

Preparing University Adjunct Faculty to Teach

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Colleges and universities employ adjunct faculty to fill personnel needs not met when availability of full-time faculty is insufficient; as such, academic leaders should find ways to ensure the success of this vitally important faculty group. This qualitative research inquiry studied adjunct faculty perceptions regarding factors deemed necessary to acquire and hone pedagogical competence in university settings. Using a phenomenological approach, the research team studied how eight college and university adjunct faculty, both pre-service and in-service, perceived teaching preparation. Deliberate Practice Theory undergirded this inquiry. Three themes emerged from the study: preparation to teach, teaching content, and institutional support. The research team recommends the following practices to prepare adjunct faculty for teaching success: construct job embedded professional development, foster a robust system of observation and feedback, and create adjunct faculty mentoring programs.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing Role of Adjunct Faculty

In a national context, colleges and universities report that contingent faculty now comprises up to 75% of instructional faculty (Magness, 2017). Grave concern is evident in relation to the university's dependence upon adjunct faculty and the effects this phenomenon may have on student academic outcomes, retention, and university graduation rates. Research shows, however, that engagement in high quality professional development activities may improve adjunct teaching practices. Kelly (2013) asserts that part-time faculty are inclined to use research-based pedagogical practices when the university provides relevant professional development. Not only are instructors affected, but improved student outcomes become evident (Kelly, 2013). Many college and university students do not reap the benefits of being taught by the most prepared instructors, as most campuses do not place professional development for adjunct faculty as a high priority (Eagan, et al., 2014).

Parker (2016) purports that meaningful professional development is a vital component in efforts towards improving instruction, which echoes in instructor' satisfaction and improved student learning outcomes. Yet, these activities continue to be low priorities, as they are omitted from university strategic

plans, as well as budget processes. Research evidence, however, indicates that meaningful, ongoing professional development is related to instructional development and connectedness, which in turn, positively influences student academic performance and engagement, as well as student and faculty retention (Condon et al., 2016).

College and university contingent faculty desire high-quality professional development, and perceive it to be essential to career growth (Flaherty, 2015; Hart Research Associates, 2015). As recognition of the need for effective instruction has become evident, university teaching and learning centers have gained in popularity and significance; however, many of them are grant-funded, and thereby, have programmatic limitations on the professional development they are able to provide (Gyurko, et al., 2016). The result is that the will of post-secondary educators to improve pedagogical practices is present, the means by which to effectuate this needed improvement are lacking. In turn, these critically important faculty members engage in historically teacher-centered practices such as lecturing, the effectiveness of which continues to be debated in the extant literature (Kuh et al., 2006; Loes & Pascarella, 2015).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While there is evidence of connectedness between teaching quality, satisfaction, and learning outcomes in higher education, adjunct faculty rarely have opportunities to gain and to improve pedagogical skills, many of which are the focus of professional development.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To address the problem, this study sought to answer the following research question: What are adjunct faculty perceptions of factors needed to achieve pedagogical competence?

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The design for this study was qualitative in nature. Christiansen, Johnson, and Turner (2010) maintain the primary purpose of phenomenological inquiry is to elucidate meaning of experiences of a group of people around a specific phenomenon. Additionally, unlike other approaches, phenomenological study begins with the phenomenon under consideration, rather than a theory. Qualitative inquiry requires researchers to use methods to elicit rich descriptions and thick recollections of experiences.

Delimitations and Limitations

Limitations on this study are ones typically associated with qualitative inquiry. The percentage of completion and return of the questionnaire, and participant willingness to respond truthfully and candidly were limitations of the study. The study was delimited by researchers' use of an electronic questionnaire, and selection of pre-service and in-service university adjunct faculty as informants.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This qualitative investigation employed the deliberate practice theory by Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993). Deliberate practice theory asserts that learners can obtain expert performance with highly structured learning and development activities (Edwards, 2012). Deliberate practice is essential to learning and effective because it allows participants to identify performance deficiencies, implement corrective measures, and sustain growth (Coughlan et al., 2014; Edwards, 2012).

The theory is exemplified in an environment conducive to teaching and acquisition of knowledge (Edwards, 2012). This setting allows for the facilitator to observe the learner demonstrating the learned skills. Accordingly, the setting must also allow for the learner the ability to engage in practice of the skills. Essentially, the core construct of deliberate practice theory is the continuous improvement of performance through learning and development (Coughlan et al., 2014; Sternad, 2015).

Deliberate practice occurs within constructs of time and resources (Ericsson et al., 1993). It can take up to 10 years for the participant to operate at an expert level. Further, resources such as training materials and teachers are needed in order to transfer knowledge to the participant and a setting in which learning can effectively occur. Secondly, there is a lack of motivation with deliberate practice. Those who participate in deliberate practice receive fulfillment from achieving the result of engaging in the process. Lastly, participating in deliberate practice requires a conscious effort for a limited amount of time. Theorists posited that effective engagement in deliberate practice occurs using a systematic, time-limited approach, to avoid becoming exhausted with the learning process.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

Purposeful sampling was the chosen method for identifying an appropriate participant pool for the study. Patton (2002) asserts purposeful sampling (also called purposive sampling) serves as a way to select information-rich cases to assist the researcher in illuminating questions under study. Eight pre-service and in-service university adjunct instructors participated in this study.

Data Collection

The phenomenological approach to data collection employed an electronic interview protocol comprised one closed question and three open-ended questions to ascertain understanding of adjunct instructors' experiences regarding preparation to teach in the university setting (Patton, 2002). Researchers triangulated data collection by including two variant types of questions in the online interview protocol.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved thematic analysis of open-ended questions contained in the questionnaire, as well as basic statistical analysis of the closed question on the questionnaire. Open coding was the primary method of analysis, with axial coding as the secondary analytic method.

FINDINGS

Four questions formed the basis of data collection for this study. Responses to each question are included in this section.

Factors Related to Adjunct Success

The first question asked participants to rank the importance of ten factors related to perceived success in the position of adjunct instructor. Participant responses are illustrated in Table 1 (see Appendix).

Onboarding and orientation were the primary concerns of the participants. Each of the contingent university faculty members perceived initial introductory protocol that familiarizes staff with the university, its processes, and procedures were the most important factors for success. Conversely, participants listed pedagogical training, or strategies to teach content, as the least concerning to teaching success at the university.

TABLE 1
RANKING BY PERCENTAGE OF FACTORS RELATED TO
ADJUNCT INSTRUCTOR SUCCESS

Factor	Percentage
Orientation/Onboarding	100%
Previous Teaching Experience	67.67%
Professional Development	67.67%
Recognition of Quality Work	67.67%
Availability of Existing Syllabus	50%
Departmental Support	50%
Institutional Bonding	50%
Mentor	33.33%
Peer Guidance/Support	33.33%
Pedagogical Training	16.67%

Preparation to Teach

The second question asked participants how the university prepared adjunct faculty to teach. Responses to this question were as follows:

Participant 1 iterated the university did nothing in the area of preparation to teach. The onboarding process includes training on the learning management system, university history, orientation, and six weeks of foundational training; however, this respondent did not see the onboarding and orientation as instructional grounding. Respondent 5 answered the question in this way:

The university really hasn't done much to prepare me to teach. I might receive a syllabus, but it's left up to me to creatively engage students so that they learn the material. I did have an opportunity to meet some of the faculty beforehand, and that was helpful so I at least have a relationship with colleagues.

In contrast, Participant 4 perceived the onboarding process as a means of instructional preparation. Additionally, Participants 2 and 7 co-teach a Master's class with a full-time instructor, and each shared that collaboration is an effective model for pedagogical training.

Teaching Content

The third question focused on subject matter. The question asked participants to discuss concerns related to teaching the content for assigned courses. Unlike the other questions where the participants returned varied responses, answers to this item were unanimous, in that each participant was confident with course content. Other subject matter-related issues, however, were noted as cause for some concern. Ensuring that students master course content, providing multiple opportunities for learning, and aligning content with previous and future learning within the students' programs of study were areas of concern for participants.

Institutional Support

All respondents believed the university showed support generally. When asked about actions the institution might take to help adjunct faculty develop instructional efficacy, participants mentioned two areas where support is still needed. Communication and availability of resources were the two areas that participants realized a need for support from the university.

Participant 3 shared the following suggestion:

Provide mentor/coach and descriptive feedback for continuous improvement.

Participant 4 added:

I would also like some feedback into my teaching, but not sure how that will happen in online instruction; certainly it must be more than a student evaluation.

Participant 6 mentioned the following:

Provide a mentor or coach to give descriptive feedback for continuous improvement.

Other respondents iterated a desire for meaningful professional development, as well as opportunities to connect with individual deans and department faculty to gain a sense of belonging in the organization.

Summary

The online interview protocol included questions related to success factors, preparation to teach, teaching content, and institutional support. Onboarding was the unanimous factor of success as an adjunct faculty member. Teaching preparation, while an area of concern, was defined differently by participants, but most respondents agreed that professional development was critical to teaching success. All participants iterated a degree of confidence in content knowledge, and described institutional support as sufficient. However, access to resources, including professional development were areas of need.

DISCUSSION

Deliberate practice theory is identified by the presence of continuous learning focused on maximizing participant performance (Coughlan et al., 2014; Ericsson, 1993). Effective performance occurs due to the existence of a proper learning environment punctuated with activities that allow learners to hone skills to expert level (Edwards, 2012). Deliberate practice theory contains specific time constraints, resources (space and facilitators), and extrinsic motivation (Ericsson et al., 1993). Research findings support the framework of Deliberate Practice Theory.

Research participants indicated professional development as a factor related to adjunct instructor success. Additionally, participants discussed the need to bolster knowledge of the subject matter to be effective contingent faculty. Interestingly, contingent faculty also intimated the need for mentoring. Mentoring also is a form of professional development and is aligned with deliberate practice. Contingent faculty studied also noted feedback as a part of institutional support as a major contributor to success. Faculty who participated in the study desired performance feedback to improve their teaching practice. Participants desired this feedback to be descriptive and specific. This notion of feedback to improve performance is embedded in deliberate practice theory and allows for a complete cycle of learning and implementing corrective action (Coughlan et al., 2014; Ericsson, 1993).

Moreover, contingent faculty who participated in the study also listed the broad themes relative to faculty support. Within these themes faculty mentioned support from the institution and department as contributors to faculty teaching success. More specifically, participants mentioned orientation and onboarding, institutional bonding and peer guidance. These indirectly relate to deliberate practice, for with the right circumstances, each can systemically be implemented to contribute to maximum performance.

CONCLUSION

As the numbers of adjunct faculty increases, colleges and universities have a fiduciary responsibility to ensure their success. Colleges and universities should implement professional development for adjunct faculty to ensure teaching success which translates to increased student outcomes. Researchers have identified the top three *Principles to Preparation* for adjunct faculty.

Construct Job Embedded Professional Development

Adjunct faculty desire learning opportunities geared at increasing their effectiveness in the classroom. Institutions should plan professional development activities focused on curriculum and content, navigating the idiosyncrasies of the institution, and pedagogy.

Foster a Robust System of Observation and Feedback

Contingent faculty want to be observed and receive feedback to improve their teaching practice. Institutions should prepare a codified meaning of feedback for adjunct faculty. This feedback should be consistent and based on objective observations of the teaching practice.

Create an Adjunct Faculty Mentoring Program

Learning from peers and senior faculty is important to adjunct faculty. Adjunct faculty consider mentoring as a key contributor to their success. Institutions should implement and encourage formal and informal mentoring to facilitate learning among all faculty. Implementing these principles allow for increased adjunct faculty effectiveness, an engaged corps of faculty, and better student outcomes.

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