Teachers' Viewpoint on Online Courses

Päivi Kinnunen[1] and Taina Eriksson[2]
[1]School of Business, Aalto University, Finland
[2]Turku School of Economics, Finland

Keywords: Pedagogical Support, Teaching Online for the First Time, Business Studies.

Abstract: Many universities that have previously focused on offering blended learning or face to face courses are currently starting to offer more and more also online courses. This paper takes a closer look at the background and perceptions of eight teachers who are about to teach an online course for the first time. More specifically, we take a look at the teachers' perceptions of themselves as adopters of new pedagogy and new technology as well as their perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of online courses. The preliminary results suggest that our teachers feel rather comfortable with the new technology and especially with the new teaching methods. Most of the teachers identified themselves as innovators or early adopters of new teaching methods. Teachers perceived flexibility and efficiency as the most prevailing strengths of online teaching. On the other hand, weaknesses included workload, technical challenges, and various topics that relate to the lack of face to face interaction. We conclude by discussing what kind of pedagogical support and training the online teachers would benefit from.

1 INTRODUCTION

Business studies provide skills and knowledge that are useful in many fields. For instance, management, entrepreneurship, and marketing are skills that many need once they enter the work life regardless of their first field of study. Thus, the demand for business studies among non-business university students is significant. To better cater for this identified need of business studies, the board of Association of Business Schools Finland decided that business schools should develop jointly an entire program of online courses. The program would be targeted to non-business students from the different faculties from all universities with business school or faculty of business in Finland (ABS 2017). This program of online courses is in line with the strategic initiatives of Finnish Ministry of Education and thus is supported financially by the Ministry. The universities that produce the courses get some money to cover, for instance salaries of teachers and teaching assistants, materials, and licence costs. The program of online courses is free of charge for the university students.

In fall 2017, a new a pilot version of totally online study module on Business studies was launched as a collective effort of ten Finnish universities. The study module consists of eight five credit courses (5 ECTS equals 135 hours of student work): Management and organization; Corporate social responsibility; Accounting; Entrepreneurship; Marketing and sales, Economics, Business law, and Business simulation. Each course is taught either by one university or in a collaboration of two to three universities. The courses are planned to accommodate up to 1000 students. However, on the pilot year, the number of students at each course is limited to 250 students.

The study module is offered for all non-business major students at most Finnish universities from fall 2017 onwards. The module is planned to provide students a lot of flexibility. Students can take which ever, and as many courses they want and find useful for themselves. However, if students want to include their studies into their degree as a business minor, they have to take at least five courses (four of which they can choose freely and a Business simulation course that bridges together the other four courses).

On the pilot academic year 2017-2018, there are altogether 18 teachers from nine universities that produce the eight courses. In this ongoing study, we investigate the teachers' perceptions of online teaching and learning. The overall goal of our research project is to get an insight into the online teachers' pedagogical thinking and what kind of

pedagogical and/or technical support universities should provide to support our teachers in their work. However, in this paper we are going to delimit our focus on getting to know our teachers better and what their perceptions are on the strengths and weaknesses of online courses. Our research questions are:

RQ1: To what degree the teachers who take on the task of creating and teaching an online course, are forerunners in adopting new teaching methods and technology?

RQ2: How do the teachers who are about to teach online business courses perceive the strengths and challenges of online courses?

2 ONLINE COURSES – PROS AND CONS

The pros and cons of online courses have been discussed by many. The identified advantages and disadvantages relate to all actors of the instructional process; students, teachers, and the university.

Fedynich (2013) summarizes the strengths as: freedom of when and where to study, different options of participating the course from asynchronous to synchronous, possibility for various teaching methods, and cost efficient for the university. Cook (2007) agrees with the many of the above listed strengths and adds to the list individualised learning possibilities (e.g., choosing the study pace) and the use of such teaching methods that would be difficult or inconvenient in traditional settings (e.g. virtual simulations). Finally, Cook (2007) and Baleni (2015) also adds possibility of providing immediate customized feedback and a venue for formative assessment. Online learning platform may also serve administrative purposes as it keeps automatically record on, for instance, which assignments students have submitted.

As a summary, the advantages of online courses relate to all actors in an online course. Students, for instance, benefit from flexible and accessible courses, teachers have more possibilities to use new teaching methods, and the university is thought to save money.

The identified weaknesses of online teaching, on the other had include (Fedynich 2013; Cook 2007): online courses require computer literacy from the students and online access, poor instructional design, lack of face to face time which may lead to social isolation, teaching and feedback may not be as individualised as one would hope for, and finally that technology is used for the sake of technology.

As a summary, both students and teachers face some challenges. Students may have to, for instance, cope with feelings of isolation. Teachers have to make a transition from the way they teach traditional course to new way of how to design online course.

3 ADOPTING INNOVATIONS

We use Roger's innovation adoption curve (diffusion of innovations theory) as a framework to get an overall understanding of how eager the teachers who we study in this research project are to adopt new innovations. According to Roger's theory (Rogers 2003; Hixon et al. 2011), adopters of new innovations can be divided into five categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. The distribution of people in these categories is described to be close to the Bell's curve. Only a very small proportion of adopters (2,5%) are typically innovators, who are willing to be the first ones to try even if there is a risk of failing. Early adopters (13,5%) are among the first ones to try new, selected innovations. Early majority adopters' (34%) wait until early adopters and innovators have gained some experiences of the innovation. Late majority (34%) adopts the innovations later than most of their peers, perhaps because of the peer pressure or emphasized, new code of conduct in the community. Finally, laggards (16%) are traditional and may adopt a new innovation only when they become mainstream.

Roger's innovation adoption curve has been used in many research project to understand and analyse the adoption of learning technology (see, e.g. Hixon et al. 2011; Soffer 2010). In this study, the Roger's framework provides a guideline to understand how the teachers as a group react to new challenges like adopting new teaching methods and becoming a teacher in an online course (which requires somewhat lot of technical skills in addition to pedagogical skills).

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

At the beginning of fall 2017, just before the first online course of the module started, we sent out a questionnaire to all eighteen teachers who produce the eight courses. We sent two reminders to increase the response rate. There were altogether 18 questions in a questionnaire that related to:
- background info (age, teaching experience, work title)

- educational background (highest degree, pedagogical education)
- approach to adopting new pedagogical and technological innovations (multiple choice question)
- perceptions of pros and cons of online teaching (open ended)
- plans and experiences relating to the course one is going to teach (open ended)
- needs and expectations regarding the pedagogical support (open ended)

The data relevant for this paper consists of the answers to four first question types. The results are represented mainly as descriptive statistics. The answers for the open- ended questions we mostly rather concise. The open-ended answers are categorized and summarized to convey the main aspect of the responses.

5 RESULTS

After two reminders eight teachers returned the questionnaire. Respondents represented the teachers of the 6/8 courses that are taught in a module. Most teachers had a PhD in Business and two respondents had Master's degree in Business. Three respondents worked as university lectures, four as researcher/post-doctoral researchers. One respondent worked as a development director. Respondents' teaching experience at the university level varied from 0 to 15 years (mean 6,9 years). There was also great variation in the amount of pedagogical studies the teachers had taken. Some had taken no pedagogical courses whereas one of the teachers had studied 80 ETCS (mean 26,4 ETCS). However, only one teacher said that his/her university requires pedagogical studies from the teachers in case they want to proceed in their career at the university (e.g., get a promotion on lecture/tenure track). One stated that no pedagogical studies are required, and the rest of the respondents did not know whether pedagogical studies are required in their institutions.

5.1 Forerunners or Not?

We asked the teachers to estimate to what degree they are the forerunners or conservative when it comes to adopting new teaching methods. Five out of eight teacher identified themselves as being the first (innovator), or among the first teachers (early adopters) in their community to try new teaching methods. The remaining three teachers prefer to wait

until they have heard about their colleagues' experiences of the new teaching method before trying the method themselves (early majority adopters) (Table 1). An overall observation is that the teachers who are teaching the online courses in our study module are more forerunners than conservative in adopting new teaching methods.

We also did a cross tabulation to see if we could see some tentative relations between how experienced teachers were (years of teaching experience) and how they positioned themselves into Roger's innovation adoption curve. The data suggests that, in general, work experience in teaching seems to be in relation with how innovative our teachers are. All three innovator teachers belonged to the four most experienced teachers in our data set. The three innovator teachers had seven to fifteen years of work experience as a teacher at a higher education level. The majority of teachers who identified themselves as early adopters or early majority adopters had teaching experience up to six years.

We observed the similar trend between teachers' pedagogical studies and how eager they were to adopt new teaching methods. In general, the teachers who had studied pedagogical studies were also more often innovators or early adopters than teachers who had not studied pedagogical studies.

Table 1: Adopting new teaching methods.

Adopters of new innovations	Question in the teachers' questionnnaire	n
Innovator	I am actively developping new, innovative teaching methods/I am usually the first among my colleagues who tries new teaching methods.	3
Early adopter	I am usually among the first ones to try new teaching methods.	2
Early majority adopter	I usually adopt new teaching methods only after I have head my colleagues experiences of how the method works.	3
Late majority adopter	I usually adopt new teaching methods only after most of my colleagues have experiences of how the method works.	0
Laggards	I do not usually see any reason to adopt new teaching methods. The methods I have used work still well.	0

In a similar manner, we asked the teachers to think to what degree they are among the first adopters of new technology. Only one teacher identified him/herself as being the innovator/the first adopter of new technology among peers. Three teachers identified themselves as early adopters, and four teachers said they usually adopt new technology only after they have heard reviews from others (Table 2). Even though the profile of the answers is slightly more conservative in general compared to the adoption of new teaching methods, our respondents

could still be described as either early adopters or early majority adopters rather than late adopters.

Table 2: Adopting new technology.

Adopters of new innovations	Question in the teachers' questionnnaire	n
Innovator	I am usually the first one to try/develop new technology.	1
Early adopter	I am usually among the first ones to try out new technology.	3
Early majority adopter	I usually adopt new technology only after I have head the experiences of it from my colleagues/friends.	4
Late majority adopter	I usually adopt new technology when most of my colleagues/friends have had experiences with it.	0
Laggards	I am usually among the last ones who adopt new technology.	0

We again did a cross tabulation to see if there were some tentative relations between the teaching experience and pedagogical studies and how teachers positioned themselves as adopters of technology. However, the answers were scattered and we could not observe any coherent trend in the data.

Since our data pool in this pilot study is small we could not make any statistical tests to the data. Therefore, we treat observations as preliminary results that provide hypothesis for the later stages of our study.

5.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of Online Courses

Respondents elaborated on their perceptions of the pros and cons of online teaching and learning in two open ended questions. Teachers were asked to write about the strengths and weaknesses from the viewpoint of students, teachers, and the university. In this study we are not interested directly in pros and cons of online courses. Instead, we are interested in *teachers' perceptions* of pros and cons of teaching and learning in an online course.

5.2.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Strengths of Online Courses

Based on the teachers' reflections, the most prevailing strength of online courses from all three viewpoints (students, teachers', university) was flexibility. The possibility to study without time or location related limitations was seen to cater especially well adult learners, part time students, and students who study the topic as their minor. In addition, flexibility was also understood as an opportunity review the learning material several times if needed. For instance, a student can watch a teaching video as many times as he wants. Finally, the online courses offer an opportunity for faster study pace for those students who are willing to do so. Faster study phase transfers to shorter study times in general, which in turn are perceived as [financially] beneficial for the universities.

Another strength of online courses that was prevailing in the data was efficiency. Online courses were seen an efficient especially from the viewpoints of teachers and university. From the teachers' viewpoint efficiency related to the possibility of reusing the teaching material. One the hand, looking efficiency from the viewpoint of the university, online courses were perceived as a cost-efficient way of teaching. For instance, online courses do not require physical classrooms.

Both flexibility and efficiency were mentioned in the data by several respondents. Other strengths that were mentioned only by one or two respondents included aspects such as conveying modern image of the university and attracting new students to the university.

We also looked at whether respondents' status as an innovator, early adopter, or early majority adopter had any effect on how many strengths teachers mentioned. However, the data suggest that there were no big differences between the teachers. In average, teachers mentioned three to four strengths regarding online courses.

5.2.2 Teachers' Perceptions of Weaknesses of Online Courses

The most often mentioned weakness of online courses from the students' viewpoint related to the workload. The teachers thought that some students might have a false image that online courses are easier because there is no face to face teaching sessions. Thus, some students might not reserve enough time for studying. In addition, online courses require good study skills from students, such as an ability to study independently and time management skills.

The workload was also seen as a challenge for the teachers. The amount of preparation that is needed before the online course starts is great. Transforming existing teaching material from a face to face course to online material takes a lot of time. On the other hand, teachers perceived that there is a misconception at the university level that online courses do not need additional resources. This is in a clear contradiction with the view that creating and teaching an online course take a lot of teachers' time.

The possible technical problems were also mentioned often in the data. Both students and

teachers have to deal with technical challenges relating to the learning management system and other technology that is used in the course.

The root cause of the third perceived weakness of online courses is the lack of face to face interaction in online courses. This poses several challenges both to students and teachers. If the online course does not encourage interaction between students, some students might feel lonely and they do not have the benefit of peer support. On the other hand, if online courses require group work, online groups might be difficult to manage.

For the teachers, totally online course poses also several challenges. First, teachers find it difficult to convey their own enthusiasm towards the topic of the course in an online course. Second, some teachers anticipated that it might be more difficult to identify students who have difficulties understanding the topic. Third, teachers find it more challenging to find ways to assess to what degree the intended learning outcomes are achieved in the online course. Finally, since all the assignments and possible exams are done online, teachers find that they cannot be 100% sure who has actually done the assignments.

The perceived challenges of online teaching relate also to teachers' and universities' set ways of thinking and organizing teaching. For some teachers, transferring own teaching from face to face teaching model to an online teaching, is a big change. It challenges teachers' old ways of thinking and organizing courses. In addition, online courses pose a similar kind of challenge to the university as an organization. The existing way how teaching related [administrative] processes are organized is not catering the needs of the online minor that is organized as a joint effort of several universities.

Teachers who identified themselves as innovative when it comes to adopting or creating new teaching methods suggested in average 5,7 weaknesses of online teaching. In contrary, teachers who were early adopters or early majority adopters identified in average 3,3 weaknesses. Innovators thus seem to be slightly more aware of/have thought of more about the challenges the online teaching poses to students, teachers and the university.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Taking on the responsibility of planning and teaching an online course as a part of a larger, national online business minor initiative requires courage, technical skills and online pedagogical skills from the teachers. We conducted this pilot study to learn from this process and be better informed about what kind of support our online teachers might need in the future. We posed two research questions for this first ongoing research project: 1) To what degree the teachers who take on the task of creating and teaching an online course, are forerunners in adopting new teaching methods and technology? And 2) How do the teachers who are about to teach online business courses perceive the strengths and weaknesses of online courses?

The size of the data pool in this pilot study is small and thus the results and the conclusions in this paper should be treated as tentative. However, for sake of the following phases of the bigger research project, it was essential that we were able to get at least some data before the teachers actually teach the courses. This data gives us some ideas for what kind of pedagogical and technical support and training novice online teachers might benefit from.

Based on the preliminary analysis, the majority of the eight teachers who answered the questionnaire were either innovators, early adopters or early majority adopters of new teaching methods. On the contrary, the teachers were slightly more conservative when it came to adopting new technology in general. However, none of the teachers belonged to late majority or laggards group. Based on the small data set, the teaching experience and pedagogical studies seem to be in relation to teachers' eagerness to adopt new teaching methods. In general, the more teaching experience and pedagogical studies the teachers had more often they were innovators or early adopters of new teaching methods. Experience and pedagogical studies have perhaps given teachers the confidence to try new teaching methods.

Teachers identified several strengths and weaknesses in online courses. Many of these corroborate the pros and cons identified by others too (Cook 2007; Fedynich 2013). For instance, different embodiments of flexibility of teaching and studying in online courses is often mentioned in the literature and it was also the most often mentioned strength of online courses in our data. Teachers identified also weaknesses, such as a possibility for social isolation and technical issues that are mentioned in the literature.

However, some of the challenges that were not mentioned in the literature but came up in our data were: 1) There is a need for a change in teacher's own way of thinking about teaching and learning. Teaching online challenges old perceptions that are based on face to face teaching. 2) The rigidness of

universities' organization and the way administration is organized. However, this latter challenge is related perhaps more to the fact that several universities provide the courses rather than the actual online courses.

6.1 Support for the Novice Online Teachers

The results provide some ideas for what kind of pedagogical and technical support teachers would benefit from. Pedagogical support and training are needed to scaffold the change in how teachers think about teaching and learning. The existing thoughts are based on classroom teaching and learning and now the online courses challenge the thoughts. Changing one's way of thinking is a process where both pedagogical training, peer support and first-hand experience of online teaching are essential.

On a practical level, the teachers would likely benefit from training modules on topics, such as:

- How instructional designs can help students to manage their time and learn efficient study skills.
- Different pedagogical and technical ways how to detect struggling students early in an online course.
- The role of assessment and different kinds of assessment possibilities.
- The ways to convey teachers' presence and own enthusiasm towards the topic of the course.
- How to create a sense of community and facilitate group work in an online course.

Since learning technology often offers some solutions for above mentioned challenges, we suggest that the training modules combine the pedagogical and technological training in one. When the pedagogical challenge is identified and pedagogically sound solutions have been designed, teachers should get the technical tools and skills to realize the solution in practices.

The need for both pedagogical and technical support and training units is also recognised among experienced online teachers even though the emphasis and content of the support might change as teachers get more experience in online teaching (Orr 2009). This is something that we need to keep in mind in the future as we organize training and support for our teachers. We need to be sensitive for our online teachers' evolving needs and expectations relating to the nature and content of the support.

6.2 Future Work

In the future, we continue studying our online teachers' experiences and perceptions on teaching. The development of teachers' technological pedagogical content knowledge is one of the specific topics we would like to investigate further. We would also like to expand our studies to students' experiences and perceptions of the content and implementations of the online courses. Finally, universities' viewpoint and experiences of this kind of jointly organized larger teaching modules would be interesting to study in more detail.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

ABS (Association of Business Schools Finland). 2017. http://www.abs.fi/2017/02/03/opetus-ja-kulttuuriminis terio-tukee-kauppatieteiden-opetusyhteistyota-yli-milj oonalla-eurolla/ [retrieved 23.1.2018]

Baleni Z. 2015. Online formative assessment in higher education: Its pros and cons. *The Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, 13(4), 228-236.

Cook, D. 2007. Web-based learning: pros, cons and controversies. *Clinical Medicine*. 7(1), 37-42.

Fedynich, La V. 2013. Teaching beyond the classroom walls: The pros and cons of cyber learning. *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies*. 13. 7 pages.

Hixon, E., Buckenmeyer, J., Barczyk, C., Feldman, L. Zamojski, H. 2011. Beyond the early adopters of online instruction: Motivating the reluctant majority. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 15(2), 102-107.

Orr, R., & Williams, M. R., & Pennington, K. 2009. Institutional Efforts to Support Faculty in Online Teaching. *Innov High Educ*, 34, 257–268.

Rogers, E. M. 2003. *Diffusion of innovations*. New York: Free Press. 5th edition.

Soffer, T., Nachmias, R., & Ram, J. 2010. Diffusion of web supported instruction in higher education – The case of Tel-Aviv University. *Educational Technology & Society*, 13(3), 212–223.