How Faculty Learn To Teach Online: What Administrators Need to Know

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Abstract

Research shows most teachers teach as they were taught. However, distance educators lack a model or benchmark for online teaching because many of them have not taken online courses as students. Indeed, many studies on teaching online point to the importance of training for online instructors. Few studies go into specifics about exactly what that training should look like. The purpose of this study is to examine best practices in professional development for instructors learning to teach online.

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There has been enormous growth in the number and scope of online classes in higher education. In fact, the "explosive growth of distance education is transforming post-secondary education" (Moller, Foshay & Huett, 2008, p. 66). Allen and Seaman (2015) began tracking online education enrollment numbers in 2003. They found that every year since 2003, "the number of students taking at least one online course has grown at a rate greater than the overall higher education student body" (p. 12).

From an administrative standpoint, online education is an increasingly more important component of educational institutions' strategies. In 2002, 48.8 percent of academic leaders reported that online learning was critical to their institution's long-term strategy. In 2015, that number increased to 70.8 percent (Allen & Seaman, 2015). There are several reasons for this increase. Technological advancements have influenced the increase in online course offerings and enrollments. Budgetary crises affecting institutions of higher education across the country make online education vital to many institutional fiscal plans (Schmidt, Hodge, & Tschida, 2013). Colleges and universities see distance education as an effective means for sustaining growth (Moller et al. 2008; Young & Lewis, 2008). There is growing evidence of the cost-effectiveness of online learning as courses can be developed, copied, and reused by other instructors allowing for cost efficiencies. In addition, the replication and standardization of online courses offers, to some extent, quality control in terms of content

presented and course design (Wise & Rothman, 2010).

Because online education offers a way of increasing enrollments and managing financial difficulties, an ever-increasing number of colleges and universities are embracing online education as part of their strategic plans. As a result, faculty had to adapt, as well. "Faculty used to teaching in traditional face-to-face classrooms now find themselves in the very different situation of teaching online. In the process, they are learning that teaching online is not as simple as transferring face-to-face courses to the Internet" (Schmidt, Hodge & Tschida, 2013, p. 132). Online teaching requires specific skills and competencies, and faculty cannot be expected to know intuitively how to design and deliver effective online courses (Smith, 2005; Paloff & Pratt, 2001). Research says most teachers teach as they were taught. In discussing how professors learn to teach, Kugel (1993) summarizes, "Most of what they have learned, they have learned from watching others and, as they start to do it on their own, they usually wish they had paid more attention to what their professors did as they taught" (p. 317). However, distance educators lack a model or benchmark for online teaching because many of them have not taken online courses as students. Results of the aforementioned circumstances are understandable. A 2012 study conducted by Inside Higher Ed found that 58 percent of the almost 5,000 faculty members who responded to the study described themselves as more fearful than excited about the growth of online education (Kolowich, 2012). Despite increasing numbers of institutions offering online courses, increasing numbers of courses each institution offers, and increasing numbers of students taking online courses, acceptance of online education among faculty members has lagged. "Only about 28 percent of chief academic officers say that their faculty members accept 'the value and legitimacy of online education', a rate substantially the same as it was in 2003" (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 6).

That fear may be based on lack of knowledge. Betts and Heaston (2014) found that "Faculty with no distance education experience may tend to have a more negative attitude toward distance education because of perceived inhibitors or barriers such as concerns about quality, concerns about time, and concerns about technology and support" (p. 1). Research has shown it takes more time and effort to develop and teach online courses than it does face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Freeman, 2015), and this is especially true for instructors new to online teaching (Freeman, 2015). As is the case with many things, Freeman (2015) discussed the issue of learning curves for instructors who have transitioned from face-to-face to online teaching. Freeman's research has shown learning curves for both online course development and online teaching decrease substantially as those instructors get more experience developing curriculum and teaching online.

Continuing professional education designed to help instructors learn to teach online and continually develop their online teaching skills may address the issues of fear and distrust noted above. Indeed, many studies on teaching online point to the importance of training for online instructors (Abdous, 2011; Bailey & Card, 2009; Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001; Horvitz, Beach, Anderson, & Xia, 2014). However, few studies go into specifics about exactly what that training should look like. The purpose of this research is to examine best practices in professional development for instructors learning to teach online. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What types of learning activities are helpful to instructors learning to teach online? What types are not helpful?
2. What content areas should be addressed in professional development activities for online instructors?

Method

In order to address the research questions, a basic qualitative approach using focus groups was employed. Merriam (2009) notes a characteristic of basic qualitative research rests on the fact that individuals construct reality through interactions in their social worlds. Basic qualitative research examines "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). This is an appropriate method for examining the ways in which professors learn to teach online because these processes involve individuals' perceptions based on reflection and interaction with their environments. The goal of basic qualitative research is to understand something (Merriam, 1998). In this study, it is to understand the perspective and views of the subjects with regard to the types of activities that helped them learn to teach online.

Data for this study was collected over the course of one academic year (2011-12). Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants (Patton, 1990). Merriam (2009) noted a major benefit of purposeful sampling is researchers can study information-rich cases and learn a great deal about the topics in question. The use of focus group sessions was determined to be the best approach for this study, as it allowed the researchers to gather data directly from participants and allowed participants to hear and discuss each other's responses (Merriam, 2009).

Participants were instructors of online courses from various program areas and levels of experience within the college of education at a large southeastern university. The instructors varied in their professional status and each instructor in the focus group had taught a distance education course for a minimum of one year. All instructors interviewed had taught both face-to-face and via distance education during their teaching careers. Participants' level of technical literacy varied from novice to expert. Each focus group consisted of a mixture of novice and veteran instructors, a range of experience with online teaching, and members of different program areas. This was done to get a strong sample of experience across levels and programs as well as encourage discourse among instructors across departments.

Participants volunteered to attend focus group sessions and were provided an introductory message regarding the topic of discussion. All signed confidentiality agreements and release forms prior to focus group sessions. A series of three 90-minute focus groups was conducted and audio taped. Two researchers participated in each focus group with one leading the semi-structured discussion and the other taking field notes. Each focus group discussion was transcribed; transcripts were read and coded for themes by individual researchers then compared for reliability. Specific themes were identified and transcripts were reread for additional instances of each.

Findings come from transcripts of the three focus groups, field notes from the focus groups, and notes from researcher discussions during data analysis. Researchers distinguished specific themes that arose from the focus group questions. The data was analyzed for specific words, context, consistency, frequency, specificity, and intensity of comments as suggested by Krueger (1994). Utilizing Krueger's systematic approach, the researchers were able to see trends emerge. As the focus of this paper is best practices in professional development for instructors learning to teach online, themes and trends identified were examined in that context. The researchers specifically examined the data from that standpoint, and findings are presented as such.

Findings

While many research studies point to the importance of faculty development and training on how to develop and teach online courses, more specific details are rare. Methods for teaching faculty about online course development and online teaching as well as the types of faculty development that are effective are not often discussed in detail. Based on responses to the research questions, the authors were able to delineate specific elements important for faculty development programs that focus on how instructors learn to teach online. Four specific themes will be discussed in the section that follows.

Professional Development Topics

Respondents indicated continuing professional development opportunities for online instructors focused mostly on the use of technology (and there were many technology-focused opportunities from which to choose). However, respondents pointed out that there are major differences between knowing how to use technology in an online classroom, knowing how to effectively design online courses, and knowing how to teach online. Respondents indicated there were few opportunities to help them learn about online teaching and online course development (curriculum design). One participant explained her initial experience with online teaching as "baptism under fire"A professor that had been here for ten years had given me the design of the course, but [support for] how to teach online was zero. Everything was by the seat of my pants."

Most participants had been given access to colleagues" online courses and for some that was the most helpful factor in designing their own course. However, for a few participants simply gaining access to a colleague"s online course provided only so much help. "People let me into their courses to see what they were doing and look around, which was helpful" [but] it"s hard to take total advantage of this when you don"t really know what you"re looking at."

Consensus among faculty members was that more professional development activities focused on online course design and the actual pedagogy of online teaching would be beneficial. Professional development opportunities focused on technology were plentiful, and they may be helpful, but there is more to online teaching than learning how to use technology.

Smaller and More Focused Training

Participants overwhelmingly found smaller and more focused professional development opportunities were much more helpful than those offered on a broad level. As noted earlier, participants in this study were faculty members in a college of education at a major southeastern university. Several participants explained how professional development sessions offered at the university level, while well intentioned, did not allow for tailoring to their specific or individual needs. The sessions were often too generic and provided too much information and often did not address the questions they had about content and structure. Many felt the professional development offered within the college of education (their home college) tended to be a richer instructional experience due to a stronger focus on and connection to teaching. One participant noted the university training was taught by experts in technology rather than teaching, resulting in "the worst instructors teaching me something that's supposed to improve my instructional ability." Others agreed training at the college

and department levels was much more effective than university-wide training, as it allowed for customization and focus on the specific discipline.

Smaller group sessions were preferred over large-group sessions, as well. In particular, small groups of instructors from the same college, department, or program were noted as being ideal. Smaller groups allowed participants to ask questions in a familiar environment of colleagues; many of whom had the same types of questions. There was less fear of asking what participants might have considered “stupid questions” and participants felt more comfortable asking questions that were discipline specific.

Informal Learning: Most Common and Most Effective

Even more valuable than organized training sessions were informal small-group or one-on-one tutoring or mentoring sessions between inexperienced and experienced online instructors. In learning to teach online, some participants asked for help from colleagues in their departments and in the college - often from faculty members in departments related to online teaching and learning, such as the college's instructional technology department. Others called on colleagues at other universities, as well. One noted most of his ideas for teaching online came from either colleagues or by attending conferences.

Informal conversations with colleagues were a common theme in the focus groups. As one participant explained, "What I've found to be most helpful is just asking people at lunch about some new piece of technology and then figuring out how to put it into [my] class, rather than some formal training." Occasionally, the formal settings led to conversations where participants heard about how a colleague was using a specific tool and offered opportunities for collaboration. These types of conversations and the development of informal communities and support networks were by far the most commonly identified means of meaningful professional development for participants. One explained, "It's really hard to change how people think and to affect [their teaching] if they're not part of a community." Within these communities, participants talked of finding a "technology guru" to aid them in learning about new tools or figuring out how to implement new tools into their course. When asked how they identify the guru; participants explained, "You know the ones that are really doing some different things... and you know the ones not to ask or think about it, because they don't think about it." These leaders often were asked to present a technology tool during the last few minutes of a department meeting. It was interesting that in each of the focus groups participants went off topic several times to further discuss specific tools or experiences with teaching online, often asking questions directly of one another to gain clearer understanding. This demonstrated the fact that community and network development was happening during these focus groups. Learning to teach online is an ongoing process, and instructors learning to teach online are continually looking to strengthen their networks and communities. Focus group members' commitment to continual learning and improving their online courses was evident in such tangent conversations within focus group time.

Participants also agreed the most effective strategies and practices for online teaching were garnered small pieces at a time. While large, formal training sessions were seen as content heavy, focus group members found informal learning of one small piece or aspect of online teaching allowed them to focus on how they might incorporate that piece of information into their course. Participants often learned more from a five-minute technology sessions held at the end of a meeting or hearing about a specific tool or tip during an informal mentoring session or discussion with a colleague. Some participants noted colleagues interested in learning about something related to online teaching might invite a technology or subject-

matter expert to lunch or to coffee, and those colleagues would invite others in their networks to attend (so they could learn more about the topic).

In summary, the development of informal networks and contacts helped participants learn to teach online, and also to continually improve their online teaching. Networking helped participants get involved in informal groups. Small, informal groups getting together for short periods times to focus on specifics related to online teaching was effective in helping instructors learn about teaching online.

Opportunities for Self-Directed Learning

In their search for meaningful ways of learning to teach online, instructors inevitably found themselves looking for very specific learning opportunities based on their knowledge of online teaching and their level of technological expertise. For the majority of participants this meant moving from formal professional development occasions to more informal learning opportunities. Many talked about their own desire to learn more through reading, online explorations, and product testing. One participant drew heavily on his own experience as a student taking online courses. His understanding of what online learning is allowed him to consider what the course must look like from the teacher's perspective. This awareness pushed him to look for free software and tools that allowed him to best meet his students' needs in the course. Such tools were often discovered through self-exploration or discussions with colleagues already using them. As one participant explained, my professional development "was all done by me digging and finding things that worked and things that didn't work, after the fact, because I had tried them in a course."

Summary and Conclusion: What Does Effective Professional Development Look Like?

Given the above themes, what does effective professional development look like? Participants were asked to reflect on the type of support universities or colleges should provide to both new and existing online teachers. Here is a summary of recommendations based on themes discussed by participants.

First, participants agreed that professional development should focus on curriculum development and the pedagogy of online teaching, in addition to technology tools. Instructors with great knowledge of technology may not know how to design effective instruction or teach online learners. Since much existing training for online instructors focuses on technology, greater emphasis on course development and online pedagogy is important.

The general consensus was professional development and support should be offered through a variety of different channels. Formal faculty workshops were important, and one participant noted sometimes the informal discussions and even support groups piggyback off of these formal sessions informed their instruction. However, formal workshops were more valuable when participants share common interests, such as subject-matter areas. Other participants believed more informal training with a faculty lead was helpful, as it provided a springboard for one-on-one discussion and the ability to share course materials. An overall belief was support should also be focused on helping instructors develop informal groups and offering training sessions that do not require a large time commitment. Many participants mentioned five-minute training sessions and how beneficial short introductions to topics intrigued them enough to look into those topics in more depth and to discuss those topics with peers. A resounding sentiment was that it is helpful to see and hear how others teach online. Finding collegial work or support groups of peers was not always easy; however, when such groups

developed, they were beneficial to those involved.

Opportunities for self-directed learning should be made available to instructors, as well. Readily-available resources that can be investigated when the instructor has time were found to be helpful. Many participants felt the development of an online resource repository would be beneficial to support individual instructor needs. One participant mentioned the benefit of email messages and distribution lists that were sent on technology tools and tips. She stated, "if something usually comes up and hits me in the face three or four times, then I'm usually like…I probably need to check this out."

Recommendations

Administrators should offer multiple options for professional development, including options at different levels of the organization; keeping in mind smaller and more focused opportunities were found to be more beneficial than larger, more general ones. Professional development focused on online teaching in the instructor's specific discipline is more beneficial than general technology opportunities. Shorter sessions are also recommended. Online learning tips, suggestions, and ideas can be shared with instructors in a variety of ways such as scheduling short five or ten-minute training sessions around staff meetings, in-service sessions, and other times groups of instructors are together. Also, consider electronic as well as traditional methods of presenting content. Include one or two online teaching tips in each employee newsletter, for example, or develop a weekly or monthly email message focused on online teaching. Where possible, and especially when content involves technology or instructional design, hands-on learning opportunities help participants get used to what is being taught so knowledge gained in training can be transferred to teaching.

Administrators should provide opportunities that focus on technology but also on online teaching and online curriculum development. With the many technology tools available to online instructors, it is easy to focus professional development on the latest gadgets and tools; however, online instructors must know how to assess whether a new technology will actually enhance their course and improve student learning. Online instructors must also receive training in online course design and best practices for online teaching and learning. A balance of professional development topics is beneficial.

Initiatives that aid in the development of small groups or learning communities should be considered. Mentoring programs pairing experienced online instructors with instructors new to online teaching is valuable. Providing ways for instructors to get together and informally network, share tips and strategies, and get to know each other can result in the development of collegial networks that can have long-term benefits for online instructors.

Finally, remember much of the learning done on online teaching is self-directed. Be sure resources are available to instructors who want to learn on their own, and remember existing resources for self-directed learners can be found in many different places. For example, many different websites have content on online teaching. Not all websites are equal in terms of value, though, so it is important to review content on those sites before recommending them. The best source of resources for new online instructors may be experienced online instructors in your organization.

Conclusion

Currently, most universities employ a "top-down" professional development process, which

includes formal workshops to develop specific knowledge and skills of technology and tools (Northcote et al. 2012). However, developing online teaching expertise through informal, need-driven professional development is also important, as are creating opportunities for instructor networking, and self-directed learning. Success in making the transition from face-to-face to online teaching is dependent upon the availability of opportunities for learning how to teach online, but those opportunities must actually be helpful to the online instructor. An understanding of the specific ways instructors learn to teach online is critical for administrators, as they are often the ones making decisions about professional development offerings for those instructors.

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