



TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

**Role Ambiguity in Online Courses:
An Analysis of Student and Instructor Expectations**

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October 2013

CCRC Working Paper No. 64

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Funding for this study was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Abstract

This paper uses data from a qualitative investigation of online courses at two community colleges and a framework of role and socialization theory to examine how expectations about the roles of online student and online instructor differ among students and instructors. Our analysis suggests that a misalignment of student and instructor expectations of one another's actions and behaviors leads to role ambiguity in the online context. Role ambiguity tends to cause frustration, confusion, and tension among both students and instructors, as they struggle to understand how their online roles differ from their roles in face-to-face settings. The mutual misalignment of expectations, coupled with a lack of exposure to the typical socialization processes that would be present in a face-to-face course, suggests that colleges need to implement institutional-level interventions, such as student readiness and faculty development activities, to bring online student and instructor expectations into better alignment.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Background and Research Perspective.....	2
2.1 Role and Socialization Theory.....	2
2.2 The Online Context.....	4
2.3 Framework for This Study.....	6
3. Data and Methods.....	6
4. Findings.....	8
4.1 Expectations About Students.....	9
4.2 Expectations About Instructors.....	17
5. Conclusion and Recommendations.....	23
5.1 Online Student Readiness.....	25
5.2 Professional Development for Online Pedagogy.....	27
References.....	30

1. Introduction

Community colleges continue to expand their distance learning course offerings (Instructional Technology Council, 2012), despite the fact that completion rates for online courses tend to be well below those for traditional face-to-face courses (Jaggars, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). The reasons for these lower completion rates has been the subject of much study, and researchers have identified unrealistic expectations on the part of students and instructors as two factors that contribute to poor online outcomes (Bambara, Harbour, Davies, & Athey, 2009; Heuer & King, 2004; Ralston-Berg, 2010, 2011). As is the case in face-to-face community college courses (Cox, 2009a, 2009b; Karp & Bork, 2012), misalignment between instructor and student expectations regarding each other's roles and associated behaviors in online courses may aggravate feelings of frustration among both groups. While being an online instructor or student is similar in many ways to those same roles in a face-to-face course, the asynchronous nature of the interaction and pedagogy in online courses exacerbates the challenge of identifying and resolving misaligned expectations.

In this paper, we use data from a qualitative investigation of online courses at two community colleges and a framework of role and socialization theory to explore how expectations around the roles of online student and online instructor vary between these two groups. Our analysis suggests that a misalignment of student and instructor expectations of one another's skills and behaviors leads to role ambiguity in the online context. Role ambiguity tends to cause frustration, confusion, and tension among these two groups of stakeholders, as students and instructors struggle to understand how their online roles differ from their roles in the face-to-face setting. This mutual misalignment between stakeholder expectations, coupled with a lack of exposure to the typical socialization processes that would be present in a face-to-face course, suggests that colleges need to implement institutional-level interventions, such as student readiness and faculty development activities, to bring instructor and student expectations into better alignment.

2. Background and Research Perspective

In this section, we review role and socialization theory, discuss how the online context affects role expectations and socialization, and introduce our framework for the present study.

2.1 Role and Socialization Theory

Individuals learn to play various parts or *roles* throughout their lifetime. Turner (2001, p. 233) explained that a role is a “*cluster* of behaviors and attitudes that are thought to belong together, so that an individual is viewed as acting consistently when performing the various components of a single role and inconsistently when failing to do so” (see also Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1961; Turner, 1990). In essence, each role that an individual plays in his or her lifetime (e.g., parent, spouse, employee) is guided by societal expectations that dictate how that person should behave (Heiss, 1990). Moreover, roles are inherently social in nature and often exist in pairs (Turner, 2001). For example, the role of teacher would not exist without the role of student.

When individuals behave according to socially expected norms, others perceive that those individuals have acquired the implicit and explicit attitudes and behaviors associated with that position (Turner, 1968, 1990). Similarly, when they do not act according to social expectations, individuals often receive negative feedback. For instance, it is a social norm that library patrons speak in low voices and engage in quiet behaviors that do not disturb others in the library. If an individual is talking loudly or otherwise being disruptive, other library patrons will assume that that person does not belong. When library patrons do not act according to socially appropriate norms, they may be hushed by others in the room, asked to work in a different space where talking is permitted, or even asked by library staff to leave.

The process of learning a new role is not a one-size-fits-all experience but rather is a dynamic process wherein role-related behavior is taught and internalized through a process of *socialization* (Brim, 1966; Heiss, 1990; Thornton & Nardi, 1975). Socialization can be understood as the “learning process through which the individual acquires the knowledge and skills, the values and attitudes, and the habits and modes of thought of the society to which he belongs” (Bragg, 1976, p. 3). This process allows

individuals to learn appropriate role-related behavior as they receive rewards or punishments for correct or incorrect behavior (Brim, 1966, Heiss, 1990). Socialization often occurs through interactions with and observations of others who behave according to the expectations of the role—in other words, *role models* who exhibit socially acceptable behavior as part of the socialization process.

Role acquisition includes learning both the spoken and unspoken behavioral expectations of the position. When individuals are taking on new roles that challenge their psycho-social identity, it is even more important to make the hidden expectations of a role overt (see Karp & Bork, 2012, for a discussion of this with regard to community college student expectations). Thornton and Nardi explained: “Hence role acquisition involves in part an increasing awareness of implicit as well as explicit expectations encompassing attitudes and values, and knowledge and skills in addition to behavior” (1975, p. 872).

Returning to the library example, while libraries often post signs with explicit behavioral expectations, they also have implicit expectations of patron behavior. As a result, an individual unfamiliar with the situation would look to others in the library (e.g., role models) to gauge appropriate behavior. Witnessing someone receiving negative feedback for her actions—such as being asked to leave after speaking loudly in a quiet section of a library for some time—would signal to that witnessing individual that it is inappropriate to speak loudly in that situation and would help that person learn the formal and informal role behaviors for library patrons.

In the context of higher education, role models are a particularly important agent of socialization for new students. Bragg (1976) suggested that college students learn the expectations of their role through a five-step process. Students (1) observe role models, (2) imitate role model behavior, (3) receive feedback on their imitation of role model behavior, (4) modify their behavior as needed, and (5) internalize their new behaviors. Students also need frequent interaction with their peers and instructors to successfully learn what is expected of them in educational institutions (Padgett, Goodman, Johnson, Saichaie, Umbach, & Pascarella, 2010).

Some college students do not learn to enact socially expected behavior; this may negatively impact their college outcomes, such as persistence and completion (see Collier

& Morgan, 2008; Cox, 2009a; Karp & Bork, 2012; Venezia et al., 2003; Venezia et al., 2010). For example, Cox (2009a, 2009b) described situations in which instructors blamed students for their lack of preparedness and lack of understanding of the demands of college-level courses, while students felt defeated by their inability to meet instructor demands and subsequently convinced themselves that they did not belong in postsecondary education. First-generation college students are particularly susceptible to this struggle to understand the norms and behaviors that faculty expect of them (Collier & Morgan, 2008), especially when expected college student behavior conflicts with the behavioral norms of their home culture (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Marti, & Castro, 2010).

2.2 The Online Context

Role and socialization theory have primarily been applied to the face-to-face setting in education, with little attention paid to online learning; however, there is reason to believe that socialization and enactment of the roles of student and instructor may be more challenging in the online setting. Dennen, Darabi, and Smith (2007) have noted that because all online interaction is mediated by a computer, communication in this medium often lacks elements, such as immediacy, tone of voice, and gesture, that distinctly influence the enactment of the role of student and instructor. Moreover, online learning experts have argued that to create a successful online course, online instructors must “shift roles from dispensing knowledge to being a content expert/facilitator in online learning” and students must “change, from passively receiving knowledge to actively constructing and generating their own learning, both in isolation and in collaboration with other learners” (Arbaugh, 2004, p. 171). The online context may thus require instructors and students to *shift* roles relative to those for face-to-face courses (Heuer & King, 2004; Salmon, 2000), but it is not always clear to individuals how these roles vary across contexts (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001).

Acquiring a new role can be frustrating in any context, but it is even harder to adopt a role that is ill defined. The literature refers to ill-defined roles as having *role ambiguity*—a situation in which expectations are incomplete or insufficient to inform behavior, thereby contributing to individuals’ uncertainty about how to behave in social

situations (Biddle, 1986, Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Pearce, 1981; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Role ambiguity is marked by two components: information deficiency and unpredictability (Pearce, 1981). Information deficiency suggests that individuals lack clear information about the expectations associated with a role or how to fulfill the expectations that are communicated (Briggs, 2005; Rizzo et al., 1970). Unpredictability associated with role ambiguity means that individuals are unsure of the consequences of their behavior as it relates to their social role (Kahn et. al, 1964; Pearce, 1981; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981). Together, these components create role ambiguity, which in turn is associated with increased dissatisfaction and anxiety, decreased self-confidence, and poor performance (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970; Van Sell et al., 1981). Ultimately, when society lacks consensus as to appropriate role-related behavior, the socialization process is affected, since it is meant to familiarize individuals with well-defined roles.

Given the more limited ability to observe one's peers and to gain feedback on role behavior in the online setting, the socialization process in distance learning courses must occur through fundamentally different mechanisms than in the face-to-face setting. In a face-to-face course, students observe countless examples of role model behavior on a continual basis. For example, students are able to observe their more experienced peers ask questions and react to positive feedback from instructors. In online courses, while students have some opportunities to directly observe their peers (for example, by reading course discussion boards), much of their peers' course-related behaviors go unobserved. For example, students cannot observe how and when their classmates write emails to the instructor; this limitation makes it harder for students to observe role models and mimic their behavior. In essence, face-to-face courses offer students a transparent opportunity to observe role models and appropriate social norms, which is not possible in online courses.

Similarly, without appropriate venues to observe their colleagues, instructors lack transparent opportunities to observe and emulate new forms of behavior expected of them in the online setting. For example, in their study of online instructors who had recently participated in a six-week, intensive online professional development course, Heuer and King (2004) found that instructors left the course with a new understanding of the role of

an online instructor. As a result of a socialization exercise in which instructors were placed in the role of students, participating instructors obtained a clearer understanding of their online instructor role than they had prior to participating in the course. The experience of participating in an online course as a student allowed instructors to observe another instructor's approach to teaching online. Although not typical practice, this example illuminates the positive effects of a well-designed professional development opportunity for online instructors.

2.3 Framework for This Study

Considerable role ambiguity exists for instructors and students in the online setting, largely because the opportunity to organically observe role models and appropriate social norms is more opaque than in the face-to-face setting. Based on this theoretical framework, our analysis examines the presence of misaligned expectations and role ambiguity among online instructors and students. Specifically, we ask: What are community college stakeholders' expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities of instructors and students in the online environment?, and How do instructor and student opinions differ and align regarding online coursework? Throughout this paper, we examine student and instructor expectations in the online context for both their own role and that of their role counterpart in an effort to better understand the extent to which stakeholder expectations are misaligned.¹ The paper concludes with recommendations that colleges can use to inform institutional policy.

3. Data and Methods

This paper draws on qualitative data collected by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) as part of a larger study of online learning (Edgecombe, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013). The purpose of the study was to examine factors

¹ Since this paper includes interview data from students and instructors, our research design differs from that found in the existing literature on online courses. Traditionally, scholars have examined only one perspective—that of the instructor (see Bambara et al., 2009; Berge, 1999; De Gagne & Walters, 2009; Heur & King, 2004; Northrup, 2002) or that of the student (see Conrad, 2002; Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006; Ralston-Berg 2010, 2011)—in isolation. In contrast, this paper examines both student and instructor perspectives of their own role and that of the other. Throughout this paper, the term stakeholders refers to students and instructors.

that affect the quality of teaching and learning in the online environment, including professional development for online instructors, faculty and student perceptions, institutional policy, and student readiness. For the study, CCRC collected data from two community colleges in the Commonwealth of Virginia. During site visits, researchers conducted 38 interviews with online instructors and other campus employees whose job functions related to distance learning (i.e., instructional technology staff, counseling staff, and administrators) and interviewed 47 students enrolled in online courses. CCRC researchers used semi-structured protocols to ascertain interviewees' experiences and perceptions related to online learning; the interviews were recorded for transcription.²

Students and instructors were invited to participate in the study based on their enrollment in online sections of 23 high-demand, entry-level college courses, such as introductory English, sociology, biology, chemistry, and accounting.³ Most students in the sample were either African American or White, reflecting the broad racial and ethnic composition of students at the colleges included in the study. The majority of students interviewed were female, with approximately half estimated to be between 18 and 29 years old and the remaining half to be between 30 and 50.⁴ The majority of students in the sample were attending college full-time while working.

Most of the student interviewees had prior experience in online courses. In fact, 74 percent of the students ($n = 34$) had taken at least one online course in a prior semester, and most of these reported having received passing grades for those courses. Most of the student sample expected to successfully complete their current online courses. This rather high expected success rate is likely related to the student sample and to the fact that interviews were conducted late in the semester, well after the drop/add period.

² See Edgecombe et al. (2013) for more information regarding the larger study.

³ Using longitudinal data provided by the Virginia Community College System, CCRC researchers quantified the proportion of sections of introductory college-level courses offered online at each college. These analyses were used to identify popular introductory online course subjects. We then invited the instructors teaching online sections of these courses and the students enrolled to participate in the study. We also included a small number of faculty and students from other courses as well. All courses in our study used Blackboard as their online course delivery platform.

⁴ Respondents' ages were estimated based on physical characteristics and information provided in the interview. We are thus able to present only approximate age ranges for our student sample.

All interviews were transcribed and then coded using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software to identify opinions about online courses and stakeholder expectations about online students and instructors. For instance, we coded statements made by students and instructors about the instructor role in the online classroom as “expectations about instructors” and statements about the student role across all stakeholders as “expectations about students.” All expectations we identified were also coded as being associated with one of the following topics: support services, feedback, pedagogy, communication, course organization, technological competency, learning management, course difficulty, assignments, and “other expectations.” To capture opinions about the college’s institutional support of online learning, we coded for discussions of student readiness activities, such as orientations, and faculty development activities, such as formal training. Finally, we coded for previous online experiences for both students and instructors to capture any experiences that may have shaped their opinions and perceptions at the time of the interview.

The research team met on a regular basis to discuss discrepancies in the coding, challenging interview passages, and areas of the coding scheme in need of refinement. As coding progressed, the research team met several times to discuss various categories and themes emerging from the data. Throughout the process, our goal was to identify the expectations instructors and students had of themselves and of each other.

4. Findings

In our analysis of expectations of role-related skills and behavior among students and instructors, we found that stakeholders generally agreed on their expectations for each role—such as technological competency and learning management skills for students, and responsive communication habits for instructors—but often disagreed on how to best meet those expectations. We refer to this disagreement as misaligned expectations and present data that show how this misalignment is associated with role ambiguity for online students and instructors. For example, instructors and students agreed that motivation is an important student attribute that is key for student success; however, instructors felt that students should be self-motivated, whereas students thought

that instructors should motivate students through the use of engaging course materials. Because students and instructors were often unaware of each the other's expectations and did not participate in socialization activities that can facilitate well-defined role-related behavior, misaligned expectations were common and were a source of frustration for both students and instructors. Our presentation of findings discusses stakeholders' expectations about students, followed by stakeholders' expectations about instructors. Both categories include stakeholders' comments about what they expect from themselves and what others expect of them.

4.1 Expectations About Students

In the interviews, distance learning faculty clearly articulated their expectations of students in their online courses. Students also reported on what they expected of themselves as college students generally and as students in the online environment. Our findings suggest that instructors expected students to engage in what they felt was appropriate role-related behavior without having to explicitly communicate their expectations to students or provide them examples of role model behavior to emulate. In our interviews, three main topics arose as important contested themes in terms of expectations about online students: technological skills, learning management skills, and help-seeking behavior.

Technological preparedness. Expectations about the level of technological skills that students should possess prior to enrolling in an online course represents an area of stakeholder disagreement. Instructors assumed that students who enrolled in online courses would possess the requisite technological skills to succeed, yet they reported that this expectation was not always met. An instructor suggested that students "need to be more proficient than more of them are." She continued, "It surprises me that sometimes students just don't know how to copy and paste and do some of the basic, basic stuff you do through [Microsoft] Word." Similarly, another instructor expressed her frustration with students' lack of preparation for the technological demands of an online course.

They shouldn't need to have step-by-step explicit instructions to do everything. They should be able to figure that out; they should know how to attach files. They should know how to save something in a format that [Microsoft] Word can read, you know, that kind of stuff. And some of

them ... don't know how to put page numbers on the paper. And it's like "Should you really be in an online class if you can't get the page numbers to go in?"

In contrast, the majority of students in our sample believed that they had the necessary technological competencies.⁵ Many older returning students reported that they were comfortable with computers through work experience: "I don't need to be taught to use [Microsoft Office].... I've been in the workforce, so I've used [Microsoft] Word and Excel a lot." In addition, younger students assumed that they already possessed the requisite technological skills for online courses by virtue of their "generational" familiarity with computers and mobile phones. For instance, when asked whether an orientation to Blackboard would have been helpful, one student summed up the general attitude of online students regarding their technological skills: "We know a lot about computers and navigating and trying to figure out like what's what. So I think that [a Blackboard orientation] is not helpful. It's a waste of time if you ask me." Instructors often contested this idea that younger students were part of a more technologically savvy generation:

I think what the colleges are assuming is that everyone is computer literate now, and they are not. ... In fact, I sometimes think [that younger students] are less literate than maybe their parents. They can text; they can do the "thumb thing," but as far as navigating on a computer, they are not comfortable.

As the quotation implies, some of the instructors we interviewed were dubious that comfort with mobile devices, such as smart phones, translated into the computer skills necessary for success in an online course.

In terms of technological preparedness, then, our interviewees offered conflicting viewpoints regarding the student's role in preparing for an online course. Students did not think of themselves as underprepared for online courses, yet instructors expressed frustration regarding the level of student preparedness, suggesting that technological underpreparedness is more prevalent than the students in our sample believed.

⁵ This finding could be the result of course attrition of students with lower technological proficiency prior in the semester than when the interviews were conducted, as well as self-selection out of online courses by students who were less technically proficient prior to the course (Hurt, 2008).

Learning management. Instructors and students agreed that student success in online courses is contingent on strong learning management skills. Because distance learning courses do not mandate “seat time,” students must be more self-directed in their learning and must frequently log into the course website to keep themselves on track and to stay abreast of announcements and upcoming deadlines.

Both students and instructors often used the term “time management” to convey the broad notion of what we call learning management. They described time management as the prioritization of tasks, and both groups stressed the idea that responsibility and motivation are essential driving forces behind successful online course outcomes. Both groups felt that students should be responsible for completing their assignments in a timely fashion. Motivation was equally important, according to our interviewees, because without the desire or willingness to strive to do well in a course, it is easy for online students to lose focus. There was consensus among stakeholders that without responsibility and motivation, even students who had the ability to prioritize tasks would be unsuccessful. However, there were also important differences in how students and instructors discussed their expectations of relevant role-related behaviors, which reveal role ambiguity in the online context: Instructors articulated the need for students to be intrinsically responsible and motivated, whereas students stated that instructors had a duty to encourage and cultivate these student qualities.

Responsibility. Both groups of stakeholders felt that students should be responsible for their learning by staying on track with course readings and regularly logging into the Blackboard course page. A student explained, “Online is really for the serious learner, because it requires more of you than the teacher, other than they have to grade and be there to answer questions. But it’s really up to you if you want to learn.” In fact, many students described feeling a higher sense of accountability in the online environment than in a face-to-face course. When asked what advice to share with students considering an online course, one student said:

I would just tell them to make sure that they have some discipline to check in every day, keep up with their assignments when they are due. Because really, you know, you don’t have a class to go to at a certain time every day. You have to kind of make that time yourself. So just have the self-discipline.

Although students felt that they were responsible for managing their time to effectively to master course content, they also expected instructors to guide them through the learning process. In a face-to-face course instructors use lectures and classroom discussions to help students determine what material is most important. Many students expected the same in the online environment. The following student expressed disappointment that online instructors did not help students prioritize learning material:

In a [face-to-face] class, you know your teacher has the book there and they will hit on the points that they feel are important. And you know that's what's important, you trust your teacher. But [in] an online class, all you have is that book. You don't know what's important out of that book. You don't have anybody to tell you "Okay, this is what I'm looking at more importantly out of this chapter."

Typical of what was articulated during the interviews, another student said, "[Online] you have to log on constantly because you will kind of miss [important] dates. Face-to-face, they tell you like 'We have a test this day.' But online ... you have to click on it to know." According to these student interviewees, an essential component of the online student role is recognizing that they themselves are responsible for independently identifying the most important material, assigning priorities to various course-related tasks, and keeping abreast of deadlines without necessarily receiving guidance from their instructors. They did, however, also feel that instructors have a responsibility to help them manage these tasks.

Instructors felt that students who took responsibility for their own learning would review the required course content, follow up with questions, complete assignments in a timely fashion, and solicit feedback on their performance to course assignments. For instance, one instructor noted that online students needed to be independent learners:

[Students] feel like they're on their own almost, you know because they've got the computer and they've got the lectures. And they have to make themselves sit down and listen to them, and make themselves ... do homework. And it's hard, well not hard but something that requires self-motivation, self-discipline.

As with most other instructors, this instructor did not indicate during her interview that she had a role to play in fostering students' sense of responsibility. In fact, most instructors suggested that the onus was on students to be responsible for their own learning and that instructors did not have a role to play in fostering this student characteristic. This was in clear contrast to students, who felt that instructors should help students understand and meet their responsibilities.

While instructors consistently spoke about the need for students to take responsibility for completing their coursework, they rarely discussed strategies they used to help students exercise responsibility. One notable exception was a psychology professor who helped students remain on track with their assignments by providing students with clear learning objectives and supplemental information. A student in this course commented:

And she'll give you like a highlight, "Alright, on chapter 8 these were some of the critical points for that chapter." The other thing she'll do is, "These are items to study for your exam." She'll give like a little review sheet of each chapter of, "You really need to focus on these areas." She also has started putting in different video links. She has added some of those, which I've told her she needs a whole lot more of. It makes the class, the facilitation, a lot easier on some of the harder subjects.

Although there were outliers, our data suggest that the majority of online instructors expected students to take a higher level of responsibility for their learning compared with face-to-face courses. While students agreed, they also appreciated instructors who made an effort to help them do this.

Motivation. A related aspect of learning management involves student motivation, which was commonly discussed by stakeholders, although with nuanced differences. Similar to the findings regarding student responsibility, analysis of the interview data points to a misalignment of expectations around the relationship between students' intrinsic motivation and the instructor's role in enhancing drive.

Students expected themselves to take initiative, but they also anticipated that instructors would facilitate student motivation through engaging activities and varied pedagogical approaches. For example, one student suggested that audiovisual

technologies helped with student engagement by reinforcing students' determination to stay on track with the course: "Maybe a video or a voice-recording might be a little more personal. ... It kind of holds your attention more too when it's more interactive."

Instructors, in contrast, felt that students should be intrinsically driven to stay on task. One instructor explained the importance of student motivation:

They are having to teach themselves, to a certain extent. You know, they think "Oh, I don't have to go to college; you know sit in the class and listen." But they have to put that effort, they should at least, be putting that effort into learning the material themselves.

Some instructors felt that lack of student motivation has larger implications in online courses. One instructor explained poor online student outcomes in terms of a lack of student motivation, suggesting that not all students are equipped to take courses online:

They don't have necessarily the motivation that they need to succeed. I think that that's the really hard part because it makes it look like maybe distance learning isn't meeting the needs as well as it could, but I think it's because some of the people that sign up for it aren't really a good fit.

Generally, instructors did not feel that they were accountable for students' lack of motivation in online courses.

The discrepancies between stakeholder expectations about students' skills, behaviors, and attitudes surrounding time-management—including students' sense of responsibility and motivation—demonstrate the range of perspectives on what are perceived to be appropriate roles and actions for teachers and students in the online environment. Students do not have a clear understanding of what is expected of them as online students due to a lack of communication around expectations and due to instructor perceptions that student time-management of learning tasks is something that is wholly in the students' domain, outside of their professional duties. These misaligned expectations regarding appropriate behavior contribute to stakeholder role ambiguity.

Help-seeking. Finally, stakeholders disagreed on expectations regarding help-seeking behavior in online courses. While students and instructors agreed that students

should reach out when they have questions related to the course, students did not necessarily understand how to do this effectively.

An instructor who oversees online learning explained that students are responsible for communicating with faculty as problems emerged: “If they [students] do have questions, they have to ask immediately. They can’t wait until the last minute [when] faculty probably won’t be able to answer the question immediately. In that case . . . that’s their own fault.” Because instructors do not have access to the same cues about student understanding in the online environment as they do in face-to-face courses, distance learning places the onus on students to reach out to their instructors and ask for help. As one student noted,

The thing that’s probably completely absent in most online courses is the instructor’s ability to gauge whether you understand or not, by watching your facial expressions and [seeing] the “deer in the headlight” look or there’s the “I’m totally not getting this.” Or, there’s the “Ah-ha moment” that they actually see you go through when you go, “Oh, I get that.” They don’t get to see any of that, so they can’t use it to help you.

Nonetheless, some instructors expressed an awareness of the increased importance of communicating with students in terms of providing help in the asynchronous online environment. Instructors often cannot tell whether an uncommunicative student needs help until after a graded assignment or assessment. According to one instructor,

I can’t use the kinds of facial expressions and body language [I would face-to-face]. I have to make certain they understand or not misunderstand the emails and the discussion boards and the work online. And so I always send a message at the beginning, “If you don’t understand something, you need to say something to me.”

Online instructors in our interviews often indicated that students should reach out if they have any questions, and they felt that stating this expectation clearly should be sufficient. However, cultural factors may make it difficult for some students to reach out

for help, even if they know they should (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010).⁶

Since asking for help in an online course is primarily a private student behavior, students who fail to enact help-seeking behavior may be at a disadvantage compared with their peers. And since students cannot readily observe their classmates asking for help, they may experience a delay in both content learning and socialization in the role of online student. Without instructors clearly articulating to students the expectation that they must speak up when they are lost and providing examples or other support to help them do so, students may not enact appropriate role-related behavior. Some instructors attempted to promote student help-seeking behavior by making themselves more approachable—for example, by reaching out to students without students always having to ask, by providing multiple ways for students to contact them, and by responding promptly when students did request help.

Summary. Our analysis of stakeholder expectations about students shows that instructors' expectations of students' skills and behavior in distance learning courses were not always aligned with how students defined their roles. According to our interviews, instructors did not clearly and consistently communicate their expectations to students—it is therefore not surprising that students may not always have been aware of these expectations. For their part, students did not always strive to meet role-related expectations as perceived by instructors, in part because they felt that they had already met those expectations, such as having the technological skills to succeed in a distance learning course. Or, as was the case of help-seeking behavior, students may have been aware of the expected role-related behavior but nevertheless have struggled with proactively asking their instructors for help. These findings reinforce the importance of examining the role of an online instructor and student together, as both actors contribute to role ambiguity.

⁶ These studies suggest that first-generation college students, students from low-income households, and racial and ethnic minority students have different help-seeking behavior based on what they expect they should and should not ask of others.

4.2 Expectations About Instructors

Both students and instructors discussed role-related expectations for online instructors in three main areas: communication habits, substantive feedback, and online presence and pedagogy. Our analysis reveals misalignment of expectations across these areas, indicating the presence of role ambiguity.

Communication. From the student perspective, instructor communication was extremely important for their success in the online course. Email was the main communication tool stakeholders used in online courses, and response time to messages was the most commonly mentioned source of tension between students and instructors. Students expected instructors to respond to email messages within 24 hours, whereas instructors considered responding within 48 hours to be appropriate role-related behavior. While most of the instructors clearly stated their communication policy in their syllabi, students still voiced strong disagreement. As one student described,

My teacher takes two days to answer back emails. Yeah, she said within 48 hours she will respond [in the syllabus], but sometimes questions have got to be answered like right now. I understand, she also has a life... But sometimes I'll be up like at 1:00 or 2:00 [in the morning] trying to do something.

Students' major concerns about the 48-hour response policy were typically related to correspondence about assignments with pending deadlines. Given the high stakes of some assignments, a lack of instructor response to students' questions often elevated students' anxiety and frustration. One student noted that, "I had to send [my instructor] an email twice. ... I'm in jeopardy of failing this class and I don't feel like it's all my responsibility." The communication issue was of particular alarm for students because many instructors had a "no weekend" email response policy, which was when many students completed their assignments. One student articulated his concerns as follows: "If it's over the weekend, then I'm typically not going to get a response until Monday. That's

when I have all my free time, all my questions will come out.... I just wish it was faster.”⁷

Students reported that they often emailed their instructor because they wanted more guidance on a particular assignment or assessment. In general, students expected instructors to provide clear, consistent, and predictable assignment and assessment guidelines. Student interviewees responded favorably to instructors who provided rubrics and/or examples or models of exemplary assignments as guideposts with assignments. For example, one information technology instructor provided a rubric for discussion board assignments that clearly outlined her grading procedures. Students were assessed for their focus, specificity, support, thoughtfulness, and use of language on a 10-point scale and provided with a description of what scores meant for each grade. When instructors did not provide this type of guidance, however, many students noted that they often had to move forward with an assignment before they received a response in order to meet an assignment deadline. Although this is similar for face-to-face courses that only meet once or twice a week, distance learning students often felt frustrated that email was their sole communication tool, while face-to-face courses offer opportunity for questions during class times.

Instructors expressed an awareness of students’ concerns around email response times but often felt conflicted and frustrated about how to respond appropriately. One instructor expressed his frustration with students’ expectations of rapid response communication saying, “I can just tell you, a mature distance learner is very demanding ... and in many cases, are unreasonable in their expectations. You know, they have lives, but their instructor does not.”

Although some instructors provided students with their home and mobile phone numbers and encouraged students to contact them whenever needed, many other instructors still felt that students should respect instructors’ privacy and free time. As one instructor expressed, “I don’t allow people to text me simply because I feel like [I’d be] on-call 24/7, and I cannot do that.” Other instructors thought of their role as requiring responsive communication with students; some even felt that this helped them create

⁷ This point of view accords with findings in the literature on online learning highlighting that students want immediate responses to emails, clear standards for instructor response time and instructor availability, and individualized email responses (Conrad, 2002; Mupinga et al., 2006; Ralston-Berg 2010, 2011).

resources for students to work effectively: “I’m trying to anticipate every question. And when students ask me new questions, I think ‘Oh, well I need to create something for that.’ So my goal is that they can work independently, but I’m there for assistance.”

In summary, students expected their instructors to create very clear guidelines and rubrics around assignments to minimize the need for follow-up questions, reply almost immediately to email queries, and use email to provide substantive guidance. Instructors expected students to reach out for help and to realize that email responses may not be as quick as students may want. In sum, instructors and students were conceptualizing their roles in different ways.

Feedback. Students expected instructors to provide written feedback on assignments rather than merely assigning a grade; in contrast, instructors tended to provide only a grade, expecting students to solicit more specific information if they did not understand their grade. For example, as one instructor explained, “I just give them a numerical grade for an assignment.... I tell them, you know, ‘If you have questions about why you got this amount of points for our discussion board, let me know’ because it should be pretty self-explanatory.” For many students, however, a numeric grade on an assignment was not sufficient because they did not consider the grading criteria to be transparent. Student interviewees indicated that they expected instructors to provide written responses assessing their performance in reference to each assignment’s guidelines.

Our data also strongly suggest that students expected instructors to provide comments on discussion board posts and felt discouraged by the lack of feedback they received on their posts. One student remarked that the lack of instructor reaction to discussion board questions resulted in the student’s devaluation of the assignments:

She’ll give us questions and in those questions it might ask you “Discuss such-and-such, being in depth with this, be specific with that” and you can put your opinion in there. But the thing is ... you don’t get any feedback. And so it feels like “Why am I telling you anything if you don’t really [read it]? I mean like you are not responding to me in any kind of way.” It’s almost like you are talking to a wall.

As illustrated here, in a distance learning course, students can only judge whether the instructor has read their posting if the instructor provides a written acknowledgement. Conversely, in a face-to-face, in-class discussion, students receive immediate recognition from the instructor when they make a point.

Instructors noted, however, that it was time consuming to constantly provide students with written feedback. An instructor noted that, “I can’t just leave it [my online course] to run by itself. I have to be in there, pretty much every day to give them feedback and guide them in the right direction.” To both ease their workload and reduce student frustration, we also found several examples of instructors using automated grading mechanisms (e.g., Pearson’s MyMathLab, Mastering Chemistry) that allow students to receive immediate grades. Ideally, these programs provide instructors with the opportunity to devote more time to providing more targeted written feedback to students.

Our interviewees reported that students preferred more rather than less feedback from their instructors. Students who had unsatisfying experiences with instructor responses expressed high levels of frustration. This suggests that students have expectations that online instructors should providing thoughtful, written feedback to student work as a matter of course, without students having to ask for this information.

Online presence and pedagogy. Students were particularly vocal about how course content is delivered in the online environment and about the role an instructor should play in the online classroom. Based on their experiences in face-to-face courses and prior experiences with online courses, students had clear expectations that the instructor should use varied and engaging methods to deliver course content and have a frequent online presence to guide them through the learning process. Underlying these expectations is the assumption that the instructor role includes providing motivation, engaging students, and actively teaching. In particular, students preferred that instructors use technology to diversify the way that content is delivered, thereby providing multiple ways student can engage with both the content and their instructor.

Students responded favorably to external multimedia resources such as YouTube or PBS audiovisual clips, but they expressed a strong preference for multimedia presentations created by the instructor. Given the limitations of the asynchronous online environment for creating more personal connections, students found that hearing and/or

seeing their instructor helped them to feel a sense of connection to the instructor and the course. They noted that materials created by the course instructor provided a personal touch, creating the sense of the instructor's presence in the course and giving students the sense that the instructor was actively teaching them.⁸ One student noted that his English teacher:

... is one of the better online teachers that I have had because he actually has [Microsoft] PowerPoints that he has voice recordings on and it actually makes you feel like you're getting a lecture in class. So, that was an aspect that I thought was absolutely fabulous because you actually feel like you're having some kind of interaction with him ... so you kind of don't miss having the classroom environment.

Students frequently noted that they felt like more like they were in a classroom lecture when instructors used audio and video materials created by course instructors. Overall, students expected instructors to have a strong and frequent presence in the online environment and to guide them through the learning process.

The expectations around content delivery were misaligned across the students and instructors we interviewed. Students expected that instructors would create engaging course materials; however, instructors often felt students were unrealistic in their demands. Most instructors seemed unsure about how they could realistically incorporate such materials or even how they could actively "teach" an online course rather than merely "manage" it. One instructor described this phenomenon:

I think from the faculty point of view, there's a lot lost. ... I feel like a manager once my class is set up, my lectures are done. I kind of feel like I'm teaching when I record my lectures, but once the class is set up, it's pure management. You go in and you grade things. You see if something needs to be fixed. ... You don't really feel like you are teaching.

⁸ Instructor presence can be defined as interactions between the instructor and students that provide students with exposure to the instructor's personality and background, which is discussed in more detail in Edgecombe et al. (2013).

This sense of managing and monitoring—discussed by roughly half of the instructors interviewed—has implications for instructors’ ability and desire to produce engaging course materials.

Even though online courses are delivered through technology, not all instructors expected themselves to use technological tools in order to produce more engaging and active pedagogy. In fact, many instructors exclusively delivered content through textbooks or other written materials. One instructor explained why he took a text-based approach in an attempt to have his distance course be a facsimile of his traditional course:

So I started typing up summaries of my lectures. ... They might be anywhere from like eight to 15 pages for a lecture on a given topic and that would be typically what I would cover in a [face-to-face class]. ... Those are available to my online students, so they can just read it and then ask questions about it and then we discuss it the same way as I would in the classroom.

An instructor who used track changes in Microsoft Word to provide students with sample critiques of essays noted that instructors could use audiovisual technology available at the college to provide a lecture, but also said, “I’m not really excited about using that.” Instructors who were less inclined to use technological tools generally did not consider that to be a component of their role as an online instructor.

Students, however, expressed frustration with courses that relied on traditional text-based pedagogy. For example, one student explained how her online instructor was not meeting her expectations of role-related behavior:

The textbook is pretty much my only primary tool for that class. ... In my opinion, [the course] is too book-heavy. ... It would be nicer to actually see like a visual presentation of it. ... Even my in-person classes are stressing that the textbook is a resource tool. It is not supposed to be necessarily your only way of learning whatever your teacher is trying to convey to you.

Another student suggested that online instructors were implicitly telling students that they had to learn course content independently. “I think the problem with online teaching is that the teachers kind of tell you ‘Okay, here’s the book, you know, study

pages 12 through 23 and know this for a test in a few days.” The student continued that this approach did not work for him because “I can’t teach myself math.”

According to students, online instructors should use of a variety of resources to actively teach students content and they should maintain a strong online presence. While some instructors agreed that these were key actions and behaviors associated with the role of online instructor, many conceived of their role as that of a course manager and relied on a limited number of pedagogical approaches. Given the diversity of philosophies, preparation, and personalities of instructors, these differing views are not surprising or distinct to the online space, but they are exacerbated in distance learning courses.

Summary. In general, our findings show that students wanted more from instructors than instructors thought they should provide. Students expected instructors to communicate often and promptly, provide large amounts of written feedback, and create engaging course materials. Instructors, however, felt that these student demands were largely unrealistic and unfair. Similar to the findings on expectations about students, we found misaligned expectations about online instructors as well.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has used interview data from students and faculty at two Virginia community colleges to explore how expectations regarding the role of online student and online instructor vary between these two groups. The interview data revealed a misalignment between student and instructor expectations of one another’s skills, behaviors, and attitudes. Although each group may have felt confident that they were enacting their *own* role appropriately, both groups were frustrated that the *other* group was not doing so. We found that most instructors felt that students should be solely responsible for being motivated, identifying the most important material, prioritizing course-related tasks, reviewing assignments in advance, and asking any questions of the instructor several days before assignments are due. While students agreed that students should manage their time well and perform course tasks and assignments on schedule, they expected instructors to work more actively to make key tasks, material, priorities,

and assignments clear; to motivate student learning by ensuring that materials were engaging; to inject their own presence into the course; and to support student learning by being proactive in providing substantive feedback. As a result, online stakeholders often expected something of their counterparts above and beyond what those counterparts expected of themselves. Both students and instructors expressed frustration about their expectations not being met. The frustration articulated by our student interviewees—who were largely successful online students—may help to explain why less successful online students ultimately drop out or fail.

The phenomena of role ambiguity and misaligned expectations are not restricted to distance learning (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Karp & Bork, 2012). Nonetheless, our findings suggest that, in an evolving online context in which expectations have not yet become firmly established, online students and instructors have not been socialized in well-defined roles. There are thus few agreed-upon standards for appropriate role behavior and action, at least in the areas of technological preparedness, learning management, and help-seeking among students, and effective communication, substantive feedback, and online presence and course content among instructors. In our exploration of these areas, it became clear that students and instructors had misaligned expectations of student and instructor roles, which is associated with role ambiguity.

Because online roles do not appear to be well-defined, fundamental questions about appropriate action on the part of instructors and students remain unanswered. For example, if a student is not highly motivated in a course, is it reasonable to expect an instructor to help motivate that student through the use of engaging course materials, more personal intervention, or other methods? Or is motivation strictly a student characteristic for which instructors have no responsibility? Although there may be no clear answer to this question, perhaps role ambiguity can be reduced by bringing student and instructor expectations closer together. To encourage this process of “meeting in the middle,” colleges could implement an explicit socialization process that communicates instructor expectations to students—and vice versa—to improve the online experience for all parties.

To this end, we advocate a two-pronged strategy: (1) improve student readiness activities for the college as a whole and for individual courses, and (2) enhance

professional development for instructors. These strategies, implemented simultaneously, would allow both students and instructors an opportunity to observe and define specific role-related behavior in distance learning courses. Through a transparent socialization process, role ambiguity that currently surrounds these online roles might be reduced.

5.1 Online Student Readiness

Our analysis suggests that students are largely unaware of what is expected of them when they assume the role of an online student. In order to help students meet the requirements of this new role and their instructors' expectations, colleges should consider both requiring students to complete a distance learning orientation course before enrolling in online courses and offering ongoing support once online courses have begun. An orientation to distance learning would focus on how being an online student is different from being a face-to-face student, skills to succeed in the online classroom, and what to expect from online instructors. This type of orientation would explicitly communicate expectations and appropriate role-related behavior to students prior to enrolling in an online course. In addition, because it might still be difficult for students to engage in issues that they have not yet encountered in an actual online class in such an orientation, colleges should also offer ongoing support once online courses have begun.

Both colleges in our study offered several student readiness activities, such as online and face-to-face orientations targeted at online learners and an online self-assessment to determine whether distance learning was a good fit for the student in terms of technological preparation and learning management skills. In addition, a small number of instructors produced course-specific orientations outlining what was expected of students in a particular course. These student readiness activities were all designed to enable online students to learn the role-related expectations their instructors would have in a distance course. There was, however, minimal take-up of these services since colleges did not monitor students' participation and students did not think it was necessary to attend. Moreover, online enrollment at either college was not predicated on completion of readiness activities.

Colleges that already offer distance learning orientations may want to rethink their existing student readiness activities to better prepare students for the demands of

studying online. First, distance learning orientations could be offered prior to and during registration periods to help students determine whether online courses are appropriate for them, while providing sufficient time to register for face-to-face alternatives if necessary. Students should not be forced to take an online course when all the face-to-face sections are filled. Rather, institutions may benefit from reserving slots in popular face-to-face courses for students who choose not to take an online course after completing an online readiness orientation. Second, colleges may want to consider making readiness activities mandatory, and they may want to check to ensure that students are really engaged in these activities. Colleges could monitor readiness attendance through orientation registration logs and/or graded course assignments, and they could track this information through the college's student information system.

Third, colleges should consider not only requiring students to attend readiness activities but should also consider refining the content of the orientation to ensure it provides practice in—not just an overview of—relevant skills and knowledge associated with success in online courses. Contextualized practice in useful skills may be much more helpful than providing isolated information (Karp, Bickerstaff, Rucks-Ahidiana, Bork, Barragan, & Edgecombe, 2012; see also Bickerstaff & Edgecombe, 2012). Stakeholder reports suggest that the substantive areas of weakness for online students are around learning management and technological competency. We therefore recommend that orientations include mandatory modules on time-management, self-directed learning, and computer literacy that allow students to practice skills rather than just read about what they will need to be able to do in an online course.

Fourth, to supplement refined college-wide online orientations, we also propose that instructors think about developing and improving course-specific orientations to prepare students for the demands of their individual courses. These course-specific orientations could be developed in collaboration with relevant academic and student service personnel. Colleges could provide ongoing professional development to ensure that these orientations are supporting the college-wide development of online instruction. Finally, colleges may also want to integrate information about distance learning and the necessary skills students must possess to be successful in online courses (and traditional courses) in college induction activities, such as summer orientations, student success

courses, and advising meetings. This can ultimately help ensure that more students are exposed to and have practice in the expectations of online learning.

5.2 Professional Development for Online Pedagogy

Colleges need to not only inform and prepare students for the online environment but should also do the same for instructors. To this end, we suggest that colleges invest in stronger professional development activities for online instructors that help them improve their course management and pedagogy.

In order to present a variety of content in diverse and engaging ways, including utilization of text, audio, and video, community colleges may want to help instructors assess their course learning objectives to determine the appropriate technologies to integrate in their online courses. Pedagogy and faculty learning is rarely discussed in postsecondary education (Bickerstaff & Edgecombe, 2012; Grant & Keim, 2002), but the rapid proliferation of distance learning courses provides an excellent opportunity for institutions to refocus their attention to the key issue of *how* instructors teach students.

Although both colleges in our study provided some level of professional development, the online instructors we interviewed often noted that they were unable to partake in these activities due to competing demands on their time. They also commented that they preferred individual assistance with new technological tools rather than learning how to use these resources in group training sessions. Based on this feedback, we recommend that colleges consider providing pedagogical professional development programs for online instructors in three formats: web-based workshops, online tutorials, and on-demand one-on-one assistance. Web-based workshops would provide more flexibility to allow instructors to participate in a live training session (e.g., webinars) while attending remotely. In addition to providing instructors with flexibility, this delivery mechanism would allow colleges to maximize their professional development offerings by partnering with other colleges to share resources. For instructors who are unable to attend trainings at specific times, online tutorials can provide assistance, particularly around implementing best practices and learning new technological tools. These online trainings could be made available for instructors to access at their convenience. To provide role models for online instructors, colleges could also send out

web-based “newsletters” to instructors highlighting the exemplary use of technological tools to encourage instructors to participate in professional development opportunities to improve pedagogy. Finally, on-demand one-on-one assistance would allow instructors to follow-up on the trainings and tutorials with individual questions that need further explanation.

Colleges may also want to consider recruiting strong online faculty as “master” teachers to work with their colleagues on course development and refinement. Master teachers could be selected based in part on their understanding of student expectations, how expectations affect online practice, how faculty can move to meet students’ needs, and how students can be incentivized to meet instructors’ expectations. Moreover, strong online faculty serving as master teachers would be able to help socialize their peers in effective role-related behavior.

In addition to professional development around technology, instructors would also benefit from opportunities where they are asked to be online students. As was discussed in Section 2, current research suggests that the experience of being an online student is particularly powerful for instructors (Heuer & King, 2004). Professional development when possible should be conducted through online courses to give instructors an opportunity to critically analyze student-centered online pedagogy.

Colleges also need to ensure that all online instructors: have a basic level of computer proficiency, can help students with basic technological questions, have the institutional knowledge to refer students to the appropriate college resources, and understand how to communicate personal presence in the online context. As institutions ask that students have a minimal level of proficiency prior to enrolling in an online course, instructors should also be proficient in online instruction. This can be accomplished through requiring all online instructors to participate in professional development opportunities offered in the college and/or by outside organizations that specialize in distance education. Teaching online may not be a viable option for all instructors; colleges may therefore want to consider using only those instructors who have received training and guidance. Although this would place the onus on colleges to ensure that all faculty who volunteer or are assigned to teach online courses are able to

teach effectively in that context, in the end it would lead to more a proficient cadre of online instructors and more effective learning for students.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that all instructors, online and face-to-face, could benefit from periodic training in effective pedagogy. Colleges could institutionalize faculty learning through orientations and learning communities for new instructors that teach them how to create clear assignments and provide helpful feedback to students, while also maintaining a work–life balance. Faculty learning communities, in particular, may be a fruitful way to establish connections for isolated faculty and to increase collaboration around pedagogical innovations (Cox, 2004; Furco & Moely, 2012). Moreover, community colleges could partner with four-year universities to offer graduate-level courses in pedagogy. Community colleges might then consider asking faculty members to take these courses as a condition of hiring or promotion.

While this study is focused on online learning, misaligned expectations between students and instructors also have consequences in face-to-face courses (see Collier & Morgan, 2008; Cox, 2009a; Karp & Bork, 2012). Thus, researchers and practitioners should continue to consider how stakeholder expectations in both online and traditional courses affect the student and instructor experience. Yet, as this study has shown, because online roles are not yet well-defined and because socialization in roles is more opaque in the online context, misaligned expectations can be particularly frustrating for online stakeholders. As distance learning grows, students and instructors need to be better prepared for the demands of online course participation.

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