



***An Exploratory Case Study of Online Instructors:
Factors Associated with Instructor Engagement***

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Abstract

This study identified factors associated with instructor engagement in online courses. We believe that this topic deserves attention because quality of instruction is one of the strongest predictors of a successful online course. As researchers, our hope is that, by understanding the factors which influence perceptions of success by online instructors, policies and/or programs can be implemented to support online instructors, which, in turn, will result in higher quality online courses. This research was an exploratory case study in which the experiences of twelve online instructors were examined over one year. The identified themes based on the participants' experiences will inform the direction of a larger quantitative study. Participant interviews were analyzed for evidence of positive and negative experiences and how frequently each occurred. We expected that participants who were less engaged in teaching would describe more negative experiences than other participants. Specific barriers to online engagement included lack of social presence, an increase in workload, and technological issues. Research priorities were determined to influence the instructors' ability to cope with these barriers. Instructors who were hired to teach and conduct research held mixed and often negative feelings about teaching in online environments.

Cette étude a identifié les facteurs associés à l'engagement de l'instructeur dans les cours en ligne. Nous pensons que ce sujet mérite l'attention parce que la qualité de l'enseignement est l'une des meilleures variables explicatives d'un cours en ligne réussi. En tant que chercheurs, nous espérons que, par la compréhension des facteurs qui influent sur les perceptions de la réussite par des instructeurs en ligne, des politiques et/ou des programmes peuvent être mis en œuvre pour assurer le soutien des instructeurs en ligne, ce qui, à son tour, entraînera une plus haute qualité des cours en ligne. Cette recherche était une étude de cas exploratoire dans laquelle les expériences de douze instructeurs en ligne ont été examinées sur une période d'un an. Les thèmes identifiés, en s'appuyant sur les expériences des participants, vont fournir des renseignements sur l'orientation d'une plus grande étude quantitative. Les entrevues avec les participants ont été analysées pour des preuves d'expériences positives et négatives et pour la fréquence d'observation de chacune. Nous nous attendions à ce que les participants qui étaient moins engagés dans l'enseignement décrivent des expériences plus négatives que les autres participants. Des obstacles spécifiques à l'engagement en ligne ont inclus le manque de présence sociale, l'augmentation de la charge de travail et les problèmes technologiques. Les priorités de recherche ont été déterminées afin d'influencer la capacité des instructeurs à faire face à ces obstacles. Les instructeurs qui ont été embauchés pour enseigner et effectuer de la recherche ont

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exprimé des sentiments contradictoires et souvent négatifs sur l'enseignement dans des environnements en ligne.

INTRODUCTION

A considerable amount of research has investigated student engagement in online courses (e.g., Oliver, 1999; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007), but the question of instructor engagement in online environments has not received significant attention. It is important to have a better understanding of the instructor's experience of teaching online because an effective instructor is one of the strongest predictors of a successful online course (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Waiet, Fiset, & Huang 2004). This study explored factors that positively and negatively affect faculty engagement when they teach online, as well as perceived barriers to their engagement in online courses.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Defining Engagement

Studying engagement is difficult because there is no consensus on its definition. Instead, engagement is an amalgamation of several attributes including participation, collaboration, and affect (Beer, Clarck, & Jones, 2010). Engagement also encompasses behavioural, emotional, and cognitive elements. Studies of engagement differ based on their operational definitions of engagement and whether these definitions focus on behavioural, emotional, and/or cognitive aspects (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). For the purposes of this study, the concept of engagement is based on the definition used by Schaufeli and his colleagues. Their definition incorporates behavioural, emotional, and cognitive aspects and focuses on vigor (investing high levels of energy in tasks), dedication (characterized by pride and a feeling that work is significant), and absorption (becoming engrossed in tasks). By this definition, engagement contrasts sharply with burnout which is characterized by exhaustion and cynicism (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002).

Importance of Instructor Experience

Although studies assessing the success of online education in comparison to face-to-face (F2F) education have been conducted, few definitive conclusions have emerged (Bernard, et al., 2004). Instead, what has been determined is that education, whether it is conducted online or in a face to face setting, is dependent on the quality of instruction and the learning environment. Based on this idea, it is becoming increasingly important to understand that online education is not just a medium (Bernard, et al., 2004); it is an environment. A key component of the environment is the instructor (Hogan & McKnight, 2007). While the structure of a course can encourage or mandate communication, it is the instructor who

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facilitates the educational process. It is the instructor's responsibility to connect the cognitive and social aspects of a course to its purposes through critical reflection, productive debate, and co-creation of common understandings (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). A large part of the success of an online course can be attributed to the online instructor (Booliger & Wasilik, 2009).

One way an instructor influences the environment of an online course is by demonstrating the value of online communication through active participation in discussions, thereby creating and maintaining social presence. Social presence is a person's ability to project one's personal characteristics and convey the 'real self' (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). Students gauge the level of importance of online communication by the rate of involvement by the instructor (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). Instructors demonstrate that they value learning facilitated through online communication by their active participation which then prompts students to respond. An instructor must actively question, listen to, and respond to online discussion (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006) as well as guide interactions, dialogue, and critical thinking by fostering debate and co-constructing understanding that leads to a community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). This social responsibility separates online teachers from their face-to-face (F2F) peers. The social presence of an F2F instructor can be taken for granted (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). A F2F instructor can be seen and does not have to work at creating a situation of co-presence. The role of the instructor changes, however, as he or she moves to an online environment, requiring, at minimum, the impression of presence to students.

The need for socialization is sometimes viewed as a "time suck" (Liu, Lee, Bonk, Su, & Magjuka, 2005), largely because it increases the complexity of online education (Hogan & McKnight, 2007). Online education includes the traditional responsibilities of F2F courses such as managing lessons and selecting methods of instruction plus the added responsibility of maintaining social presence (Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011). Further, because managing an online course is much more like individual instruction than group-based classroom management (Dykman & Davis, 2008), F2F teaching skills do not translate directly to an online environment. Good instructors must be "VOCAL: visible, organized, compassionate, analytical, and leaders-by-example" (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006, p. 251). The multiple roles of instructors as planners, models, coaches, facilitators, and communicators are particularly complex in the online environment (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006).

Online and technology-mediated instruction is growing, and we need to discover why some online programs are successful and others are not (Bernard, et al., 2004). Working from the idea that the instructor is essential to the success of an online course, this study is a step towards understanding how

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online settings can be structured to be engaging and fulfilling for the instructor. Many studies have focused on improvement of online education by addressing student barriers (Hara, 2000; Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011); this study shifts the focus to learning how to design and deliver online courses that facilitate quality instruction and a positive experience for the instructor.

Study Aims & Research Questions

As outlined above, it is generally accepted that instructor presence is essential in online learning environments. It is also generally accepted that students are less motivated to participate when they are not engaged in the course (e.g. Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; & Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011). However, little is known about the factors that affect faculty engagement in online courses. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors affect faculty engagement when faculty teach online?
2. What are potential barriers to engagement when faculty teach online?

METHODS

This was an exploratory study designed to inform the direction of a larger quantitative study. Because the study was exploratory and not suited to the testing of a hypothesis (Seale, 2006), the researchers adopted a grounded theory methodological framework. As such, this work is the beginning of the “continuing development” of a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) of online instructor engagement. Approval for the study from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board was obtained prior to data collection.

Participant Recruitment

An email was sent out to 51 instructors who were listed as teaching an online undergraduate or graduate course in 2012. Only instructors outside the field of Education and Computer Science were invited to participate because they were considered to reflect “typical” online knowledge, skills, and teaching abilities. The purpose of this restriction was to reduce the likelihood that the participants would have an extensive background in online education techniques and/or a research portfolio in the area of online teaching and learning. The restriction, therefore, enabled understanding of how instructors who are not well versed in technology or pedagogy mitigate the challenges of integrating technology and pedagogical practices into online learning settings. While nineteen instructors volunteered to participate, twelve met the criteria for inclusion.

Data Collection and Analysis

Demographic information including years of teaching experience, gender, department, comfort with technology, and class size was collected to provide descriptive information about participants.

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Participant interviews (n = 12) were recorded, and the audio files were analyzed. Each interview began with questions that asked the participant how the online course was going, and if there had been any developments since the prior interview. Neutral, event-based questions followed so that the tone (i.e., positive or negative) was established by the interviewee. Subsequent questions were primarily follow-up questions to elicit additional information. Near the end of the study, as themes began to emerge, the instructors were asked to comment on preliminary findings and whether they thought the themes accurately reflected their experiences.

The interviews were reviewed and sorted quantitatively by the lead researcher. The quantitative analysis focused on how many positive and negative experiences participants discussed. Remarks were classified as positive if the participant described an experience as useful, beneficial, or hopeful. Thus, a remark such as “The technical support staff was very helpful and helped me to fix all the glitches I found” would be labelled as positive. Even though the experience of finding glitches is negative, it was labelled positively because the memory of the experience was expressed in a positive light. Conversely, a remark such as “My department reduced my work load because I found the online course to be too much work” was labelled as negative. Although the speaker of this statement had the positive experience of departmental support, the remark focused on the negative aspect. Accordingly, statements were labelled based on the perceived overall affect as expressed by the participant, rather than on whether particular experiences were challenging or beneficial. This sorting strategy aligns with our operational definition of engagement as outlined by Schaufeli et al. (2002). Their work-situated sense of engagement is in opposition to exhaustion and cynicism, two latent factors of burnout (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). Based on this model, instructors who are more engaged will exhibit a positive mindset related to their online courses and those are less engaged will exhibit feelings of detachment and cynicism.

FINDINGS

There was an even split between male and female instructors from a variety of academic backgrounds. Half of the instructors taught courses in both F2F and online environments. Class size and online teaching experience were also variable. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants. Comfort with technology was assessed by asking the participants which category (see Table 2) best described their technological comfort. The categories and definitions for technological comfort were developed by the authors of this paper.

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Table 1. Description of Sample. *

Participant*	Gender	Department	On or Off Campus	Class Size	Years Online Teaching Experience	Technological Comfort
1	Male	Arts & Science	Off	16 to 50	6 to 10	Comfortable
2	Female	Arts & Science	On	15 or less	6 to 10	Adequate
3	Female	Arts & Science	On	16 to 50	6 to 10	Adequate
4	Male	Agriculture	Off	15 or less	6 to 10	Adequate
5	Female	Arts & Science	Off	Over 50	6 to 10	Early Adopter
6	Female	Health Science	On	16 to 50	3 to 5	Comfortable
7	Female	Health Science	On	16 to 50	Over 10	Early Adopter
8	Male	Agriculture	Off	16 to 50	Under 1	Unfamiliar**
9	Male	Arts & Science	Off	Over 50	Over 10	Early Adopter
10	Male	Health Science	On	15 or less	Under 1	Early Adopter
11	Male	Arts & Science	On	15 or less	3 to 5	Early Adopter
12	Female	Agriculture	Off	16 to 50	6 to 10	Comfortable

*Names of participants were changed to protect their anonymity.

**By the end of the study, this participant self-identified as comfortable with technology.

Quantitative Analysis

Aligned with the concept of engagement used in the study, participants were grouped by their level of positive versus negative responses. Based on this model, participants who were not engaged in teaching online would frame their experiences around their struggles; engaged instructors would describe their experiences in a positive light. The positive versus negative experiences measure led to three broad categories: struggling (those who focused on negative aspects), coping (those who reflected a balanced

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attitude between positive and negative experiences), and succeeding (those who focused on positive aspects) (see Table 3). Each category reflects only the percentage of positive remarks made by the particular participant. For example, in the Struggling category, Participant 3 remarked positively 23.9% of the time and in the negative and neutral categories 76.1% of the time. It is important to note that, because the research was framed around discovering challenges, it was expected that more negative than positive experiences would be generated in the interviews. Thus, the low level of positive comments was not interpreted as high cynicism.

Table 2. Categories of Technological Comfort

Early Adopter	Very comfortable with technology and enjoys technology. Early adopters enjoy incorporating new technologies into their lives and try to stay up to date with the latest developments.
Comfortable	Comfortable with technology but do not go out of their way to be up to date with the latest technology. People in this category are comfortable with technology and tend to see technical problems as fun puzzles to solve.
Adequate	Know just enough about technology to do their job. People in this category can use technology to complete the tasks that they need to, but rely on tech support to handle technical problems that they come across.
Unfamiliar	Intimidated by technology. People in this category not only rely on tech support to help them with technical issues, but they also tend to rely on co-workers/friends to help them with daily use of technology.

Table 3. Classification of Instructors' Feelings of Success when Teaching Online

Struggling	% of Positive Remarks	Coping	% of Positive Remarks	Succeeding	% of Positive Remarks
Participant3	23.9	Participant1	36.5	Participant4	59.7
Participant10	26.9	Participant2	31.5	Participant5	56.6
Participant11	23.5	Participant6	38.6	Participant8	50.0
		Participant7	36.3	Participant9	55.4
				Participant12	54.0

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To understand which factors might predict the instructor's engagement in online teaching, participants were grouped according to four independent variables: 1) technological comfort, 2) class size, 3) years of experience teaching online, and 4) requirement to carry out research as part of his or her faculty role. While technological comfort, class size, and years of experience teaching online have obvious impacts on instructor experiences, the researchers wanted to explore whether there were any relationships between an instructor's requirement to carry out research as part of his or her faculty role and engagement in online teaching. Thus, this fourth variable was investigated. Table 4 provides single factor ANOVA results based on the four key variables and the dependent variable of engagement in online teaching. Because this study is exploratory by design and the sample size is quite small, the purpose of the statistical analysis was to identify potential areas for further research, not to test a hypothesis.

Table 4. Single Factor ANOVA Analysis Based on Four Key Variables

Category	SS Between Groups	SS Within Groups	P-Value
Technological Confidence	204.76	1557.54	0.8200
Class Size	582.85	1403.31	0.2095
Experience	260.05	1719.43	0.5693
Research Requirements as Part of Faculty Role	1441.02	545.14	0.0004

ANOVA results indicated that, in the sample, technological confidence did not predict higher engagement when teaching online. There was a slight difference between class sizes over 50 and smaller classes but this finding was not significant. There was, however, one significant finding: instructors who were hired to teach and do research were significantly ($p = 0.0004$) less engaged than those who were hired only to teach. Participant 1 was an exception. He was the only instructor hired without a requirement to carry out research as part of his faculty role who was not classified in the succeeding category. However, while he was not hired by the university to conduct research, he did have another position where research was required.

Emerging Themes from Interviews

The researchers identified the following themes that repeatedly emerged from the interviews: 1) student engagement, 2) establishing social presence, 3) lack of student social presence, and 4) the increased effort of teaching online, isolation, and technical issues. These themes will be reviewed more fully in the Discussion section.

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After the interviews, the preliminary results were shared with the participants. Each participant learned how scores were determined and the category in which he or she had been classified. The instructors then had the opportunity to respond and suggest a different classification for their experience. None of the participants chose to change their classification. Each participant agreed with the level of perceived struggle and success that this sorting strategy indicated. The only modification of the results was that, at the beginning of the study, Participant 8, the instructor who was instructing online for the first time, said he was unfamiliar with technology. However, by the end of the study, he self-identified as comfortable with technology.

DISCUSSION

As mentioned previously, an aim of the study was to capture the perspectives of “typical” instructors or individuals who did not specialize in education or technology. However, as one participant said in an interview, the participants in the study were not typical instructors because every participant was bold enough to try online education. Not everyone in the study preferred online instruction to other ways of teaching. By comparison they all seemed to agree that online teaching was a challenge. All of the instructors were invested in their courses and cared whether the students succeeded or not. The instructors felt pride in their students’ successes and seemed troubled by their struggles. The instructors were not apathetic; they thought actively about how they could improve their courses.

Student Engagement

All of the instructors were aware of the importance of engaging their students in the learning experience. Four of the instructors were working with Instructional Designers to improve their course formats and to enhance student engagement during the duration of the study. One instructor had just finished working with an Instructional Designer prior to teaching the course. The other seven instructors did not have access to Instructional Designers during the study and had to create ways to increase engagement without assistance. This discrepancy in access to Instructional Designers was related to how much funding the faculty member’s department had for online course development. The University of Saskatchewan funds online course development internally through a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) allocation. TEL grants enable access to instructional design and multimedia development services as well as a modest amount of discretionary funding that can be used to hire student support or pay miscellaneous expenses associated with the development of the course.

The help of an Instructional Designer influenced the instructors’ choices of strategies to engage students. The instructors with access to Instructional Designers explored how to incorporate new tools and technologies into their courses to enhance engagement and participation. Those without access to an Instructional Designer utilized different strategies to increase engagement. One instructor designed the course to be synchronous and maintained a lecture format with the distance students attending through web cameras. Two other instructors used email to interact and engage with their students

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individually. The other four used online forums to engage students in discussion. Half of the instructors who had used forums also used grades to encourage posting to the forum while the other half posted questions in the forums to act as catalysts to start discussion.

Instructor Presence

The use of discussion boards created problems for instructors whether or not they had access to an Instructional Designer. Some of the instructors struggled with deciphering what their role should be in online discussion. This finding is congruent with the literature. Liu et al. found that establishing the social role of an online instructor is difficult because online students tend to be task-oriented. This situation makes it challenging for an instructor to understand how community is important and how it plays a role in students' learning (Liu, Lee, Bonk, Su, & Magjuka, 2005). A common concern among the participants in this study was that an instructor's comments might stop the discussion. Instructors were concerned that their authority might discourage students from actively participating in conversation. They feared that, if they weighed in on a topic, a student might be afraid to question it. Confusion surrounding the social role of the instructor can cause an instructor to depend more on individual interactions or act as a facilitator of discussion (Liu, Lee, Bonk, Su, & Magjuka, 2005). Both strategies were found in this study. Two participants avoided the confusion by interacting with students individually. Six instructors mitigated their concerns about being a silencing authoritarian by acting as a facilitator.

Lack of Student Social Presence

The third theme was the lack of social presence by students. Eight of the twelve people in the study found it difficult to teach online because their students did not have a social presence. For example, the participants reported that, in an online course, they cannot see if a student is confused with sections of the course content. They further stated that they could not even tell if the students were going through the content or not. This lack of presence made it difficult for the instructors to understand who their students were and if they were interested in the subject. Two areas that the instructors wanted to know about were the students' interest in the subject and if the students understood the content. Generally, the instructors did not receive feedback about students' understanding until a student submitted an assignment, at which point, it was too late to intervene.

Effort, Isolation, and Technical Issues

Another theme that emerged was the notion that online courses require more effort by the instructor than F2F courses do. Although there was no consensus that it took longer to teach an online course, all participants found that it took more effort to teach online courses compared to F2F courses. Unlike F2F teaching, online teaching involves interacting with technology. In other words, the work for the instructors was more cumbersome in the online setting but did not necessarily take longer to complete

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than in a F2F course. Several comments were made about how it was easier to answer a question as it came up in class compared to answering a question online where the instructor had to put more thought into the composition of a text-based answer. The same question might arise many times if students contact the instructor through a private communication channel such as email. In a F2F class, questions are generally asked only once because all of the students hear the answer. Further, by its nature, an online course necessitates more effort. Instructors have to learn to use a new technology to even manage the course. While an instructor may invest time in learning the software, new updates may change the interface and available tools. Therefore, continual learning is required. There is also the issue of the interface itself that requires logging into and, often, many clicks to access common applications. This increased effort was not always seen as a negative aspect: some participants enjoyed learning about new technology and playing with online tools. However, in the overall, online courses still require additional effort because of the technological element. The instructors have to know more and utilize more software to even run an online course compared to a F2F course. As one of the participants said, "You have to know more to even be there."

Isolation was a theme, both isolation from students and isolation from co-workers. As mentioned, eight out of twelve instructors felt isolated from their students due to the lack of student social presence. However, the instructors were also isolated themselves, both physically and collegially. Half of the instructors did not teach on campus. Therefore, the participants could not bump into their colleagues in the hall and discuss how their online courses were going. They were likewise physically isolated from the university. Of those on campus, two of the six instructors were isolated by being the only online instructors in their departments. The online instructors had little opportunity to interact with each other beyond departmental boundaries. Many of the people in this study taught courses for the same multidisciplinary program. However, they had never met nor did they mention each other during the interviews. In one instance, a participant commented that she was struggling with a course she had taught many times because twice as many students enrolled than she expected. While she did not expect the increased enrollment, one of the other instructors mentioned that the course in question was being recommended as an elective to his students that semester. Therefore, increased enrollment should have been expected.

One of the most discussed aspects of online education was technical problems. Most problems related to the usability of the software and not to a lack of understanding of the technology. For example, a common issue with the software was how permissions were set. Permissions are settings that determine who can and cannot see the course content. Instructors cannot control or change permission settings and need to depend on technical support staff to ensure that they are set appropriately. The default permission settings were unintuitive and often caused problems for both the instructors and the technical support staff. Additionally, certain usability issues challenged instructors. Simple tasks such as checking email were awkward to perform and required several mouse clicks. Other issues were adapting to new system updates; by contrast, instructors rarely had issues with not being competent enough to use the technology.

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Requirement to Carry Out Research as a Faculty Member

The requirement to carry out research as part of a faculty role was not a key consideration at the onset of the study or a theme that was identified consistently in the interviews. As the divisions among struggling, coping, and succeeding instructors emerged from the data, we reflected on the data to see if there were themes within subsets of the data that might explain the distinctions among the groups. When analyzing the interviews after excluding the instructors classified as succeeding, the idea of focusing on the concept of “publish or perish” emerged. This idea led to a closer look at the research requirement in the job descriptions of the participants. Many of the participants discussed the importance of their research agendas, the pressure to publish greater amounts of research to receive merit, and the perception that more of their time should be spent on research than teaching. Without additional study, it is hard to say why this trend presented in this study. Further, since the outlier situation (Participant 1) can be explained by a connection between research expectations and struggle with teaching online makes this finding worth further consideration.

The finding about the need to conduct research and its effect on online teaching quality was shared with the participants. They were asked to comment on why they thought this relationship existed. Several of the instructors who did not have carry out research as part of their role and one who did suggested that it might be that those in research positions enjoy research more than teaching. This idea, however, does not fit with the data. All of the instructors made a deliberate effort to teach well and actively sought resources to help improve their quality of instruction. Other explanations from the participants seemed to better apply. They provided the following as possible explanations: 1) a lack of time to devote to instruction; 2) how easy it can be to ignore an online course when dealing with competing pressures; and 3) how research is linked to promotion, whereas quality instruction is not. Although more research is needed in this area, understanding the teaching culture of a research-intensive university would be a first step towards understanding the impact that research requirements might have on quality of instruction, particularly in online environments.

There was still considerable variation in how successful instructors perceived themselves to be in meeting their research requirements. Half of the participants were classified as coping and the other half as not. This trend may connect to the idea that researchers might have greater time management challenges than their non-researcher counterparts. The research instructors who practiced time management strategies were more likely to fall into the category of coping than those who did not (p -value = 0.018). Their time management strategies included checking emails at designated times, not checking on course discussion on evenings and weekends, insisting students only contact the teacher via the course email system, and so forth. These techniques aided in creating a solid distinction between their online course time and other activities. The participants who used these strategies said the techniques helped them not to worry about the course when they were doing other activities. We hypothesize that the time management techniques gave the coping instructors a sense of control over

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their online courses. The number of research participants is too small ($n = 6$) to say that time management strategies help struggling instructors, but it does suggest an area for further research.

Technological Confidence and Success with Online Teaching

One finding that should be noted for its absence rather than presence is the lack of connection between technological confidence and feelings of success related to teaching online. Technology is often cited as a challenge for online instructors (Liu, Lee, Bonk, Su, & Magjuka, 2005), but it does not generally appear to be linked to the technological competence of the instructor. The sorting technique used in this study did not reveal a connection between technological confidence and feelings of success. Additionally, the technical problems that did occur pointed to a lack of connection. The participants faced a multitude of technical problems with the learning management system (LMS) used by the institution (Blackboard); however, very few of these were issues that a competent end user could resolve. Most of the problems with the LMS were related to its poor design and usability. The technical issues did not arise from the participants' lack of understanding of technology, rather poorly designed software.

Study Limitations

There were several limitations of this study. The first, and most important limitation, was the small sample size. While quantitative findings cannot be generalized beyond this study population, transferability of these findings may be possible. Readers of this research are encouraged to make connections based on similar experiences and research findings within their own institutions.

There was also a possibility of researcher bias, as both researchers in this study are deeply invested in online learning as a viable alternative to conventional learning environments, and have strong opinions about the importance of instructor presence and engagement in online classroom settings. We attempted to mitigate this influence by encouraging the participants to lead the interviews, by asking follow-up questions to elicit more detail, and asking questions that were neutral in tone (e.g., What have you done with your online class this week?). In addition, all data sorting was done by one researcher, and, while themes and results were shared, there was no process employed to test the validity of the labels that emerged. These limitations will be addressed in future research.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to identify areas for further research pertaining to instructors' engagement when they teach online. The study identified important areas for additional research including instructor engagement, the impact of research requirements on perceived success, and the technological skills of instructors who teach in online environments. Findings from this study suggest that instructors who have strong research programs may be less engaged in their teaching activities, particularly when they teach in online environments. Although research is needed to substantiate this

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finding, it does highlight the need for a better understanding of the culture of a research-intensive university and the effect that this culture may have on the quality of online instruction. The role of time management likewise needs to be better understood in order to discern if time management strategies can lead to higher levels of perceived success among online instructors. In addition, more research is needed into how technological challenges hinder instructors and into the kinds of supports needed by instructors. This study suggests that the issue of technology is a larger systemic issue related to an institution's choice of LMS, rather than to the competence of the instructors.

After spending a year observing online instructors struggle and succeed, the authors do hold some opinions about how online instructors could be better supported. This study indicates that instructors may increase their engagement if they maintain a schedule with online "class time" equivalent to the credit hours of the course. Class time should consist of time set aside to work on the online course, to respond to discussions, and to answer email. These activities should be restricted to class time and should not occur at other times. How and when instructors construct their class time can vary, but a sharp division in time may aid in giving instructors a sense of control over their course.

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