Online Teaching May Be Perilous To Your Health: A Research and Reflection Essay on the Not-So-Well-Being of College Professors in 21st Century Classrooms

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College professors may be fast becoming an endangered species. Recent studies show that more than 50% of married college professors, particularly those who teach in isolation, such as homebased online environments, will get a divorce. From this group, increasing numbers will develop serious physical health issues, depression, and some will commit suicide. This clutch of educated professionals may seem an unlikely segment of the U.S. population to generate abysmal statistics, yet it is a combination of biology and psychology, brought about by the stress of the profession that transforms these unwitting circumstances into unfortunate reality. Further, due to the rise of online universities, fueled by the growing demand of students seeking to earn a degree from home, qualified faculty will be aggressively sought by universities to fill teaching positions. Therefore, as applicants are hired into the talent pool and begin experiencing related stress and isolation, it is reasonable to assume that ratios of divorce, poor health, depression, and suicide will systemically rise as well. This research and reflection essay explores the physiological symptoms of loneliness that contributes to psychological-sociological behaviors that can be inappropriate, awkward, and tragic. Further, this writer shares an account of a colleague who fit the profile described and ultimately died from suicide. Lastly, university leaders can ameliorate this disturbing pattern by stepping up and encouraging methods for faculty decompression. When both students and faculty feel less stressed, a healthier synergy from teaching and learning is realized—and consequently online and on-ground professors will find restored satisfaction in today's competitive and high-tech environments.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the title *university professor* was one that commanded respect, reverence, esteem, admiration—and until recently, security. However, in the 21st century a paradigm shift emerged in the role of the professor, one that better resembles an assembly line worker--and it's a part time gig for *adjunct online* professors (Flaherty, 2015). Such perpetual uncertainty, combined with a sense of feeling minimized by school leaders and students creates *stress*, spawning a host of related symptoms that decades ago were unknown to members in this profession.

For example, due to demands placed on professors by their schools to be extraordinary educators and technologically-savvy *to stay competitive*, many professors will grow distracted and experience depression, become socially awkward or lose their social skills altogether, and rising percentages in this profession will realize they are no longer able to maintain healthy marital relationships. Subsequently they get a divorce—often late in their career—and this change in status brings about a powerful sense of

loneliness and disconnection from social interaction which is inherent to human happiness. Research shows that virtual or online teaching platforms can fail to satisfactorily fill these voids for scores of professors; consequently, their physical and emotional well-being will hit bottom—and unfortunately, some will commit suicide. While this subject matter is taboo—and few professors come forward to share their stories about experiences in this unsettling trend, it is the hope of this writer that university leaders will heed new data and *step up* to create better opportunities for their faculty members to decompress, regain respect within the institution, and flourish as stable contributors to the noble mission of higher education.

College Professors and Anti-Social Behavior and Misbehavior

While films and television depict a stereotype of the college professor as foggy, absent-minded, easily distracted, forgetful, spaced out, a deer in headlights, and highly vulnerable, there is a *darker side* to these descriptions where researchers also paint them as *predators*. Still (2000) argued there was simply "Too much temptation--due to exposure of college professors to students peaking their sexual appetites" (p. 186). Two decades ago, studies showed that within some traditional learning institutions, the classroom was the professor's kingdom--and students, their subjects; however, today students seem to run the show—leveraged by the simple economic model of supply and demand. Rapid change within the hierarchy has reduced professors from monarchs of their domain into subjects of the students—and thereby able to be easily manipulated by competition for tuition dollars. Further, adjunct professors in particular must await results of their performance scores from student surveys that will determine whether their contract to teach is renewed. This form of anticipation creates stress.

If *you* are a married college professor today, *you* have a 50/50 chance of remaining so—as studies show that a combination of stress and temptation will threaten matrimonial bliss (Still, 2000). Without doubt professors are perpetually preoccupied with thoughts of the job—and consequently will experience difficulty maintaining relationships. Unlike many jobs where the person can punch out and call it a day, most professors are constantly bombarded with duties that revolve around meeting the needs of students and the university, and online work never stops; consequently, time away from the spouse or significant other will take its toll on the relationship.

The old adage rings true that *if you don't use it, you lose it*—and this cliché applies to the chiseling away of social skills and a fundamental practice of manners or etiquette when interacting with others that mostly online professors who work in virtual isolation risk losing. Present-day professors who stay cloistered away at home, teaching from their laptop, and interacting with their student counterparts virtually by typing discussion responses and only imagining their classroom may very well lose touch with reality. Consequently, when thrust into real-life social situations they find themselves uncomfortable and unable to interact effectively with humans. This phenomenon is a condition this writer refers to as *disconnection through connection*—meaning a professor can be comfortable interfacing with their computer, but clearly awkward in social situations. As a result, simply conversing with another person can make them sweat, and body language can become very inappropriate, too—such as how they sit, stand, dress, and use voice inflections. Over time finding comfort far from the madding crowd becomes a pattern where they retreat into themselves, and consequently become recluses—which can lead to serious health consequences.

Online College Professors and Physical Health Issues

Studies show that professors who work from home and teach online will likely become victims of poor health, and this decline will commence from a lack of regimen *when* food is consumed and its quality (fat content). This risky behavior combined with fluctuations in sleep patterns is a recipe for heart disease, various types of cancer, and diabetes. Yarrow (2012) stated that frequent users of technology often lose track of time and subsequently consume food virtually anytime and anywhere—and as proof of this growing trend, McDonalds is showing an increase in earnings between midnight and 5:00 am in the U.S. Individuals react differently to high fat diets—as some will dramatically gain weight while others will lose weight.

When the biology of the body is subjected to unpredictable patterns in food and sleep—combined with a paucity of exercise (online professors tend to remain stationary for extended periods of time), along with poor posture from a lack of ergonomic correctness, physical changes will occur—and consequently the individual will find more comfort in *comfort food* and hence grow more withdrawn due to their deteriorating appearance and muscle aches—all of which adds stress and a heightened sense of disconnection and loneliness.

Online College Professors and Loneliness

Data shows that loneliness is much more than an emotional state, but a condition that contributes to very poor physical health as well. Oftentimes an online professor experiences bouts of extreme loneliness, spawned by a lack of tangible interaction with students in face-to-face on-ground classroom environments—a consequence of emerging technology with complex teaching delivery modalities. While considered the *perfect job* by many onlookers who do not fully understand how disassociating teaching online can become, feelings of loneliness will produce changes to the body that may not be detected until it is too late to ameliorate them. For example, threats from severe loneliness can morph into metastatic cancer, diabetes, and obesity. The onset of Alzheimer's may develop more rapidly. Further, it was discovered that among lonely individuals, the immune system deteriorates, intensified by the activity of genes responsible for various types of physiological inflammation; at the same time, the immune system stops producing antibodies that fight off infections (N/A, 2016).

Humans, through the course of evolution are social creatures, and most college professors known by this writer *enjoy* the spotlight; however, when social interaction is cut off or suppressed, both psychological and physiological effects occur. In sum, it is decidedly apparent that loneliness adds to feelings of inadequacy, despair, and amplified levels of stress never before experienced by members in this profession. That said, the numbers of students attending online universities today are increasing between 2% and 6% every year—thus, more online teachers will be needed to facilitate classes; however, with the *enviable autonomy* that comes with teaching from home online, an apparent loneliness ensues from sharing knowledge only with a laptop rather than through face-to-face interaction.

Online College Professors and Stress

Every profession comes with its fair share of stress and challenges—which is why it is called *work*— yet these days, being a college professor barely resembles what it did a few decades back. First of all, most college professors no longer feel like teachers, but rather facilitators of the material provided by university curriculum designers. In many classrooms today, whether on ground or virtually, there is a waning sense of self-sufficiency—which means no matter how much of an expert a professor may be on the subject, because of macro-environmental forces such as accrediting agencies and government entities that provide oversight to ensure consistency across the spectrum, professors must teach from *set* guidelines, and straying from this path is surely met with resistance—or worse, termination.

Of course professors fully understand that teaching a consistent curriculum is essential, particularly when many universities stretch from coast to coast—and often around the world—yet, feelings of being controlled and forbidden to exercise individual methods to produce results stifles creativity and promotes a more mechanistic approach to a formerly liberating environment where the classroom was owned by the teacher and their students. While this assertion does not include every institution of higher learning, Flaherty (2015) argued that professors who are well established in their career are feeling a sense of loss and disengagement—and most are hesitant to come forward about matters of stress, fearing a loss of respect will result, and this "would seem tainted and reduced in their eyes" (p. 3)—meaning the eyes of colleagues and students.

College professors have many *added stressors* beyond teaching to stay viable in the pipeline, such as continuous training—whether it is annual compliance training or the school adds a new gadget (tool) into their platform, and time must be set aside to learn how to use it in order to effectively perform the duties of an online professor. Atop this, add in monthly or quarterly faculty meetings—whether with the Chair or as an entire university—and often these are town hall meetings, and interaction is expected and

monitored—and interestingly they are scheduled at odd times of the day, or night—based on time zones. Add into this mix the professional development activities that faculty must complete each cycle—and each activity depends on the university and expectations placed on them by their accrediting body. Further, many of the schools expect professors to attend conferences, speak at conferences, belong to outside organizations affiliated with disciplines they teach, and network with peers and colleagues—and of course all of these activities must be documented, and often the professor is not reimbursed. There is committee work, and student advising—working alongside each school's success counselors to help with retention efforts. Lastly, there is the perpetual updating of course shells with check lists audited by university leaders to ensure the most current and relevant information for students is included—and faculty must complete each task on schedule with aplomb (Reeley, 2015).

The *art of teaching* seems to be moving into the background amid university requirements to carry out duties related to managing its technology, accreditation, and student retention, thus it is not surprising that college professors are feeling higher levels of anxiety, stress, and *inadequacy*. One professor lamented "As soon as the students left, I'd drive to a quiet place in the hills near my apartment to sit and stare for hours. On Tuesday afternoons, I dreaded Thursday. Thursdays, I obsessed about the next Tuesday. I went to sleep wishing never to awaken" (Brown, 2015, p. 3). Unfortunately studies show that these states of mind *can* lead to tragic consequences.

Online College Professors and Suicide

This subject is taboo at networking functions and social gatherings, yet if this matter is left unaddressed, data shows that the paradigm will only worsen. College and university professors *are* committing suicide—and it is happening at an alarming rate for a segment of the U.S. population who are perceived to be the most enlightened, secure, and comfortable in their own skin. That said, studies show the rate having risen by 80% within the last decade—and according to sources, it is the older members in the profession—those in the twilight of their careers who are increasingly representing the majority of those committing suicide: 50 to 64-year-olds account for 65 percent of the total. Instances of suicide are now 30-40 percent higher for teachers than the national average compared to other professions. In fact, suicide rates among teachers rank a few percentage points above occupational therapists and ship/boat captains (Fridman, 2012).

This writer was acquainted with a college professor who was an exceptional classroom teacher—and beloved by students—and this affection was perpetually reflected in student survey scores at the end of each term. However, this individual fit the profile and showed symptoms of those described in this essay, and ultimately died from the stress of rapid changing classroom delivery methodologies. Not coincidentally, this professor was divorced, and had been for quite some time, and often expressed loneliness, but relied on teaching as a means of mustering some degree of self-esteem. Further, this individual fell within the age category described in this piece. While face-to-face classroom teaching was the forte of this individual, pressure to adapt to online teaching, and using technology as an extension for reaching students was ultimately this person's downfall. Unable to keep up with rapidly shifting trends and expectations from the university, and while hanging by a thread subsequent to poor performance reviews from administrators, worsening health, humiliated, and derided by a lack of confidence in teaching using new technology, the individual was terminated from the faculty. Unfortunately very soon after the firing, the individual died from complications stemming from the overuse of alcohol and prescription medications. This was a tragic end to a talented teacher who gave so much to students, and was an asset to the university in the discipline.

Summary and Conclusions

Professors *can* find ways to help themselves to stay healthy and happy; however, without adequate support and validation by their university leaders and students, traveling this road toward happiness and esteem can be a lonely and arduous journey. The work of a college professor is hard, and competitive—and perhaps *they* never considered that securing a teaching position with a university, whether in on-ground or online settings would be as difficult as it is. Nevertheless, the research in this essay showed that

intrinsic reward is often impeded by external forces, many of them well beyond the control of the individual professor. This reality is why leaders in higher education should recognize that professors are professionals (it's in the very word), not disposable commodities whom some in this profession have come to believe themselves to be. *We tend to get what we expect*—and when a culture is fostered where professors only believe themselves as a link between the school and product production, their sense of purpose and achievement cannot be fully realized—and as a consequence this can become a catalyst for darker outcomes or self-destruction.

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