
Transitioning to the Learning Management System Moodle from Blackboard: Impacts to Faculty

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Abstract

What are the workload impacts to faculty during a Learning Management System (LMS) transition? What type of support is needed by faculty during an LMS transition?

Transitioning to a new LMS may result in faculty problems with learning a new technology platform in addition to teaching. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the impact that an LMS transition had on faculty workload and instructional practices. All faculty interviewed expressed a need for additional support in the form of either a course release, compensation, professional development and/or mentoring. The results of this study can be used to increase alignment between administration and faculty and improve faculty job satisfaction.

Introduction and Background

What are the impacts to faculty during a Learning Management System (LMS) transition? What type of support is needed by faculty during an LMS transition? There is a lack of research available with regard to the impact on faculty during an LMS transition. However, there is significant research on how faculty are affected by teaching online, how to migrate to a new LMS, and how students perceive LMSs. For example, 85% of faculty at public institutions, 72% of faculty at private institutions, and 66% of faculty at community colleges stated that there is additional time added to their workload when teaching online (Windes & Lesht, 2014). Faculty believe that the time utilized for distance learning (DL) program development and planning for DL courses is extensively more than it is for traditional courses (Kampov-Polevoi, 2010). Faculty must spend extensive time and exert additional effort when developing a course for online delivery due to the difference in teaching modality in online courses. In addition, faculty may not be compensated for the additional time creating materials for an online course (Kampov-Polevoi, 2010). When DL is coupled with an LMS migration, there are additional factors that impact faculty workload and teaching experience. In this study, the impact that a technology initiative involving LMSs had on faculty instructional practices and workload was examined.

An LMS such as Moodle can be effective at accommodating complex learning activities with ease of use (Barr et al., 2007). LMSs can support educators with the administration and dissemination of course material (White & Larusson, 2010). Good LMSs should also include collaboration, interaction, and participation (Barr et al., 2007). An effective LMS should reduce difficulties such as deficiency of system dependability, absence of connectivity,

insufficient hardware and software, and lack of technical support by providing a manageable and accessible format. This structure permits educators and learners to work with minimal assistance. Faculty that utilize Moodle effectively can minimize these problems because the LMS was created for ease of use and faculty independence (Barr et al., 2007).

Topic and Purpose

In many institutions, administrators are choosing to transition to a new LMS, such as Moodle, which is more cost effective, provides additional tools for faculty and student utilization, and is student preferred. When the college in this study decided to transition to a new LMS, the administration did not believe that the impact to faculty during this LMS migration would be significant and therefore did not provide incentives or additional financial support to faculty during the LMS migration. Therefore, the administration did not provide funds for a unified support plan for faculty during the migration from Blackboard (Bb) to Moodle. The college administration did not allow release time for development nor compensated faculty for course development and migration. This resulted in faculty not being prepared to teach in Moodle and the courses not being completed before the semester began. There was minimal instructional design and technical support for the instructional initiatives related to the LMS transition. Faculty were not required to attend training on how to make the Moodle course pedagogically sound or how to utilize the tools effectively.

Design and Methodology

This phenomenological study was guided by the central research question: How did the transition from Bb to Moodle impact the faculty member's workload and instructional practices at the college from 2009-2013. A phenomenological research design was utilized in an effort to identify and examine the impacts to faculty who transition to a new LMS, Moodle. Phenomenological research focuses on the meanings of human experiences in situations as they naturally occur in the progression of daily life (von Eckartsberg, 1986). Phenomenologists are interested in how people put together the phenomena they experience (Patton, 2002). It is the search for the "essence of things" that cannot be revealed by normal examination (Moustakas, 1994).

A phenomenological approach was chosen because it can be utilized to examine perspectives and gain insight into situations or circumstances of faculty regarding their perceptions during an LMS transition (Leedy & Ormond, 2014). The goal of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impacts to faculty during an LMS transition, with the goal of identifying the elements needed for the transition to be successful. This phenomenological study focused on the interview as the data collection tool (Moustakas, 1994). Large amounts of information was analyzed and Nvivo 10 was utilized to identify themes and categorize the data. The information was then summarized to support the conclusions and recommendations. Moustakas (1994) explains a heuristic process in phenomenological analyses that includes immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. It is a recommended methodology when the study goals are to understand the meanings of human experiences (Creswell, 1998).

Population and Sample

A community college on the East Coast of the United States was the setting of this study. The college is an equal admission, two campus, associate degree granting public institution. The college offers students associate degrees, diplomas, and certifications in liberal arts, career and workforce development programs. The college serves approximately 3,000 curriculum

students and 10,000 continuing education students annually. The general population of the study was the current full time faculty at the college, who transitioned courses from Bb to Moodle between August 2009 and December of 2013. This college was chosen for this research because it was an early adopter of Moodle. For example, at the beginning of 2009, in North Carolina, only 4 of the 58 community colleges were primarily using Moodle (Randall, Sweetin, & Steinbeiser, 2010). Purposeful sampling was used to interview 13 of the 72 full time faculty members at the college. Purposeful sampling means that the researcher selects participants and sites for the study based his expert judgment that is typical of the population (Singleton & Straits, 2009).

Current full time faculty who had transitioned a course from Bb to Moodle from 2009-2013 were contacted via email and asked to participate in the study. These interviews, consisting of faculty with different experiences, resulted in an extensive study of the impact and challenges faced by faculty before, during, and after their transition to Moodle and course delivery. This sample included experienced and inexperienced DL faculty. Experienced faculty, for this study, meant the faculty member had taught DL courses for the college for at least three years. The viewpoint of inexperienced faculty was critical to get an accurate depiction of the case. Inexperienced faculty, for this study, meant faculty who had not delivered DL courses for a minimum of at least two years.

Thirteen faculty were interviewed at the college during a two-week period. An in-person interview was scheduled for each faculty participant at a mutually agreed upon time. Interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes each. Each of the interviews were recorded utilizing Audacity software. The interviews were manually transcribed with Microsoft Word 2013 software. Once transcribed, each interview was sent to the faculty participant as a password protected file, for member checking. Furthermore, an external auditor assessed the findings, interpretations and conclusions to ensure they were supported by the data.

Results

The findings of this study indicate that overall, there is a significant impact to faculty workloads during an LMS transition and that additional support is needed for faculty.

Central Research Question: How did the transition from Bb to Moodle impact the faculty member's workload and instructional practices at the college from 2009-2013?

The feedback from faculty participants was that time to learn Moodle and transition a course from Bb to Moodle varied from several hours to an entire year. Therefore, transitioning to a new LMS adds an even greater impact on their workload. Faculty that are teaching online spend more time investing in their work than those who teach face-to-face (Bollinger & Wasilik, 2009). All faculty stated that they believed there was an impact to the workload during the LMS transition. Participant 12 stated that it affected his workload and "it took a lot more time." All of the faculty participants indicated that additional time was needed to migrate courses from Bb to Moodle successfully.

The LMS market is now considered volatile because many faculty and administrators are experiencing migration fatigue (Lokken, 2013). Migration fatigue is the exhaustion faculty and administrators are experiencing because of time and impact to them when migrating to a new LMS. Participant 10 expressed how it affected his workload: "It affected it tremendously. I took about a year to prepare my class in my own time." Participant 11 also stated how it affected his workload:

Well, I would use the word 'tremendous'. We had used Blackboard for 10, 11, 15 years, something like that. And Moodle was totally different. Not from the standpoint of teaching online because I am actually a certified online instructor, so I can teach online. I know how to do a group discussion. I know that part of it. But the mechanics of how that particular system, Moodle, worked was totally different from what we were using. When you move into a new system, first of all, you have to see what it even looks like.

Participant 5 stated that there was a significant impact to his workload as well. He stated that

I spent a lot of time at home and on campus after we were done with our usual duties attempting to navigate and move information. There were some things that we actually did different, faculty including myself, elected to continue in a written format or asked for students to email because we were not that familiar with how to utilize Moodle to support different types of learning.

Participant 12 also stated "it affected my workload where it took a lot more time." While each faculty participant perceived the exact time impact differently, there was general agreement that the faculty had to allocate significant amounts of time to learning and working in the new LMS. Time can be viewed as an unaccounted for cost. There are several unaccounted costs related to course design. These include leadership and support provided by faculty, department chairs, and others coordinating the design, development, and implementation of new courses. It is much easier to identify and quantify costs that are incurred when instructing online courses versus development (Neely & Tucker, 2010). Faculty stated that there were several unaccounted for costs, primarily related to the learning process that was ongoing with Moodle. Participants 2, 4, 7, 11, and 12 all stated "I am still learning." Faculty discussed that due to the continuous upgrades of Moodle each year, the learning of the LMS is ongoing. Participant 11 stated "the first Moodle is not the same the second Moodle. So you know it's still a learning process."

Faculty discussed how they had to learn Moodle during their spare time, such as evenings or weekends. Participants 1, 6, 10, and 11 all referenced working over the summer with Moodle in order for their courses to be ready or for them to learn the LMS. The work lives of college faculty can be perceived to have crumbling borders because of the time devoted to the profession outside of work (Kolowich, 2011). This was evident in this study. Participants 2, 5, and 11 also referenced working at home or on the weekends with Moodle. Seven (54%) of the faculty participants stated during interviews that time outside the institution, outside their 40 hour work week, was needed to transition a course from Bb to Moodle successfully.

Faculty in the study were asked if they felt supported by the administration. Seven (54%) of the faculty stated that they did not feel supported during the migration to Moodle. Faculty had various experiences with the support offered during the transition. Participant 4 stated "I think I got as much help as I asked for. But having worked with Blackboard, I just kind of tended to work through things myself." Faculty Participant 6 stated "everybody was frustrated, and everybody was doing the best they could." Other faculty had different experiences. For example, Participant 7 stated

If I ever had a problem I could always call or email the director of distance learning who always had a response. If I ever had a problem, she would either contact me directly or would provide a spot or seat in one of the training scenarios so that was never an issue.

Faculty Participant 8 stated that

Well, the people that they had working in Moodle, I would say did the best that they can. It is still in me becoming Moodlized, it was still going to workshops that turned into question and answer sessions, and so as a novice, I felt left out. I felt that my learning level and maybe some others were way below so I did not feel like I was attended to as I should have been.

Faculty also expressed that additional support was needed. For example, Faculty Participant 1 stated “I think faculty needs to be compensated for it or anybody else that is developing a course.” Participant 10 suggested a course release, money, and structured mentoring were needed during an LMS transition. Participant 12 suggested a course release because this would

Really allow more time to be able to learn these things and then we could actually use innovations and use new techniques and you know not spend all our time learning how to do just basic things, because we'd have more time there. And then I think that a faculty mentor is also a good idea. Somebody else who's had more experience with it can definitely give you tips and ideas and help, be a resource.

Infrastructure support for faculty who teach online should be well organized with an ongoing process of improvement. Regardless of how the current infrastructure is, there is always room for improvement. Therefore, faculty teaching online has specific considerations that are not normally an issue in a campus only type of teaching environment (Meyer & Barefield, 2010). Many colleges and universities put courses or programs online in a relatively haphazard fashion. Course selection is typically driven by instructor interest rather than a department or college based decision making processes. Therefore, it is often a hardship or impossible, for college administrators to monitor their online course offerings and ensure they are of consistently high quality (Community College Research Center, 2013).

Throughout the interviews, support for faculty was referenced as a need. This support was mentioned in various ways. Nine (69%) faculty stated that a course release was needed as support for faculty. Ten (77%) faculty expressed that some form of additional compensation was necessary during the transition. Four (31%) faculty stated that mentors were needed for faculty who transitioned courses. Nine (69%) faculty shared that additional professional development was needed. One faculty member suggested hiring additional staff such as another DL director to aid faculty during the transition. All participants expressed that support was needed from administration in the form of compensations, mentorship, and release time.

States have significantly cut funding for higher education during the recession that began in 2008. Since the recession began, colleges have increased tuition, cut spending and students have taken on additional debt (Mitchell & Leachman, 2015). Due to these budget cuts, monies have not been available for additional support. College administrators need to address the lack of support in areas such as student retention, student preparedness, course quality, American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, as well as, faculty training and accreditation based assessment (Lokken, 2013).

According to Kenny, Banerjee, and Newcombe (2010), faculty have been unable to engage in training and use technology tools in their classrooms due to obstacles such as lack of time and conflicting priorities. The faculty echoed those beliefs in this study as well. Faculty have revealed that administration must show a commitment to allocating resources and revising policies and procedures to reduce obstacles to faculty and student use of an LMS (Keesee &

Shepard, 2011).

During the interviews, three (23%) faculty reference the specific need for various support staff to assist with the transition. Participant 9 stated that:

I thought it was managed well when support staff got involved with me personally... It was a smooth transition. I am a sight person, not a computer person. We are confident and we are capable of doing it but as long as we feel welcomed to go if we have problems.

Participant 10 stated

I think we were scrambling to get it moved over and, if I recall correctly, there were a lot of changes in personnel and I think it was possibly the best that we could do but it wasn't the best that could have been done.

Participant 13 stated that throughout the transition adjunct faculty “did not have the same people in support roles to help them out, and I think that that was a negative side of it.” Support for faculty is critical in facilitating change. One of the primary roles of leadership is to help faculty and create a shared vision for the technology being used. The shared vision should place emphasis on utilizing technology as part of an ideal learning experience (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010).

Birch and Irvine (2009) concluded that in order for technology utilization to be effective, educators need to be shown that it is possible to use technology and integrate it into their lessons without difficulty. Support for faculty should be given by providing instruction on the basics of the technologies that will be the most useful to the faculty. In addition, the faculty should be shown ways to integrate the technology into their classrooms effectively (Birch & Irvine, 2009). Thirteen (100%) of the faculty in this study voiced that additional support was needed. These findings align with this study as well. Faculty were not required to learn the basics of the technology beforehand and were not shown ways to integrate the technology into their classroom.

According Voakes, Bean, and Ogan (2003), most educators believe they are learning new technologies continually. While faculty appreciate the technical support they receive from staff, they also believe they need more assistance in learning new technologies (Voakes, Bean, & Ogan, 2003). Faculty referenced throughout this study that they were continuing to learn the new LMS and that the new LMS had changed multiple times since it was adopted in 2009. In addition, faculty expressed that they were still learning the new LMS, even though several had transitioned to Moodle in 2009. Moodle has various versions that continue to change. Not only were faculty having to learn a new LMS, but once they transitioned over to Moodle, the LMS was routinely being updated. These updates would be in the form of enhanced interfaces and features. Those enhancements required faculty to learn to utilize new items in the LMS, which added additional burdens to them.

Conclusion

This study adds new information to a body of literature on the experiences of faculty who utilize LMSs. When transitioning to a new LMS, such as Moodle, there are numerous impacts to a faculty member in regards to workload and instructional practices. Providing adequate support to faculty during an LMS transition could help faculty more efficiently transition their courses and provide for a more satisfied and prepared faculty member. Faculty

stated that additional support in the form of a course release, additional professional development, additional support staff, mentoring, and compensation was needed. These results are relevant to the field of education because many colleges and universities are considering migrating to a new LMS and utilizing new technologies by all of their faculty.

Limitations

The number of the sample utilized in this study is not the entire population at the college that transitioned a course from Bb to Moodle. Therefore, the findings may not represent the whole population, even though 13 faculty with representation from each of the centers in the college was interviewed. Since the entire faculty population was not represented, this may result in generalizability being difficult at other institutions. This study is also bound by the social context of the college, which has experience with both Bb and Moodle. Other colleges may not be transitioning from Bb to Moodle. They may be utilizing other LMSs. Specifically, the study only focused on full time faculty in all the academic centers at the college. Adjuncts were not interviewed. This study is also restricted in terms of its focus. The research only focused on the transition from Bb to Moodle as it pertains to full time faculty at the college. Other aspects of technology or technology tools were not explored. These other issues or technologies could have a direct influence on the impact to a faculty member during an LMS transition. Finally, it is also possible that the setting in each of the academic centers at the college differ from each other. These differences may have had a significant impact on the respondent's opinions about the impact to them.

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