

An Exploration of Burnout Among Online University Professors

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Abstract

Stress and burnout have emerged as a serious concern for today's higher education instructors. As the growth in distance education continues, the demands on online academics will increase, potentially leading to the burnout. This study examined the correlation between years of online work experience, gender, educational level, academic training, and burnout. The correlation was not found to be significant among these areas. In addition, this research examined stress among higher education faculty members with online courses. The analysis revealed there were appreciable differences in syndromes for burnout when comparing online and traditional teaching methods. In fact, it appears as though the online instructor is less stressed than his/her face-to-face counterpart.

Résumé

Le stress et l'épuisement professionnel ont émergé en tant que préoccupation importante pour les instructeurs de l'enseignement supérieur d'aujourd'hui. Alors que l'éducation à distance continue à prendre de l'ampleur, les exigences de l'apprentissage en ligne augmenteront, menant potentiellement à l'épuisement professionnel. Cette étude se penche sur la corrélation entre le nombre d'années d'expérience de travail en ligne, le sexe de la personne, son niveau d'instruction, sa formation académique et l'épuisement professionnel. La corrélation trouvée parmi ces facteurs n'était pas significative. De plus, cette étude se penchait sur le stress parmi les membres du corps professoral au niveau de l'enseignement supérieur qui avaient des cours en ligne. L'analyse a révélé qu'il y avait des différences appréciables dans les syndromes d'épuisement professionnel lorsqu'on comparait les méthodes d'enseignement en ligne et traditionnelles. En effet, il semble que l'enseignant en ligne est moins stressé que son homologue traditionnel.

Introduction

Online learning is the fastest growing segment in the American educational marketplace (Conhaim, 2003). During the fall 2006 term, 3.5 million U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course, an increase of nearly 10 percent from the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2004). This expansion of online instruction far exceeded the 1.5 percent increase for the overall higher education student population in

the U.S. The level of 1.6 million students participating in at least one online course in the fall of 2002 advanced to 3.48 million in the fall of 2006; a compound growth rate of 21.5 percent. During this same period, the size of the U.S. higher education market had an increased annual rate of 1.5 percent, from 16.6 million in the fall of 2002 to 17.6 for the fall of 2006. Similar growth is occurring in other parts of the world.

Online learning in higher education is part of the trend in lifelong learning. The primary reason higher educational facilities increased their online courses and programs are related to demand (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Increasing student access was the most cited reason for higher education institutions offering online courses, with 63 percent of institutions saying this was Very Important and another 30 percent rating it as Important. Even though on-campus, in-person classes at public universities are increasing, on-campus students demand convenience. Additionally, remote locations bring a greater diversity in population. Include the continual increase in tuition while public funding shrinks and the pressure to do more with less in higher education institutions is predominant. Many believe that online education can satisfy this demand (Conhaim, 2003).

As the growth in distance education continues, the demands on faculty will increase, potentially leading to the burnout. This research examined stress among higher education faculty members teaching online courses to determine the levels of burnout, if any. The research focused specifically on the following research questions:

1. What is the degree of burnout in higher education online instructors as compared to brick and mortar faculty?
2. Is there a relationship between number of years experience and burnout?
3. Is there a relationship between gender and burnout among higher education online instructors?
4. Is there a relationship between burnout among instructors and education level?
5. Is there a relationship between academic training for online instruction and burnout?

Literature Review

Defining Burnout and Its Antecedents

Teaching is often recognized as an intense, highly pressured profession in which burnout is common (Yu, 2005). The term "burnout" was first coined by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, in 1974, to

describe the state of complete depletion experienced by workers. His analysis concentrated on helping professionals who worked long hours and had excessive workload. One of the most commonly accepted definitions of burnout is the tripartite model that includes feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishments. It was developed in response to chronic stress in jobs where individuals work with people (Maslach, 1982). Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) list three subcategories. Emotional exhaustion (EE) refers to the requirements of personal contact with clients and customers that demand a wide range of emotions. It leads to feelings of being overextended emotionally and without emotional resources. Depersonalization (DP) refers to the conditions where workers dread going to work; become cynical to co-workers, clients, and the organization. Personal accomplishment (PA) refers to a person's self-evaluation in relation to his or her job performance (Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek, 1993).

Burnout is further defined as a persistent and negative mental state that is characterized by the emotional exhaustion related to distress. A feeling of reduced performance and ability with dysfunctional attitudes at work is an additional result of burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Potential stressors are seen as antecedents of instructor stress as presented by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978). This model distinguishes between physical stressors (technology or large numbers of students) and psychological stressors (poor relationships with boss and coworkers). When coping mechanisms are not adequate, then stress or burnout occurs. In addition, an individual instructor's personal characteristics are components influencing burnout.

A comprehensive attempt to develop a theoretical framework for examining teacher burnout was through the research of Maslach and Leiter (1997). They presented six major factors or influences for burnout: (1) workload; (2) lack of control over day-to-day activities; (3) lack of rewards for performance including the feelings of needing to improve performance for less reward; (4) the feelings associated with relationships being undermined; (5) the feelings that occur when respect, fairness, and openness are missing; (6) the feelings associated with missions or core values being in conflict with decisions made by management.

Burnout Research

The literature on online instructor burnout is limited. This review identified only one significant study that examined higher education online instructor burnout. Hogan and McKnight (2007) examined the status of burnout among higher education online instructors, the

significance of gender and burnout, and compared normative data from educator burnout and among online instructors. The population for this study was 76 online instructors employed by baccalaureate granting institutions within the United States. It revealed that online instructors possessed an average score on the emotional subscale, high degree of depersonalization, and a low degree of personal accomplishment.

Methodology

Measures

The Maslach Burnout Inventory—Educator Survey (MBI-ES) and a demographic questionnaire were used for this study. The demographic questionnaire was designed to elicit gender, age, ethnicity, education, experience, and instructor training. The MBI-ES was used to assess the level of burnout among higher education online instructors. It is a tool widely used to address the three subscales (syndromes) of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA) (Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter, 1996). The MBI-ES consists of 22 statements rated on a seven-point Likert scale, permitting responses to selections from 0 to 6 (0 = Never to 6 = Every Day). The emotional exhaustion subscale contains nine questions measuring overextension and exhaustion in the workplace. The depersonalization subscale contains five questions and measures impersonal responses toward co-workers and service recipients. Personal achievement contains eight questions that measure feelings of competencies and success in the workplace.

The MBI-ES instrument views a low numerical EE and DP mean score in a positive light. A small figure indicates low emotional exhaustion and little depersonalization. Conversely, a high score in PA demonstrates that a respondent believes a large amount of personal achievement is derived from his/her position.

Validity and Reliability

The Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educators Survey was utilized in this study. It was developed as an offshoot of the MBI General Survey. MBI-ES first appeared in 1986 and is the same instrument as the MBI-GS with the word "recipient" changed to "student". This change allowed the instrument to represent clearly the educational field.

Validity and Reliability of the MBI-ES were demonstrated through a study completed by Iwanicki and Schwab (1981) as well as Gold (1984). Iwanicki and Schwab reported a Cronbach alpha estimate of .90 for Emotional Exhaustion, a .76 for Depersonalization, and a .76 for Personal

Accomplishment. Gold's estimates were .88, .74, and .72 respectively (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

Population

The population for this study encompassed college and university instructors currently using a computer-based educational format. Grasping the population size of online instructors was difficult. The Sloan consortium estimated 3.2 million students took at least one online course in the fall of 2005, an increase of 40% over the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2004). Securing the exact number of online students is dependable, since it can be assumed that an individual student is not attending more than one institution congruently. The same cannot be said for online instructors. Many are adjuncts, working for five and six schools simultaneously. To count the number of existing online teachers in each facility may, therefore, inflate the real population. However, an estimate of the maximum number of faculty members can be determined within reason. American Public University is a completely online program. With 10,777 students, the university requires 627 full-time and adjunct faculty members, roughly 16 to 1 student to faculty ratio (educationUSA, 2008, para. 1). If this ratio was taken as normal, then the 3.2 million students Sloan estimates would require 200,000 instructors each teaching one online class. However, most full-time and adjunct instructors are responsible for approximately seven separate courses. A conservative analysis indicates approximately 28,500 distance educators currently exist.

Procedure

A random selection of 650 online instructors from around the United States was contacted for this study. The United States was used only to enhance the comparison with previous studies. It is understood that online instructors have no physical boundaries. Access to faculty emails was normally limited to school personnel and therefore, the randomness of this study was affected. All online instructors from four separate universities were sent the survey instrument. Ten percent or 65 online instructors responded providing pertinent data.

Faculty were sent an email that explained the purpose of the study, research question, and outlined the procedures for completion. An attachment with each email contained the MBI-ES. MBI is copyrighted by CPP Inc. Therefore, CPP Inc. was contacted and rights to the distribution of the survey were purchased. CPP Inc. permitted the placing of the questionnaire into Word format and sending as an attachment. No other method for electronic distribution was allowed.

The information provided by the respondents was placed on an Excel spreadsheet. Descriptive statistics, correlations, demographics, and levels of responses were computed. As previously stated, the demographics collected information concerning gender, age, ethnicity, educational level, online experience, and instructor training. In addition, subscales, such as Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment, are displayed for analysis.

To entice instructors to comply with the request, a promise was made in the initial email to provide the results to anyone requested to participate. This will be accomplished by sending each potential respondent a link to this publication

Results

This analysis only compares the demographics of online instructors to that of the Hogan/McKnight study published in 2007. Both of these reports involve online instructors only. However, the last comparison in this section adds The MBI - Educators Survey to the mix. It views the three burnout syndromes of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and lack of Personal Accomplishment, from the MBI-Educators Survey to this study by the Authors and the previous by Hogan/McKnight.

Gender

The total number of recipients with the current study as compared to Hogan/McKnight is very similar. This report presents responses from 65 individual online university instructors, while Hogan/McKnight used 76. It was of interest to find a more balanced representation of males to females in the current survey. No definitive comments can be made concerning this change other than it appears that one gender does not appear to dominate the arena of online instructing.

Table 1. Respondent Gender Comparisons between Burnout Studies

Gender	Author's Study	Hogan/McKnight
Male	46.20%	60.50%
Female	53.90%	39.50%

Age

The overall age of the respondents has not changed since the Hogan/McKnight study when considering the lapse of time between investigations. Their mean age of 47.2 years is almost identical to the results of this study of 49.1 years. Additionally, individual age ranges were extremely similar.

Table 2. Respondent Age Comparisons between Burnout Studies

Age	Author's Study	Hogan/McKnight
18 to 25	0.00%	2.60%
26 to 35	10.80%	13.20%
36 to 45	26.20%	27.60%
46 to 55	33.90%	31.60%
56 to 65	24.60%	22.40%
66 to 75	4.60%	2.60%

Ethnicity

The five categories of ethnicity were African American, Asian, European American, Hispanic, and Other. Compared to Hogan/McKnight, the percentage of African Americans respondents doubled while the European Americans dropped. The previous study did not have any classified as Other, but in the current paper, 13.8% listed themselves as a category other than the two discussed. The sampling of online instructors continues to be dominated by European Americans.

Table 3. Respondent Ethnicity Comparisons between Burnout Studies

Ethnicity	Author's Study	Hogan/McKnight
African American	12.30%	6.60%
Asian	3.10%	2.60%
European American	70.80%	89.50%
Hispanic	0.00%	1.30%
Other	13.90%	0.00%

Education

Unlike the Hogan/McKnight study, the respondents to this study revealed no individuals with their highest attainment as only an Associate's or Bachelor's degree. Each study had only one individual with an ABD. The largest difference between the papers lies with those possessing graduate and terminal degrees. It appears online education is demanding more instructors with terminal degrees.

Table 4. Respondent Education Levels Comparisons between Burnout Studies

Education Levels	Author's Study	Hogan/McKnight
Associate	0.00%	1.30%
Bachelor	0.00%	13.20%
Master	21.50%	42.10%
ABD	1.50%	1.30%
Doctorate	76.90%	42.10%

Experience

A comparison cannot be made, as the Hogan/McKnight study decided not to analyze experience. Of the respondents who participated in this question, the bulk of them—32.20%—had more than five years of experience. Computerized instructing seems to have roughly a third of the professors that existed since the beginning.

Table 5. Online Instructor Respondent Experience in the Author's Study

Online Experience	Author's Study
0 to 1 year	15.30%
1 to 2	22.00%
2 to 3	13.60%
3 to 4	17.00%
Over 5	32.20%

Training

Only two respondents stated they did not have training in online instruction. It appears the category of training is a moot discussion when considering burnout. Generally, all teachers will complete some type of specific training before beginning their cyber instructing.

Table 6. Online Instructor Training in McCann/Holt Study

Training	Author's Study
Yes	96.90%
No	3.10%

Research Question 1: What is the degree of burnout in higher education online instructors as compared to brick and mortar faculty?

In the original MBI survey, a ranking was developed to determine low (lower third), average (middle third), and high (upper third). Emotional

Exhaustion for the MBI Education Survey of traditional instructors, as well as the Hogan online instructors, was average. In this survey, the EE was ranked low. The emotional exhaustion associated with online instructing is less than that of a brick and mortar instructor and it appears to be improving with time.

Similar results were discovered with Depersonalization. MBI traditional instructor's score was average, Hogan/McKnight was high and the Author's Study came in low. Again, there is evidence that time is easing the dread that online instructors have when approaching their daily assignments.

The perception of Personal Accomplishment was nearly identical for both MBI and Authors while Hogan ranked low. This study suggests the self-esteem an online instructor feels is improving and matches that of the traditional professor. It is interesting to note that in all three categories, time is having a positive effect with instructing.

Table 7. Categorization of MBI Scores for Postsecondary Education

Postsecondary Education	Low	Average	High
EE	≤ 13	14–23	≥ 24
DP	≤ 2	3–8	≥ 9
PA	≥ 43	42–36	≤ 35

Table 8. MBI Subscale Comparisons between Studies

	MBI		Author's Study		Hogan/McKnight	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Emotional Exhaustion	18.6	12	10.2	7.1	22.1	11.6
Depersonalization	5.6	6.6	2.9	3.2	9.8	4.7
Personal Accomp.	39.2	7.9	40.6	5.6	46.9	6.6

Remaining Research Questions

2. Is there a relationship between number of years experience and burnout?
3. Is there a relationship between gender and burnout among higher education online instructors?

4. Is there a relationship between burnout among instructors and education level?
5. Is there a relationship between academic training for online instruction and burnout?

A correlation was completed comparing the research questions and burnout. No correlation was found greater than 0.24. The analysis could not find any direct correlation between the variables of experience, gender, education level, training, and the variable burnout.

Table 9. Burnout Correlations between Demographics and Subscales

	Burnout Correlation		
	EE	DP	PA
Experience	0.19	0.24	0.03
Gender	0.09	0.09	-0.06
Education	0.10	-0.02	0.13
Training	-0.08	0.20	0.08

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine burnout among higher education faculty members active in online courses. Additionally, to determine the degree of stress compared to traditional professors. Generally, it appears that there are appreciable differences in syndromes for burnout when comparing online instructors to those operating within a brick and mortar setting. In fact, it appears as though the online instructor is less stressed than his counterpart.

When comparing this study to Hogan/McKnight's, it seems the online instructor's Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishments are improving with the passage of time. It is likely that this relatively new method of distance learning is being fine-tuned through trial and error. Both the instructor and student are learning to adapt and accept this method as "normal". This commonplace attitude results in less stress for the instructor.

One possible reason online instructors experience less stress may be due to the standardization of content management formats used to deliver a course. The content management systems used by most schools have been narrowed down to three main types, Blackboard, eCollege, and Angel. As instructors move from university to university, they are more likely to be familiar with the format required, resulting in the comfort of familiarization.

Another potential stress reducer is student motivation. The greater the motivation, the more the teacher can concentrate on course content. Motivation normally increases as the student progresses from undergraduate to graduate level studies. With the increased acceptance of the online classes, more universities are offering graduate programs. Thus, a greater percentage of students may display an eagerness to finish the assignments in a timely and professional manner.

The convenience of working at home is a bonus some instructors may view as a stress reducer. Eliminating the daily drive to and from the educational facility permits more time for physical rest. In urban areas, the removal of traffic jams and potential vehicle altercations can be viewed as a positive aspect to online instructing.

Finally, there is the individual who finds the ravages of age to be a factor in selecting the less stressful online instructing. Potentially, a professor can leave the brick and mortar university and continue holding sessions online for another twenty years.

Recommendations

Time appears to be a factor decreasing stress in online instructing. The obvious recommendation is to repeat this experiment every few years to determine if the trend that was found between the Hogan/McKnight and the Author's Study is continuing.

As with nearly any study, increasing the population size will provide increased accuracy. A comparison can also be made between national versus international online universities. Additionally, it would be interesting to know if schools that are strictly distance learning score differently than universities that are a hybrid of traditional and online.

Limitations

The vast majority of online instructors also teach in a brick and mortar setting. Therefore, segregating online instructors is very difficult, since few universities are fully online. It can be assumed that respondents followed the instructions presented, attempted to answer without bias, and considered only their feeling of burnout in relation to distance education. However, being a professor of both methods simultaneously, does allow the potential for skewing responses.

The various delivery methods of online classes may impact the burnout level of online instructors. However, this study did not include an analysis of the delivery method used by the respondents therefore it is limited in its use when considering burnout of instructors among the various methods of instructors utilized in this study. This study and the MBI analysis did not take into consideration the various forms of online

education that have developed during the maturation process. Synchronous and non-synchronous methods were not delineated. Additionally, the use of audio and/or video instructional methods were not explored in relation to burnout.

Conclusion

Stress and burnout have emerged as a serious concern for today's higher education instructors. Growth in distance education continues at a rapid pace and the demands to online academics will increase, which may potentially lead to increased burnout among these professors. This study examined the correlation between years of online work experience, gender, educational level, academic training, and burnout. The correlation was not found to be significant among these areas. In addition, this research examined stress among higher education faculty members with online courses. The analysis in this study revealed that there were appreciable differences in syndromes for burnout when comparing online and traditional teaching methods. In fact, it appears as though the online instructor is less stressed than his/her counterpart.

Implications

This research adds to a limited body of knowledge dealing with distance educator burnout while it complements the well-researched issue of traditional face-to-face instructor stress. The results have implications for instructor satisfaction and the motivation of online versus traditional methods of teaching.

The implications of this study will change as distance learning evolves and changes. Initially, online instructing resulted in a great deal of stress as the educator was required to learn new tools and techniques. As professors become comfortable with the new approaches, the level of stress seems to have decreased. Currently, online instructors are less stressed as compared to those in the traditional classroom.

The question remains, what is next? Future research opportunities encompass the cause of decreased burnout factors for online instructors. Why is there a curtailed level of faculty fatigue for the wired professor? Is there a stress relieving advantage when teaching from home? Is the use of the Socratic method of teaching enhanced by updated technology? Answers to these questions and additional research can enlighten and strengthen this construct, potentially leading to improved online teaching methods.

Additionally, technology will not be stagnant. The use of audio and/or video real-time lectures is growing. Eventually, the format for distance learning may parallel that of a traditional classroom. If that occurs, will the stress felt by the instructor increase, decrease, or remain status quo?

Will teaching in real time to virtual students adversely affect the profession? Since instructor satisfaction is a key element in the overall educational experience, factoring this satisfaction into the equation can lead to a more successful experience for the university, professor, and student.

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