets. Covey's (2004) principles of time management perhaps put it best – "organize and execute around priorities" (p. 149). This strategy will ensure that online faculty are less likely to underestimate the demands of their teaching responsibilities within and between different courses. In Table 1, we provide a summary of the various ways that online faculty can learn to balance the different facets to optimize efficiency and effectiveness.

Examining the ways that one can be more efficient and effective in teaching is likely to be valuable for online teachers. Whether the strategies discussed in this paper actually prove to be successful is a topic for future research. For example, online teachers who follow the specific recommendations could be compared to those who do not and each group's teaching-related stress, experiences, and student performance could be compared. In addition, when trying to balance the various facets of our professional lives – teaching, research, service – how much do faculty multi-task to try to accomplish all that needs to be done? Does online teaching make faculty more prone to multi-tasking?

In conclusion, we have argued that a within-domain balance focus brings unique and important insights to the faculty development process as it applies to online teaching. Whereas this is an unconventional way to view faculty domains and balance issues, we have demonstrated how considering the facets within the online teaching domain can help make the complex and challenging nature of the faculty role clearer and more manageable.

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Table 1. *Balance Strategies for Online Teaching*

Course Design and Development
1. Refer to exemplary design models for your discipline when developing or redesigning your course. Why reinvent the wheel?
2. Take a look a publisher resources when first offering a course, then modify to suit your student needs. Many publishers have excellent activities, videos, and other multimedia sources that are good learning tools. Limit the inclusion of chapter numbers and page numbers (because textbook editions change), or date- and term-specific references or information.
3. Limit the inclusion of chapter and page numbers (because textbook editions change), or date- and term-specific references or information.
4. Resist making small changes to a course throughout the semester. Keep a record of changes and make them collectively for the next offering.
5. Try to make major changes for one course at a time.

Course Delivery
1. Keep the number of course preps (especially new preps) to a minimum of one per year.
2. Keep class size no larger than 20-30 students. Online teaching can be very time consuming because it requires a great deal of one-to-one interaction with students to be effective.
3. Consider your student population for the course. Some students may require more monitoring and attention.

Assessment and Feedback
1. Use content delivery tools to leverage efficacy in grading and delivery.
2. Develop or utilize assessment rubrics that give good feedback while maximizing efficiency.
3. Stagger assignment deadlines across courses.

Professional Development
1. Attend workshops on the newest tools for your content delivery system, using assessment rubrics, or technology devices.
2. Work with an Instructional Design Specialist to redesign your course, think about a better way to meet a learning outcome, or implement a technology tool.
3. When attending a professional meeting in your discipline, go to a session on online teaching to learn something new.
4. Start an e-learning faculty learning community across disciplines at your institution to share ideas, give feedback, or conduct research on an online teaching and learning subject.

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