The Instructor's Roles in Distance Education for Library and Information Science

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ABSTRACT: With the rapid developments of information technologies, distance education programs in library and information science are increasing across the world. Instructors play very important roles in providing high quality instruction for students. Given this climate, this article briefly compares the traditional education with distance education and discusses the instructor's roles from multiple perspectives. The related literature is reviewed, which results in the recommendation that instructors should prepare for and perform multiple roles while teaching. Only when much more importance is attached to multiple roles in distance education by instructors themselves, administrators, and accreditors can the quality of distance education, assessment and evaluation be effectively improved in the future. Instructors who are accustomed to delivering lectures in face-to-face classrooms and will teach online should have a good mastery of the multiple teaching roles transformation, be very clear about what roles and responsibilities they should have in distance education, and have the corresponding changing role-related skills and competencies in order to provide the high quality teaching for distance learners.

I. Introduction

In modern society, the pace of economic globalization is quickening. Knowledge has become an important productivity element. Computerization involves people's lives and activities. More and more people use computers and the Internet at home. The rapidly evolving information technologies, especially digital technologies, have brought great changes to society. The changing information technological contexts have made it necessary and significant to redefine and relocate colleges and universities' roles, faculty roles, and students' roles. Higher education faces many challenges in the digital age.

One of the challenges is distance education with the increasing demands and numbers of enrollments (Neely & Tucker, 2010, p. 20; Rashid & Rashid, 2011, p. 108). In order to cope with these changing contexts, most colleges and universities have established distance education programs. Some small colleges may begin to buy online courses from vendors in order to expand distance education. Especially, the programs in library and information science (LIS) are increasing across the world.

As for the quality of distance education, research findings show that the distance learners' outcomes are the same as those of the traditional students (Buchanan, Xie, Brown, & Wolfram, 2001, p. 286; Rashid & Rashid, 2011, p. 113). Undoubtedly, instructors play very important roles in distance education.

What roles on earth do instructors have in distance education? Some view an online instructor as a mere transmitter of information. In others' view, online instructors just send and receive electronic messages to and from online students. These views oversimplify an instructor's roles in online teaching.

Compared with traditional roles and responsibilities, instructors have more roles in distance education to nurture successful online students. Instructors should be proficient with various types of information technologies and have sufficient knowledge and abilities to perform traditional roles and responsibilities.

This article briefly compares traditional education with distance education and examines the instructor's roles from multiple perspectives. The related literature is reviewed and some recommendations are made in order for instructors to provide high quality teaching for distance learners and for universities to recruit and train instructors and to implement online LIS programs.

II. Comparison between Traditional Education and Distance Education

In traditional education, faculty's roles contain three main aspects: teaching, research, and service. These roles may vary as educational institutions are different. Generally, instructors impart knowledge and train students' critical thinking abilities and practical competencies, and have face-to-face interactions with students. Faculty may directly and easily know about students' learning demands and needs in the face-to-face classrooms. Faculty members may adjust their teaching approaches to improve students' learning efficiency according to their specific levels and conditions. Faculty members have to improve their research abilities, do some research based on their research interests, and publish books and articles in their fields so as to make their teaching more effective and successful. They actively serve the colleges and universities, schools, and departments and participate in the activities of professional associations and societies. Students acquire the needed knowledge and abilities through tangible multi-dimensional interactions.

Distance education is a kind of education synchronously or asynchronously delivered to the learners over a distance through web-based course delivery systems such as Blackboard, Sakai, and WebCT. Faculty's roles go beyond the traditional ones. On the one hand, faculty members should do their conventional education duties. On the other hand, the information technology roles are essential for successful online instructors. In the online teaching environments, faculty members should be familiar with updated course-needed technical functions despite the fact that online students can get assistance from course system facilitators. In the online learning environments, distance learners may ask and discuss questions concerning related or even updated information technologies. Therefore, faculty members have to update their information technology knowledge and skills to be qualified for online teaching and to succeed in these roles.

III. Instructor's Roles

In the changing virtual environments, online instructors have multiple roles to take on in order to offer successful teaching for online learners. They should transmit, develop, and innovate knowledge as well as information to distance learners, and be technicians, course designers, guides, facilitators, managers, coordinators, coaches, consultants, communicators, evaluators and researchers (Aydin, 2005; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Dennis et al., 2004; Easton, 2003; Egan & Akdere, 2005; Goodyear et al., 2001; Thach & Murphy, 1995; Varvel, 2007; Wiesenberg & Hutton, 1996; Williams, 2003). See Figure 1 below.
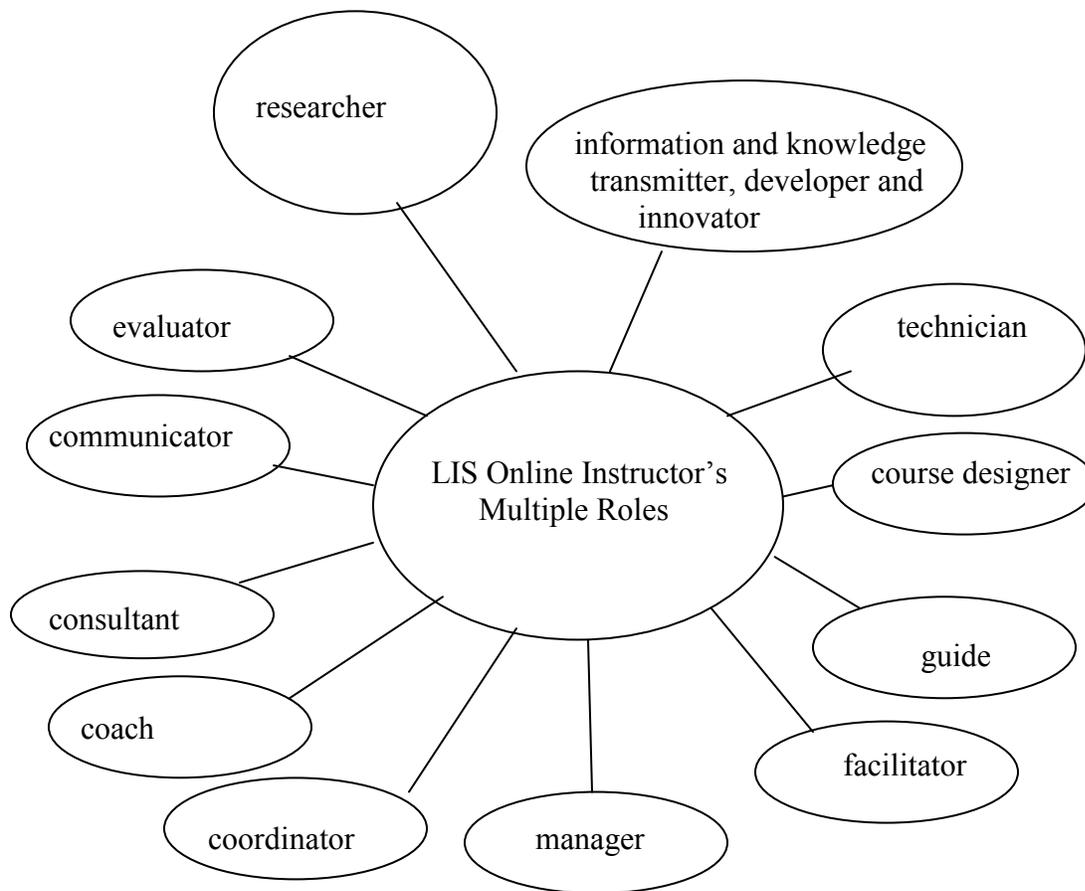
Figure 1: LIS Online Instructor Multiple Roles Model

The important faculty's roles are to transmit, develop, and innovate information and knowledge to distance learners and to train and develop their critical thinking and creative abilities. There are several types of students. Some are dependent and thus more likely to take face-to-face courses. Others are self-directed and thus more likely to learn online. No matter what type of a student he or she is, faculty members should take effective approaches to make him or her an active online learner.

An active online learner should have an excellent self-taught ability, participate in all online course activities and discussions, and finish online assignments, projects, and papers effectively

and creatively. Faculty should utilize effective web-based teaching sections such as discussion board and groups management to make an online learner interact with the instructor, fellow students, and subject matter. Focusing on course contents, skills, and competencies is very important for online teaching and learning.

An instructor should be able to solve some technical problems in online teaching (Aydin, 2005; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Dennis et al., 2004; Easton, 2003; Egan & Akdere, 2005; Goodyear et al., 2001; Thach & Murphy, 1995; Varvel, 2007; Wiesenberg & Hutton, 1996; Williams, 2003). As the online teaching and learning environment is network-based, faculty should offer online learners technical tips and answer the questions regarding some information technology and use issues.

Designing is an online instructor's important role (Aydin, 2005; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Dennis et al., 2004; Easton, 2003; Egan & Akdere, 2005; Goodyear et al., 2001; Thach & Murphy, 1995; Varvel, 2007; Williams, 2003). It mainly includes creating an active, personal, comfortable online learning environment by virtue of available web-based course system functions on Blackboard, or WebCT, or other Interact course sites and designing a syllabus with detailed and comprehensive instructions and directions. It also involves designing such other online course sections as discussion topics and group divisions. Even the purchased online courses need instructors' redesigning. On Blackboard, faculty may select the appropriate course frames, and online interaction and communications tools. What an online instructor teaches and a distance student effectively learns centers around a well-designed syllabus, which includes course goals and objectives, general instructions and policies, standards, course calendar, materials, readings, links, detailed explanations and due dates for assignments, exams, projects, papers, etc. The more detailed and comprehensive an online designed syllabus is, the more effective the teaching and learning outcomes are. Instructors and students interact by means of such critical non-verbal communication feedback tools as announcements, e-mails, postings, virtual chats, and questions for professors on discussion board. Faculty members create appropriate course menus, and design the syllabi based on features of courses and distance learners. They design the curriculums on the basis of concrete characteristics of courses and distance students.

One of the online instructor's important roles is "to guide the students" (Burge, 2008, p. 409; Isman, Altinay, & Altinay, 2004). Instructors guide the students how to fulfill the course learning objectives using information technology tools, electronic services and resources. They create a friendly, inviting and interactive online environment, direct the learning activities, make the class a shared experience and assist students in learning independently. As a guide, an instructor usually provides concrete instructions on each aspect of the teaching course for students, introduces students to a variety of practice-based topics and assignments and helps students along the way. Students are inspired and motivated to navigate their own learning and think about whom they can be and what they can do in the future. Students can learn, reflect, assess and complete all the tasks and assessment items following the instructor's guidance in the syllabus, on the forums and in the videos.

There are many facilitation tasks for an online instructor to complete. Online instructors facilitate the learning process as well as the learning contents (Beaudoin, 1990; Goodyear et al., 2001, as

cited in Abdulla, 2004, p. 31). Online instructors facilitate the collaboration activities among the remote locations and a variety of online learning activities (Goodyear et al., 2001; Thach, 1994). They facilitate "a virtual classroom" (Buchanan, 2001, p. 276), all the interactions and make the learners comfortable with the course sites, systems and tools (Burge, 1995). They ask students questions and assist them in finding the answers themselves (O'Neil, 2006). They monitor all the forums and regulate the discussions. They "guide learning by taking on the dual roles of teacher and learner to allow others the opportunity to share and participate" (Heuer & King, 2004).

An online instructor is a course manager (Aydin, 2005; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Dennis et al., 2004; Easton, 2003; Egan & Akdere, 2005; Goodyear et al., 2001; Richey et al., 2005; Thach & Murphy, 1995; Varvel, 2007; Wiesenberg & Hutton, 1996; Williams, 2003). An online course teaching process is permeated with management. The class organizational management functions are divided into several sections on Blackboard or WebCT. The course management work chiefly includes teaching and learning resources, tools, users, and assessments. An online instructor regularly posts the course modules unit by unit or week by week. The teaching steps can be administrated and controlled through online control panel. Excellent time management and organizational skills are essential for a successful online course. Faculty members supervise learning environments and manage activities of their students, and students' work and results. An instructor needs to maintain the online course resources with other instructional support personnel (Besser, 1996, p. 819).

Online coordination is a task for an online instructor to accomplish. In order to make an online course go harmoniously, an instructor should coordinate relationships and proportions of course contents, resources, knowledge, abilities, skills, discussions, activities and the like. In the online group projects and topic discussions, the role of coordination is very important. In mentoring course projects, faculty should identify and coordinate project steps. They find problems in time and provide the feedback in time. When the discussion topics appear too difficult, an instructor may make them easier to arouse students' participations and discussion interests.

The extensive remote access to the needed learning resources through search engines and databases, etc. has made the faculty member's role changed from performing one-way information flow to coaching the learning activities. Coaching requires online teaching to take the learner-centered approach rather than the teacher-centered approach, provide distance students with encouragement, motivation, and regular, supportive, and constructive feedback, and help learners to actively learn.

An online instructor is regarded as a consultant, for the professional course advice is given to distance students in the teaching process. Faculty offers much more services for learners. Students consult professors concerning academic advising as well as course-related problems. Students, especially disabled ones, can learn much more knowledge and skills in consultation with online faculty through online communications tools.

The successful interactions between instructors and students should be well established by instructors as key communicators (Isman, Altinay, & Altinay, 2004). An online instructor effectively communicates with students, colleagues, administrators, or other academic staff using various formats, media and tools such as email and phone, "responds promptly to student

concerns and creates a climate of open communication" (Heuer & King, 2004). The instructor establishes the interactions between learner and content, learner and instructor, and learner and learner through effective communication.

In online teaching, it is not too difficult for faculty to assess and evaluate students' performances, for there are such available assessment tools on Blackboard as grade book and course statistics, and what students have done is posted online or sent to the digital drop box or via EASTS. The learning outcome evidence can make faculty's evaluation role work well.

An online instructor should be an "on going researcher" (Isman, Altinay, & Altinay, 2004). Research informs teaching and vice versa. Instructors apply their practice-based and empirically confirmed research publications and presentations to their teaching courses. This will arouse students' learning curiosities and interests and motivate more interactions between instructors and students. While teaching, instructors will deepen their understandings of the topic-related issues and research trends, and conduct more research projects with respect to their teaching topics, which LIS distance learners will benefit a great deal from.

IV. Preparing for and Performing Multiple Roles

There are some studies that classify an online instructor's roles from multiple perspectives. Berge (1995) grouped the roles of the online instructors from four perspectives: (1) pedagogical; (2) social; (3) managerial; and (4) technical.

An online instructor's roles were also identified from five perspectives: (1) design/planning; (2) social; (3) instructive; (4) technological; and (5) management (Guasch, Alvarez, & Espasa, 2010, p. 201).

According to Abdulla (2004), among the four classified online faculty roles: (1) intellectual; (2) social; (3) managerial; and (4) technical, the intellectual role is the most important one (pp. 41-42).

It might be difficult for an instructor to employ all these roles while teaching. As Berge (1995) stated, "Not all of these roles need to be carried out in their entirety by the same person." Some aspects of the roles may fall instead to other instructional support staff. In some cultures and contexts, an instructor may not be required to undertake multiple roles.

However, students and their expectations are changing, which result in "a demand for different instructor's roles within different learning environments" (Burge, 2008, 407-408). In order to provide successful instruction for students, an instructor should always prepare for and "take on a multi-dimensional role" in the changing technological environments (Bawane & Spector, 2009, p. 383). As Easton (2003) stated, "As the boundaries between traditional positions blur, role clarification becomes increasingly important. In this learning environment, the role of the ODL (online distance learning) instructor requires the merging of multiple roles" (p. 103).

V. Conclusion

With the rapid development of information and telecommunication technologies, with educational institutions' missions, goals, objectives, and roles redefined, and with the faculty roles, student roles, and all other roles well accomplished, distance education will have a very bright future.

Only when much more importance is attached to changing faculty roles in distance education by faculty themselves, administrators, and accreditors can the quality of LIS distance education, assessment and evaluation be effectively improved in the future. Faculty who are accustomed to delivering lectures in face-to-face classrooms and will teach online should have a good mastery of the online teaching roles transformation, be very clear about the multiple roles they should prepare for and take on while teaching, have the corresponding changing role-related skills and competencies in order to provide the high quality teaching for LIS distance learners.

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