

Teaching and Learning Communities: Empowering Adjuncts and Ensuring Quality

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Abstract

Due to the need to lower costs in higher education, there has been an increased reliance on adjunct and non-tenure track faculty to deliver curricular content. At the same time, academic departments are concerned with ensuring quality and the standardization of course content, while maintaining high levels of course relevancy and currency. Too often, this has been translated into a top-down approach which alienates and minimizes the expertise of the adjunct, limiting the potential for innovative approaches. This paper provides examples of solutions that have been tried, both successfully and unsuccessfully, and describes an experimental model that could assist in bridging the gap between non-tenured faculty and departmental administrations while ensuring high levels of student outcomes and course consistency. The Teaching and Learning Community (TLC) model provides a venue and a culture that encourages collegial reciprocal flow of content, pedagogical techniques, and embedded assessments. By utilizing the accessibility and social tools of a modern Learning Management System, TLC improves the quality of experience for all parties with minimum cost impact.

Keywords: Adjunct; Learning Management System; Quality, Higher Education, Distance Learning; Administration

1. Increasing Reliance on Adjunct Instructors

The American Higher Education system is renowned in the world, acclaimed for its successes in innovation, academic freedom, and preparation of the academic elite. Prosperous parents globally choose to invest their money on an “American Education” for their sons and daughters.

Many may be surprised to learn that almost 75% of people who teach undergraduate courses at American institutions are not full-time permanent professors, but rather contingency employees who work on limited term contracts to teach from one to six courses, often part-time, and with no benefits. Part-time/adjunct faculty account for 47% of all instruction, not including graduate assistantships. The percentage at community colleges is even higher at almost 70% (Academe, 2010).

These faculty members are a vital resource to our academic institutions. They provide institutions with the flexibility needed to respond to enrollment changes and they bring a wealth of practical experiences to the classroom (Umbach, 2007, Wagoner, Metcalfe, & Olaore, 2005)

Higher education's reliance on adjunct faculty has increased as enrollments have increased, while budgets have been cut. The number of adjunct faculty members has increased by more than 100% over the last 20 years (American Federation of Teachers, 2009).

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1.1 Varieties of Adjunct Instructors

On behalf of the American Federation of Teachers, Hart Research Associates (2010), conducted telephone surveys with 500 part-time adjunct faculty members currently employed at a two-year or four-year institution in the spring of 2009. They found part-time faculty members fell into two camps— those who prefer their current part-time teaching position and those who would prefer a full-time teaching position. Of those who stated they preferred their current part-time position, 49% reported they already had a full time position elsewhere, while 34% preferred part-time because it allowed them to devote more time to family or personal matters.

When reading the literature about part-time faculty, it is important that this distinction be kept in mind. There are those who are part-time and that is their preference, while there are those who are seeing it as perhaps a 'stepping stone' into a full-time position. The current working conditions in higher education may not be an issue for those in the first group, but it certainly is of concern to those in the second group. Furthermore, the issue becomes even more complex in the 21st century when we are seeing increased use of not only adjunct instructors, but adjunct instructors whose only connection to their students and their institution is online.

1.2 Disparities in Salaries and Benefits

Another distinction among adjunct faculty is between those who are unionized versus those who are non-unionized. Faculty that are unionized are more likely to have higher pay and health benefits. Attempts at unionizing faculty (both part-time and full-time) have varied widely among states, but has largely been unsuccessful. Less than 20% of faculty are unionized, and most of that occurs in 15 states that have conditions that do not restrict unionization (Hirsch, B. & Machpherson, A., 2012).

In terms of salaries of part-time instructors, faculty at two year institutions generally make less than faculty at four year institutions, but the salaries are low by any standards. 35% make less than \$2500 per class, while 42% make between \$2500 and \$5000 per class. 46% earn less than \$15,000 annually from part-time teaching. In addition, most faculty members do not receive health benefits from their employers (American Federation of Teachers, 2010).

Health benefits are often a function of course load at the same institution. 95% of faculty who reported having health benefits reported teaching 3 or more courses at the same institution. This has led to the implementation of teaching caps of two courses in some institutions in anticipation of the Patient Protection and Affordability Act (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013). The concern is that this will only lead to further fragmentation of faculty resources as adjuncts must adjust to multiple learning systems, textbooks, and institutional policies in their attempts to put together a hodge-podge of part-time positions to create a "full time" position, albeit with no benefits.

1.3 Wasted Resources

Adjunct faculty positions are tenuous, at best. They are typically assigned per course, per term so there is no expectation of security. As discussed, wages are low and benefits are scarce. In addition, there is often insufficient administrative, technological or professional development support. A key issue is that adjuncts are not involved in curricular discussions or kept abreast of trends in the departments for which they are teaching. At the same time, their student outcomes and course evaluation data reflect that they score comparably with full-time faculty members (Landrum, 2009).

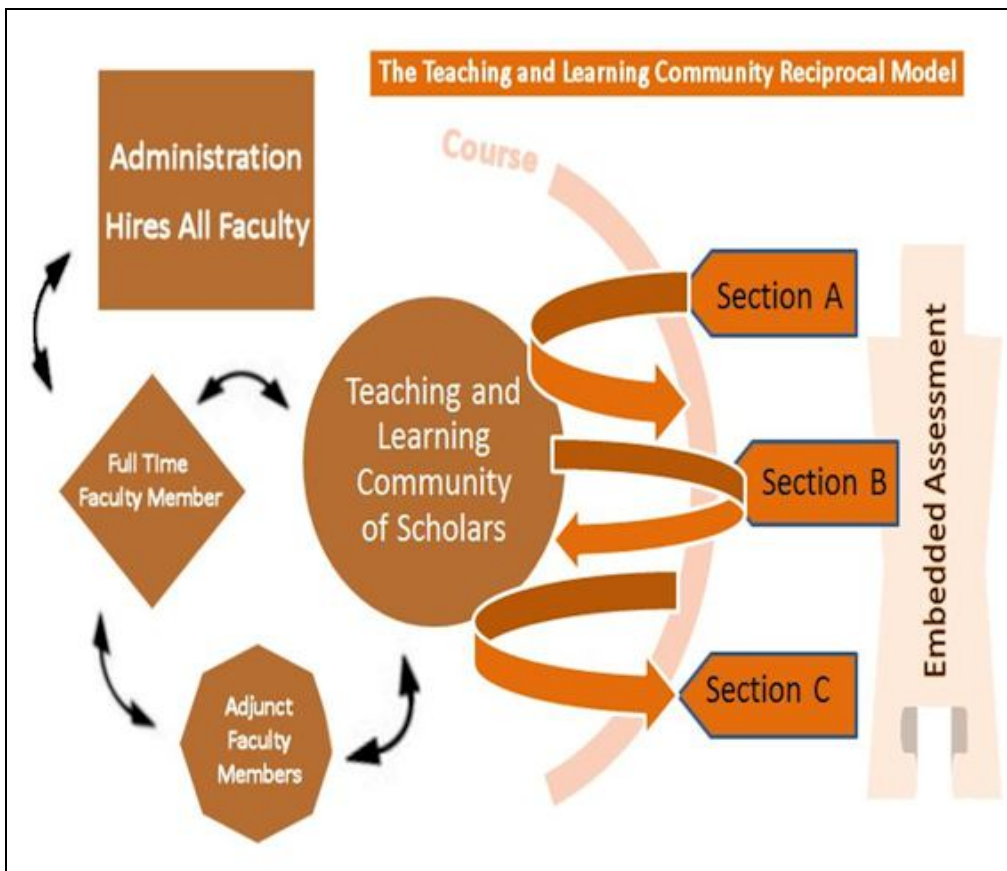
Often, in professional programs, adjuncts bring real-world experience to the classroom and opportunities for discourse with practitioners in the field. They enrich the classroom experiences of students by providing, "stories from the field" that prepare them for the often difficult circumstances they may face. They add flexibility and depth to the curriculum.

Deans and program directors recognize the importance of using adjunct faculty to enrich the curriculum and bring in practice experience which is current with ongoing practice (Clark, Moore, Johnston, & Openshaw 2011). However, given the temporary, tenuous, often isolated environment in which adjuncts work, it is likely that these Deans and program directors are unable to realize/access the full potential value of adjuncts. In turn, adjunct instructors, frustrated with their inability to be recognized, often take their under-utilized skills with them at the end of the term.

2. The Teaching and Learning Communities (TLC) Model

This project stemmed from the experience of XXXXXXX as she assumed her professorial curricular oversight duties at XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX offers a mixture of online and live classes, both on-campus and at satellite locations across the country. XXXXX was tasked with ensuring instructional quality and uniformity of learning outcomes by coordinating a mixture of tenured and contingent faculty across great distances. Both XXXX and XXXXX had experience working as contingent instructors on the other end of this same situation for other universities and community colleges. Through our conversation, reflection, and research, we decided to try to design a reciprocity performance model that would leverage the social tools of XXXXXXX's Learning Management System to create a more unified and dynamic curriculum, while improving the experience of contingent faculty by empowering them through greater connectivity, an expanding set of resources, and validation of their professional expertise. While the genesis of this model was in response to her individual situation, many professors and institutions are currently operating under the same or similar circumstances. While we are still in the early stages of application, the initial results have been heartening enough that we offer it here for your consideration.

2.1 Figure 1 – TLC Model Map



2.1.1 Key Elements of the TLC Model

- Departmental and College Administration hire full-time and contingent faculty, as well as assigning curricular oversight responsibilities to particular tenured/tenure-track faculty by course.
- Faculty course coordinator then adds and orients all instructors (on/off site, contingent/tenure track) to the TLC space within the institution's Learning Management System.
- The TLC space provides a mixture of social and curricular tools.
 - Social areas include an informal faculty lounge for casual conversation.
 - Guided daily/weekly discussion boards for faculty.
 - Mandatory embedded assessments for all sections.
 - A collaborative depository for sharing and giving feedback on assignments, activities, rubrics, tutorials, etc.
- The faculty implements all mandatory assessments, and selects additional tools/material from the depository to implement in their individual sections.
- Each section's experience is brought back by that faculty member and added to the continuing dialog occurring within the TLC space.
- All members of the community can make adjustments, generate new material, and suggest inefficient instruments which may be eliminated.
- The faculty course coordinator monitors the TLC space regularly and provides constructive feedback / interventions as needed.
- At the end of the term, the faculty course coordinator embeds the best practices and new insights in to the curriculum for the following year.
- The faculty course coordinator may then utilize information generated by the TLC space to report back to departmental and college administration with recommendations for any staffing or curricular changes for the future.

2.1.2 Benefits of the TLC Model

The TLC model provides key benefits to all of the parties concerned. For college departmental deans and administrators, it provides a way to centralize the managerial process by utilizing the learning management system in which the college/university has, most likely, already invested. Therefore, efficiency is improved and quality assured with little to no additional cost. The learning outcomes and instruments by which they are measured remain connected to the "real world" through the professional experience and insight of contingent faculty members, many of whom are practicing professionals. Thus, currency is improved and courses are able to move and adjust in near real-time to changes in the field. Additionally, data from the TLC space can be utilized for demonstrating progress toward performance goals and to illuminate areas for improvement that may have gone unnoticed in a more hierarchical structure.

The faculty coordinators benefit greatly by having a centralized space within which to monitor, communicate, challenge, and collaborate with contingent and remote faculty. The TLC space also fosters a sense of collegiality and collaboration which allows the coordinator to tap the skill-sets and creativity of the individual section faculty.

By discussing and adjusting the embedded assessments, the coordinator can assure that the learning outcomes for each section remain constant and always in sight, without constraining/demoralizing the individual section faculty. This allows the coordinator to focus on the larger issues, while the other members enhance the material through their own perspectives and pedagogical devices.

The contingent/remote faculty members gain a sense of empowerment and connectivity through interaction with one another, while the coordinator serves as a mentor within the locus of the TLC space.

One of the greatest benefits for adjunct/contingent/remote faculty is that their contributions are not only recognized and validated, but sometimes incorporated into the embedded elements of the course for following terms. Thus, these instructors, who so often feel ignored and powerless, gain a sense of participating in the development of the curriculum and the continuing life of the institution. The TLC model provides a path from alienation to collaborative recognition and empowerment.

Ultimately, greatest benefit of the TLC model is that it enhances the learning experience of students. They are given classes with unified standards and assessments to ensure parity among sections. However, the TLC model also allows them to have a dynamic, engaged instructor who feels invested in the process, rather than drone faculty who have micro-managed, fully mandated course designs forced upon them.

3. Pilot Results and Next Steps

XXX has been running a TLC pilot for one course with 16 sections since January of 2013. XXXX is serving as the faculty course coordinator for six contingent/remote faculty. So far, the TLC space has been used to collaboratively generate question banks for weekly quizzes that have been incorporated into the embedded assessment for all future sections. The other elements of the embedded assessments include a Mid-term, Final Project, and Final Exam. The contingent/distant faculty actively engaged in the process and have generated a course content depository which now includes a variety of discussion questions, tutorials, assignments, and rubrics from which future faculty will benefit. Anecdotal feedback has been very positive and XXX is moving forward to enhance and expand the pilot.

XXX will be meeting with the Director of the Department of Academic Technology to ensure that the Learning Management system is being put to optimal use and that faculty has access to necessary training to operate within the TLC space. Discussions will begin shortly on how to formalize the TLC space and operation guidelines for implementation in other courses and departments. The involvement of the Department of Academic Technology is key to successfully implementing this model on a broader scale.

4. Final Thoughts

While the initial results of the TLC model and the feedback from participants and colleagues have been overwhelmingly positive, we feel it important to note that this is not meant as a panacea. It does, however, attempt to ameliorate some of the aggravation and inefficiencies which are caused by the combination of instructional diaspora (on-campus, online, hybrid, and satellite location-based courses) and the increasing reliance on contingent faculty. It requires active social engagement from all levels if it is to function well. While there is some front-loading for the faculty course coordinator and Academic Technology departments, the TLC model quickly, consistently, and continuously generates synergistic, collaborative, reciprocal rewards for all involved.

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