
Comparing Faculty Perceptions of an Online Development Course: Addressing Faculty Needs for Online Teaching

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Abstract

Since the advent of hybrid and online instructional delivery for college and university courses, a principal issue has been training faculty to design and deliver these courses. The present study examines a faculty development course, "Build a Web Course," offered to educate faculty members about how to design, create, and implement technology and internet-based instructional materials for the purpose of hybrid and online courses. Of particular interest to this study, the faculty participants were required to complete the development course as online students. More specifically, the study compares faculty perceptions from two separate offerings of the course and the distinct groups of faculty. Through an analysis of the faculty participants' perceptions, this study seeks to highlight the perceived differences and similarities in the learning outcomes for the two courses to determine if strategic changes in the course prove to be beneficial. Among an array of positive findings related to the course, the faculty participants also indicated they did not feel that the nature of the guest speakers was appropriate, and they felt underprepared to complete the subsequent Quality Matters review of their courses. These results may aid in further understanding what faculty members perceive they need to become effective in preparing instructional materials for hybrid and online teaching.

Introduction

As a result of vast technological developments internet and computer-based technologies now allow people to access a plethora of information at any time and from almost anywhere. Because of the flexibility new technologies allow, colleges and universities have begun offering more distance learning courses as an alternative to traditional face-to-face courses. For example, Allen and Seaman (2010) found that over 5.6 million students in the United States took an online course in the fall of 2009. Similarly, they reported that 81% of all institutions of higher education offer online or blended learning courses, and among public institutions 97% offer online or blended courses (Allen & Seaman, 2003). This wide scale use of distance education, and in particular online courses, directly reflects the 21st century pattern for information on demand.

Although there has been much debate about comparing student learning outcomes for online and face-to-face learning (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Wallet, Fiest, & Huang, 2004; Dell, Low, & Wilker, 2010), not much discussion has focused on preparing faculty and instructors to effectively deliver online courses. For this purpose the present study examines a faculty development course, "Build a Web Course," offered to educate faculty members about how to design, create, and implement technology and internet-based instructional materials for the purpose of hybrid and online courses. Specifically, the study seeks to highlight the perceived differences and similarities in the

outcomes for two offerings of the same course to determine if strategic changes in the course prove to be beneficial. Thus, although the online development workshop described here does not differ significantly from others commonly offered at other institutions, the focus of this research, to provide a better understanding of what faculty members perceive they need to become effective in preparing instructional materials for hybrid and online teaching, has the potential to shed light on the topic from the participants' perspective.

With this in mind, the building and refining of knowledge with regards to training faculty to develop online instructional materials is paramount. Such a process allows others to replicate effective strategies and avoid inefficient practices in addition to serving the needs of the faculty participants. More specifically, this study is an analysis of faculty perceptions of a distance learning preparation course, which has been taught five times over three academic years at the university. The particular issues of interest derived from the analysis of two distinct course offerings include preparing faculty to design and deliver online courses, selecting appropriate software for training, the nature of guest speakers, providing faculty with necessary support, and preparing faculty for the Quality Matters review process.

Distance Learning

At the large, southeastern university in which this study was conducted the Distance Learning Center is dedicated to offering distance learning options so that students may take advantage of the convenience and flexibility afforded by alternative course delivery. Currently, the university offers several online degree programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels, certificate programs, and a large selection of individual hybrid and online courses.

In fact, supporting online teaching and courses is part of the university's 5-year strategic plan (2007-2012). University Goal 1 is- "To enhance and expand academic programs and delivery: Expand the technology and technical support available for teaching." Action steps within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences for realizing this goal include:

- adding on-line and hybrid courses (at least 5 each year over a five year period),
- training faculty (at least 10 per year) in the design and implementation of on-line courses,
- providing curriculum and technical support staff and equipment for teaching on-line and hybrid courses, and
- creating an appropriate user fee to support expanding our on-line and hybrid course offerings.

Within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences the Office of Distance Education was established in 2009 to support the expanding efforts to offer online courses. The general mission of the office is to support the growth of hybrid and online courses. Specifically, the staff of the office, including a director, two associate directors, and an administrative specialist, offer support to the college faculty and staff in designing, developing, and delivering online and hybrid courses and programs. Part of that support includes the "Build a Web Course" workshop described in this study.

The Faculty Development Course for Online Teaching

The Course Details

The "Build a Web Course" is a faculty development workshop "designed to take potential online instructors from curious about instructional technology to comfortable with instructional technology in three months, or one semester" (Powell, 2010). The course is generally offered to both beginners and more advanced technology users. In addition to attending the workshop sessions, faculty members also have to develop their own hybrid or online courses to successfully complete the course. The workshop is offered via a 12-week course (eight face-to-face sessions and four online sessions) in which faculty members explore an assortment of topics and technologies, which relate directly to teaching online courses.

The following list provides an outline of the typical, two-hour course sessions.

1. Online Session. Orientation to Online Learning and overview of the workshop, including streaming media lecture, discussion board, and assessment activities.
2. Online Session. Vocabulary and theory lessons. Quality Matters. Puzzles and games. Discussion board.
3. F2F (face to face) session in a computer lab: Faculty members who have already taught online will share their experiences and advice and demonstrate strategies.
4. F2F Session in a computer lab: Workshop on creating content with MS Word, PowerPoint, and Adobe Professional.
5. F2F Session in a computer lab: Participants will create a web page using a free html editor (SeaMonkey).
6. F2F Session: Participants will use a Wiki (PBWiki) to critique the previous web page session. Then, participants will use the knowledge gained in the web page session to create blogs (using Blogger) and podcasts.
7. F2F Session: Participants will create streaming media (using Camtasia, Captivate, Jing, and ScreenToaster) and interactive course content (using Hot Potatoes and Quandary).
8. F2F Session: Participants will finalize their goals and assessment techniques and start to implement these items in their courses.
9. Online Session: Workshop on designing and implementing a web course, including designing banners and buttons (using Aviary).
10. Online Session: Participants will view a humorous video called "Late Night Learning with John Krutsch."
11. Optional F2F Session: Participants who desire extra help may attend to get assistance from the instructional team.
12. F2F Session: Participants will demonstrate their courses so far and discuss plans for completing their courses.

These workshop sessions, both online and face-to-face, are designed to train the participants how to create course goals and measurable objectives to help students to grab the content of the course so as to meet and, eventually, exceed their expectations. The sessions also provide faculty members with one-on-one training on the use of the latest instructional technology for designing distance learning courses, teaching or delivering multimedia courses, and evaluating online students.

What Makes the Course Unique?

The faculty development course for online teaching is also concerned with the quality of the courses produced in the workshop. So at the end of the training and workshops, the participants design and present online courses that adhere to the eight Quality Matters (QM) content areas, which include 1) course overview and introduction, 2) learning objectives, 3) assessment and measurement, 4) resources and materials, 5) learner engagement, 6) course technology, 7) learner support, and 8) accessibility (Quality Matters, 2011). All courses developed through the "Build a Web Course" workshop must pass the Quality Matters review process before they can be offered to students. Last, participants who successfully complete the training process earn Quality Matters certification. This certification is essential for faculty members to teach online courses.

Another distinguishing characteristic of this faculty development course is that it requires the faculty members to participate as online students. As Anderson and Elloumi point out, "the goal of any instructional system is to promote learning" (Anderson & Elloumi, 2004). However, the transfer of knowledge is not possible if educators are not endowed with appropriate skills and methods. We acknowledge in this paper that, in addition to acquiring online teaching skills and methods, distance learning teachers must have some online learning experience which makes them aware of difficulties associated with such learning processes.

To achieve that aim, this faculty development course for online teaching requires that faculty members who are aspiring to teach online or hybrid courses be put in the position of online students. The main purpose of this requirement is to stress the importance of the praxis side of the training whereby the participants learn by actually doing it. In so doing, faculty members will then be able to identify best strategies for engaging their students. The goal here is to train faculty members from various disciplines

on how to apply the andragogy theory which stresses how to engage independent and self-directed learners (Kaufman, 2003).

Difference in the Approaches to the Course

In the fall of 2010, the 12-week course was offered to three separate groups of faculty, two sessions on Fridays and one session on Tuesdays. During these workshop meetings, the lead facilitator was assisted by a full time assistant. Each participant received, in addition to a laptop, a stipend of \$2,600 for completing the course. The main focus of the training was how to better use technology to deliver online courses effectively and efficiently. The technologies covered included, but were not limited to GradeMark, Turnitin, Blogger, Vista, Moodle, SeaMonkey, Hot Potatoes, Podcasting, Aviary, Wikis, Camtasia, Quandary, Wimba, Polling Software, SocialGo, Winksite, and PowerPoint. The participants were limited to the use of PC only. Based on the feedback of the faculty participants and the instructional team's review of the course, it was determined that the course modules were poorly organized, and the overall course lacked clear evaluation guidelines.

With these suggestions in mind, several modifications were made to the 12-week course in the spring of 2011. In general, the course required stricter faculty participation and evaluation measures. The course materials and content were better organized, and there were more optional sessions. Moving beyond basic technology training, the course focused more on designing online learning modules, and module organizers and activity checklists were added to the workshop. In addition, the array of technologies covered in the course was reviewed and modified. Notably, SocialGo and Winksite were removed from the course. In addition, more staff members were added to the instructional team. The course was led by the director of Distance Learning, in conjunction with an assistant director and three full time assistants. Faculty members participating in the course also had complete access to the university's Distance Learning Center (DLC) instructional designers. Each participant still received a \$3,000 stipend and a laptop. Last, Mac users received more support throughout the workshop, including tutorials created with Mac use in mind.

The Study

Over a period of two years, the faculty and staff from the Office of Distance Education employed a questionnaire to gather data related to the faculty members' perceptions of the online development course described previously. Subsequently, the review of this data allowed the instructional team to make changes to the course in response to the faculty needs. The 15-item survey instrument was designed specifically to gather the faculty participants' perceptions about the course and their learning outcomes. The faculty responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale to allow for a neutral choice if faculty had no strong opinions about a given question. Questions focus on identifying beneficial and unbeneficial components of the course. The survey was administered approximately one week after the end of the faculty development course. Once this data was collected, the faculty responses were compared between the courses.

Data and Findings

A total of 57 faculty members responded to the questionnaire upon completing the online development course. 24 of 25 faculty participants responded in the fall of 2010 (96%), and 33 of 34 responded in the spring of 2011 (97%). Only faculty members who successfully completed the workshop were invited to participate in the questionnaire. This excluded three faculty members who did not successfully complete the course due to personal reasons.

The subsequent analysis evaluated the data based on faculty members' responses to the questions concerning the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the course. First, descriptive statistics were run for all questions and classified by the semester the evaluation was given. Data was then transformed into a Likert scale in order to test for differences in the tendencies of the responses of faculty to the evaluation. "1" corresponded to an answer of "Strongly Agree" on the original data, "2" was "Agree", "3" was "Disagree" and "4" corresponded to a response of "Strongly Disagree." T-tests were then run to test for differences in the mean response of this new variable based on semester. Next, data was made into a

binary variable classified by either “1” for “Agree” or “2” for “Disagree.” This was done to test for risk estimates to see if the responses differed by semester.

Most differences were found to be statistically insignificant across the four survey responses, except for questions #2, #6, and #11. However, when grouping “Agree” with “Strongly Agree” and “Disagree” with “Strongly Disagree,” as in Table 1, it is still possible to extrapolate some practical value from the apparent changes in percentages. The following sections present a discussion of these findings.

What Went Well?

As seen in Table 1, the faculty members from both courses overwhelmingly agreed the course provided them with useful information related to designing and delivering an online course and that the facilitator was prepared and effectively led the course. What else went well? The participants from both groups believed that the facilitator created effective components for the online portion of the course, and she had consistently used the learning management system (GeorgiaView Vista) effectively in designing and delivering the course. They were also happy with the training material provided to them during the course and affirmed that it assisted them in creating course content. In addition, the participants asserted that they had been very well instructed and knew where to seek assistance when they encounter difficulties while working on their course. Last, as Table 1 demonstrates there were small increases and decreases in the levels of agreement between the two groups for several of these items; however, the overall sentiment as indicated by the faculty participants’ responses remained positive (91% and higher). Of particular interest were the respective 5% and 12% increases for receiving adequate support and appropriate software training.

What Needs to be Reviewed Further?

While the majority of the faculty participants responded favorably on many of the questionnaire items, there were also several items that merit further review based on critical responses. As seen in Table 1, there was a 7% decrease in the number of faculty participants who were satisfied with the overall course (from 92% to 85%). This increase in discord appeared to carry over to the faculty’s responses regarding the nature of the guest speakers. In fall of 2010, 8% of survey respondents indicated the guest speakers were not appropriate to the course and did not provide helpful information. In spring of 2011, this view became more pessimistic. 18% of the respondents indicated the guest speakers were not appropriate or helpful. Last, the faculty participants reported decreases in their ability to teach online as a result of completing the workshop (10% decrease, from 92% to 82%), and their ability to successfully complete the Quality Matters review process (12% decrease, from 88% to 76%).

What Remained the Same?

There were two items in particular that remained relatively unchanged for the faculty participants of each respective group. First, 96% of the fall 2010 group and 97% of the spring 2011 group felt they were able to get their questions answered during the workshop. Second, respectively 92% and 91% felt satisfied with the lead facilitator of the workshop. Changes of 1% in the level of faculty agreement in their responses were treated as remaining the same.

Table 1. Perceptions of Faculty about Online Development Course

Survey Question	Fall 2010 No. (%) agree or strongly agree (n=24)	Spring 2011 No. (%) agree or strongly agree (n=33)	F value	P value
Q1. The course provided me with useful information related to designing an	24 (100%)	31 (94%)	1.73	0.0896

online course.				
Q2. The course provided me with useful information related to <i>delivering</i> an online course.	24 (100%)	31 (94%)	2.17	.0343
Q3. The facilitator was prepared and effectively led the face-to-face portions of the course.	24 (100%)	31 (94%)	0.73	0.4704
Q4. The facilitator created effective components for the online portions of the course.	23 (96%)	31 (94%)	-0.18	0.8571
Q5. The facilitator used GeorgiaView/Vista effectively in designing and delivering the course	24 (100%)	32 (97%)	1.48	0.1438
Q6. The facilitator provided adequate support as I created my online or hybrid.	22 (92%)	32 (97%)	-2.22	.0307
Q7. The software training sessions were effective in helping me to learn what software I might choose to use in my courses.	19 (79%)	30 (91%)	-1.07	0.2899
Q8. The training material provided to me during the course assisted me in creating course content.	24 (100%)	30 (91%)	0.27	0.7873
Q9. The guest speakers were appropriate to the course and provided helpful information.	22 (92%)	27 (82%)	1.52	0.1352
Q10. My questions related to designing and delivering online classes were answered during the course.	23 (96%)	32 (97%)	0.13	0.9009
Q11. The course prepared me to	22 (92%)	27 (82%)	2.29	0.0261

teach online.				
Q12. The course prepared me to go through the QM process.	21 (88%)	25 (76%)	1.53	0.1312
Q13. If I have problems while working on my course, I know where to go or who to ask for assistance.	23 (96%)	30 (91%)	0.66	0.5149
Q14. Overall, I was satisfied with the course.	22 (92%)	28 (85%)	1.07	0.2884
Q15. Overall, I was satisfied with the facilitator.	22 (92%)	30 (91%)	0.11	0.9127

Summary and Discussion

In an ever increasing technological world, college and university educators struggle to develop effective instructional methods to adapt to the online environment. This study examined a faculty development course for online teaching to determine if strategic changes in the course proved to be beneficial for the faculty participants' perceived learning outcomes. Through the analysis of two consecutive courses, the study identified several strong characteristics of the course (training for designing and delivering online instruction, overall support of faculty, and appropriate software training) and several areas for improvement (the nature of the guest speakers, the ability to teach online as a result of completing the workshop, and the ability to successfully complete the Quality Matters review process).

In particular, these results demonstrate that the specific changes made to the course yielded positive results. Increased attention to supporting faculty with more staff and further Mac support appeared to have had a beneficial impact on the faculty participants. These changes were enacted through careful planning and execution by the facilitators. However, the results also highlight the need for cyclical and constant reflection and reevaluation of such a course to maintain an effective overall program. Even with extensive planning and preparation, there were several areas of deficiency. Specifically, the faculty participants did not feel that the nature of the guest speakers was appropriate, and they felt underprepared to complete the subsequent Quality Matters review of their courses.

Why did the faculty feel this way? It is possible that the timing for the delivery of these training components was not most conducive for the participants' implementation of said practices. Also, it is important to consider that the faculty development course focuses mostly on individual training components, and the faculty participants are still required to make overall connections between the components covered to successfully create an online or hybrid course. Perhaps, in some cases the faculty members were unable to make these connections. Having said this, further review should be undertaken to ensure that this faculty development course effectively addresses these components.

Our Suggestions for Future Training Opportunities

From our experiences offering the "Build a Web Course" workshop over the past three years and from the specific analysis of the faculty members' feedback concerning the courses of fall 2010 and spring 2011, we would like to offer several suggestions for anyone who may be planning future training opportunities for online teaching: 1. *Be prepared.* Plan the curriculum for the faculty development course in advance to be sure that each step is thoughtfully developed. Also, encourage the faculty participants to be prepared for each workshop session. They must be dedicated to developing their online teaching skills. 2. *Provide support.* Make sure that there will be enough support staff or faculty to assist the participants through the process of completing the course and developing their hybrid or online courses.

Also, keep in mind that your faculty members will come with unique technology needs. Some will prefer PC, others will prefer Mac. In addition, each faculty participant will begin with a unique skill level. 3. *Focus the technology training.* When deciding which software programs to utilize for faculty training, be sure to focus on specific skill sets. Try to avoid covering a technology simply to do so. Make sure that each technology covered will have direct value for the faculty participants. 4. *Select guest speakers and presenters carefully.* Often guest speakers can provide a vantage point that is valuable and well received by faculty participants; however, selecting appropriate guest speakers is essential. Be sure to select someone who is knowledgeable about online teaching, but also someone who has experience with online teaching and course design. 5. *Cover any course review process in depth.* In our case the university requires a course review process carried out with Quality Matters guidelines. If you have a similar process for reviewing and approving online courses at your institution, be sure to cover this process in great depth. You may even consider performing a pre-review as a component of the faculty development course.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study does have several limitations. First, the data collected for the investigation were self-reported. Even though the participants were faculty members, it is still possible that there was bias evident in their responses based on relationships forged with the facilitators and researchers. Second, the same bias could have been present due to the faculty receiving stipends and laptops as a result of participating in the development courses. Third, the findings of this study are likely the product of the particular university setting and the environment created for the development course. Other institutional settings and course environments may not yield the same results. Having said this, the findings reported here do raise some important questions about how faculty perceive their needs related to developing online courses. For example further research should be conducted to carefully analyze the effect of training components on faculty and their abilities to implement distance learning courses as a result of receiving such training. Correlational studies may prove useful to establish connections between such training components and the subsequent courses designed by the faculty.

In addition, another question raised as a byproduct of this research is related to the distinguishing characteristic of the faculty development course, which requires the faculty members to participate as online students. Future research could focus more specifically on the learning experiences of the faculty participants as online students. Again, examining the faculty members' perceptions of being online students throughout the development course may correlate directly to the types of courses they ultimately design.

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Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume XIV, Number II, Summer 2012
University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center

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