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# Coaching for Professional Development for Online Higher Education Faculty: An Explanatory Case Study

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## Abstract

Coaching is increasingly being used in higher education as a mechanism to meet the individualized professional development needs of faculty. Faculty coaching has been associated with positive organizational and pedagogical outcomes. However, missing from the research is insight into why faculty choose to participate in coaching and how the coaching process addresses the faculty members' individual learning goals. To address these questions, an explanatory case study design was employed to focus on the bounded system of the coaching program within a Teaching and Learning Center of an online university. Data collection included faculty focus groups, responses to written, open-ended questionnaires from faculty coaches, and a review of the coaching registration database. An inductive analysis approach resulted in four themes, *Affirmation of Current Practices*, *Expectations for the Coaching Experience*, *Reciprocal Institutional Relationships*, and *Teaching Support*, and added to the body of knowledge about faculty coaching in online higher education.

## Introduction

Quality instruction is critical to student success at all levels of education, including post-secondary settings (Gürgür, 2017; Kane et al., 2016; Thurlings, & den Brok, 2017). Faculty come to the learning environment with varying levels of pedagogical expertise. However, regardless of the faculty member's ability, high-quality professional development is also necessary to ensure current, research-based practices are being implemented (Herman, 2012; Pesce, 2015; Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015). From the organizational perspective, the primary role of professional development in higher education is to improve faculty performance in the classroom (Bonura, et al., 2012). To meet strategic goals aligned with quality instruction, professional development is often prescribed by the organization. At other times, faculty development is an individual choice made by the faculty member to meet personal goals (Bedford, 2019).

Traditionally, professional development opportunities for faculty are delivered through instructor-centered modalities including workshops, courses, and lectures (Dron & Anderson, 2014; Holmes & Prieto-Rodriguez, 2018; Stoten, 2020). However, these modalities are less effective than those that promote a learner-centered environment (Bedford, 2019; Gürgür, 2017). A learner-centered environment according to Hughey (2020) facilitates individualized learning in which the goal is to empower the learner. Learner-centered strategies promote engagement with content and encourage interaction among colleagues. They are designed to facilitate the construction of knowledge through academic discourse and the building of professional relationships (Cartner & Hallas, 2017; Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015).

Learner-centered professional development has been shown to result in higher satisfaction and transfer of knowledge to the classroom setting (Bedford, 2019; Bloomberg, 2020; Krutka et al., 2017; McConnell et al., 2012). In addition, the most effective learning opportunities for faculty are those that allow individuals to learn from colleagues through a structured exchange of knowledge and expertise aligned to their own needs (Dron & Anderson, 2014; Krutka et al., 2017; McConnell, et al., 2012; Trust et al., 2017; Zhang & Wong, 2018). Leaders within institutions of higher education are becoming increasingly aware that effective professional development needs to capitalize on learner-centered, novel strategies. As a result, opportunities that incorporate learner-centered strategies, including coaching, are increasingly common within the faculty development continuum.

## Literature Review

Purposeful professional development for faculty can ensure the use of instructional strategies to motivate and engage students for subsequent success (Bedford, 2019; Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018; Bonura et al., 2012). Faculty overwhelmingly report positive changes in attitudes, increased knowledge/skills, and improved behavior following participation in a faculty development opportunity (Steinert, 2017), particularly those in which participation is voluntary (Bedford, 2019). In addition, faculty report higher satisfaction and more positive outcomes as a result of professional development focused on their individual needs as well as those designed with engaging, interactive pedagogy (Bedford, 2019; Bloomberg, 2020; Krutka et al., 2017; McConnell et al., 2012; Urquhart, et al., 2013).

Faculty require access to professional development opportunities that provide timely and relevant support for instructional concerns (Bonura et al., 2012). Supporting faculty who deliver instruction online requires additional support and resources to understand their unique needs (Bedford, 2019). Online faculty are dispersed, often work in isolation, and experience decreased confidence because of the lack of well-defined expectations. Faculty who deliver online instruction often view their role, and ultimately, their professional development needs, differently from face-to-face instructors (Martin, et al., 2019) or from those who engage in distance learning because of the 2020 Covid-pandemic restrictions (Hodges, et al., 2020). Relationships established within the coaching relationship can create opportunities for these online faculty to develop feelings of belongingness and collegiality in an otherwise detached workforce (Lewis & Ewing, 2016).

Professional development is critical to organizational and individual effectiveness (Gürgür, 2017; Kane et al., 2016; Thurlings, & den Brok, 2017). To be effective, organizational and individual goals must be linked. Learner-centered professional development can specifically target that linkage, creating positive attitudes towards organizational goals (Rosenberg & An, 2019). Learner-centered professional development is described in terms throughout the literature that include personalized professional development (Özer, 2020), individualized professional development (Hughey, 2020), and heutagogy (Stoten, 2020). While nuanced in their approach, they are all situated within a supportive paradigm and create opportunities for individuals to establish personal goals based on individual professional needs.

Learner-centered professional development, along with traditional types of training, can provide holistic support for faculty as they strive to incorporate research-based practices into their teaching repertoire (Emery, et al., 2021). Learner-centered professional development can be a component of a broad range of complementary learning activities for faculty (Seehusen, 2021; Wood, et al., 2016) because it provides the framework for faculty to incorporate instructional concepts into their teaching style (Bedford, 2019). It allows the learner to focus on the self and requires them to “own” their learning (Orrill, et al., 2006). However, learner-centered professional development needs may not be recognized as a direct outcome of traditional training; rather they may emerge in a non-linear progression (Stoten, 2020). Therefore, flexible strategies including one-on-one coaching may be more suitable to complement traditional organizational learning.

Coaching is increasingly being used in higher education as a professional development mechanism with a focus on individualized needs. While coaching programs within institutions of higher education are structured in a variety of ways, coaching often includes a time-limited relationship between a coach and coaching participant (Desimone, 2017; Jacobs, 2018; Lofthouse, 2019; Nanduri, 2018; Seehusen, 2021). The coach typically comes to the relationship with greater levels of experience and expertise than the coaching participant, although the coaching participant may have skills and experience in specific areas that can provide reciprocity within the coaching relationship (Lofthouse, 2019; Nanduri, 2018). Coaching can be a collaborative, informal support mechanism or the result of a structured program for faculty members who perform below or exceed expectations (Desimone & Pak, 2017). In any case, a productive coaching process will focus on relationship building, reflection, and feedback, which are critical to the professional growth process (Lofthouse, 2019) and can have lasting effects on performance (Nanduri, 2018).

While much of the early literature focused on coaching in the k-2 face-to-face learning environments (Desimone, 2017) recent attention has been given to this strategy to support higher education faculty. Many coaching techniques for the higher education population rely on self-reflection and peer feedback strategies, which have been demonstrated to be effective techniques for continuous instructional improvement (Gürgür, 2017; Lofthouse, 2019; Nanduri, 2018). In addition, coaching outcomes are reported as generally positive and those who have participated in coaching report increased morale, high-quality collaborations, and a better understanding of proven pedagogical practices (Bloomberg, 2020; McDowell et al., 2014).

Positive coaching outcomes are associated with the individual as well as with the organization. Coaching facilitates the development of collaborative partnerships and relationships that extend the learning among faculty and across disciplines (Gürgür, 2017; McDowell et al., 2014). It provides a venue in which the faculty member can address individual goals and have a voice in their learning through reflection and feedback (Stover et al., 2011). Faculty coaching is also associated with increased morale, a better understanding of proven pedagogical practices (Bloomberg, 2020; McDowell et al., 2014), and increased motivation (Cox, 2012). Participation in coaching by faculty provides for more positive learning environments and higher satisfaction for the individual (Passmore & Rehman, 2012). Finally, coaching can also provide internal and psychological motivation for individual faculty members, which results in higher quality outcomes for the organization (Cox, 2012). These factors are associated with increased confidence in teaching, which results in higher levels of instructional performance (Sadler, 2013).

## Methods

While institutions of higher education often prescribe professional development activities for faculty to support strategic goals, faculty also engage in professional development activities aligned with self-identified goals. While coaching as a learner-centered, individualized professional development activity has the potential the realization of learners’ self-improvement goals (Özer, et al., 2020; Stoten, 2020) it is less understood than other individualized professional development practices (Seehusen, 2021). Faculty coaching is a learner-centered approach for professional development in higher education and has been associated with positive outcomes (Bloomberg, 2020; Cox, 2012; Lewis & Ewing, 2016; McDowell et al., 2014). However, missing from the research is insight into why faculty choose to participate in coaching and how the coaching process addresses the faculty members’ individual learning goals. To address these gaps in the literature, two research questions were the focus of this study:

1. Why do online, higher education faculty choose to participate in coaching for professional development?
2. How does the coaching process address the faculty member’s individual learning goals?

The setting for this research study was an online university with a focus on graduate education. In this institution, faculty are primarily credentialed at the doctoral level and bring diversity in expertise and experience to their role. The faculty coaching for professional development program has been established by a Teaching and Learning Center where two faculty coaches provide the coaching services to faculty. While coaching is often situated in the supervisory context (Farghaly, & Abdelaziz, 2017), in this program, the faculty coaches are considered peers. The philosophy of the coaching model used draws on evidence-based approaches focused on relationships and collaboration (Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018; Desimone, 2017; Lofthouse, 2019; McDowell, et al., 2014; Nanduri, 2018) with solution-based outcomes. It draws upon a structured approach that emphasizes individualized, confidential, and non-evaluative services. Faculty coaches have experience and specialized expertise in the online classroom and were chosen for their position for these characteristics as well as their ability to show empathy and encouragement to faculty members. Faculty participate in the coaching program voluntarily with an average of 60 individual faculty members engaging in approximately 150 individual coaching sessions per year. In her questionnaire, one faculty coach explained the structure for coaching as follows:

Coaching sessions are scheduled in an hour block.... Sessions are typically conducted over the phone, however about 30% of the sessions require a demonstration, so I use my...[virtual meeting room] when this need arises...[after initial greetings to develop rapport]...I listen to the faculty member’s needs, offer resources and suggestions... [and then] follow up with an email.

An explanatory, case study design as described by Stake (1995) was employed to focus on the bounded system of the coaching program within a Teaching and Learning Center of an online university. Data were collected through focus groups with active faculty members who participated in at least one coaching session over three years. Sixteen faculty members agreed to a 40 to 60-minute focus group session. These individuals were divided into four focus groups with two to six participants each (Appendix A). In addition, data were collected from two faculty coaches who completed an open-ended, written questionnaire (Appendix B). The coaching registration database, which used a dropdown menu for coaching topics that potential participants could choose from including time management, engagement, and feedback, was also reviewed to identify the topic on which each participant requested coaching.

Initial coding was conducted by one of the members of the research team through a process of inductive analysis of the raw data that included the interviews and questionnaires (Patton, 2015). Once the initial coding was complete, the researcher categorized the individual comments and concepts into units as described by Garrison et al., (2006). Finally, another researcher reviewed and confirmed findings to ensure that the diverse perspectives of the group were represented (Richardson, 2000). They also compared the findings of the focus groups to the faculty coach questionnaire data to identify both consistent and divergent themes.

## Findings

Data analysis resulted in four themes that answered the two research questions: *Affirmation of Current Practices*, *Expectations for the Coaching Experience*, *Reciprocal Institutional Relationships*, and *Teaching Support*. The theme, *Affirmation of Current Practices*, grew out of the conversation around outcomes associated with enhanced positive feelings and included codes such as confirmation, confidence, guidance, and increased motivation.

*Expectations for the Coaching Experience* emerged as a theme that described the structure and outcomes expected of participants as well as those understood by the coaches. The theme, *Reciprocal Institutional Relationships*, centered on the participants' purpose for seeking coaching and was triangulated with the coaches' responses related to their professional motivation to maintain the coaching relationship. Finally, *Teaching Support* emerged as a theme that described specific outcomes related to pedagogical concerns. Faculty participants described this as strategies and tools that supported their work with students.

While each of these themes reflected unique insight into the research questions, as analysis progressed, they became intertwined and dependent upon one another. For example, the theme, *Teaching Support*, overlapped with *Affirmation of Current Practices* in that it suggested that faculty who feel affectively supported in their role also feel they are more effective in the classroom as described by Cox (2012). A summary of the results of these analysis activities is outlined in Table 1, with a detailed description in the following subsections.

**Table 1**  
***Participant Data Categories and Themes Triangulated to Coaches Questionnaire***

Categories	Themes	Triangulation with Coaches Response
Confirmation Confidence Guidance Increased Motivation	Affirmation of Current Practices	Coaches reported leaving the session also feeling affirmed. Providing specific skills appeared secondary. They framed their experience around relationships.
Goal Setting Matching Expertise Best Practices Consultation	Expectations for the Coaching Experience	The coaching structure is described as flexible and individualized. Coaches describe their processes as including listening and preparation based on needs cited in the registration
Continued Support Collaboration Isolation Institution Acumen	Reciprocal Institutional Relationships	Coaches described specific relationship-building strategies. Sharing of personal experiences, anecdotes, reassurance, and listening as a strategy.
Student Needs Classroom Activity Engagement Providing Resources	Teaching Support	Coaches cite a variety of reasons that participants come to coaching. While affirmation was cited as a reason, specific skill-building requests including working in the online classroom, feedback, engagement, etc. were also noted.

Table 1. Development of themes as they emerged from the initial data analysis and triangulated with the coach questionnaire

### **Theme 1: Affirmation of Current Practices**

The coaching participants in this program are required to list a pedagogical issue on their request for a coaching form. In most cases, coaching participants listed the topic for coaching as a specific pedagogical, time management, or classroom management issue. However, during the focus groups, most of the participants reported a primary desire to attend faculty coaching was to affirm their current practices. In other words, the participants wanted to be reassured that their current classroom practices were meeting organizational expectations. Given that they engaged in their faculty role within a remote working environment, they shared that they often questioned whether the pedagogical strategies they used were acceptable by University standards. For example, one participant commented, "I didn't need help with the content or how to teach online or any of that. It was just more picking at myself. Just wanting to be sure I was doing what I was supposed to."

In most cases, participants described that their goal of affirmation was achieved and resulted in pedagogical as well as affective outcomes including motivation and confidence. For example, one participant shared:

But that was one of the things that I really wanted to kind of discuss with the coach and again it didn't necessarily give me anything to change but it did at least affirm that what I was already doing was acceptable, and OK, which I think then gave me the confidence to generate my own ideas.

In addition to the participants' affirmation of current practices, faculty coaches also expressed feelings of affirmation that their overall professional development practices were appreciated by the participants and their time spent in the coaching process was valued. For example, one faculty coach stated, "It feels good to that what I am doing is really helping someone."

For participants who did report that they were seeking coaching for specific pedagogical reasons, affirmation was a secondary, unexpected outcome. Two of the faculty participants reported seeking coaching services specifically to gain pedagogical knowledge. However, they also discovered through the process that those techniques that they were currently using in the classroom were appropriate and effective. One stated:

I decided to sign up for coaching because I wasn't sure what to do with...[a student]. [The coach] was able to help me see that I was already on track but was still able to give me more ideas. That felt really good.

### **Theme 2: Expectations for the Coaching Experience**

Participants and coaches described their expectations about the coaching process in a variety of ways. Most participants shared that they came into the coaching relationship expecting to engage in conversation, receive access to resources, and gain suggestions for practice. Specifically, they stated that they expected their coaching experience to be a collaborative sharing of ideas. While they were not disappointed in their experience, they found it to reflect a more consultative approach in which they were situated as receivers of information. One participant explained:

... so when I met with...[the coach] it was more of, like here's what you should do, like they were giving me the answers. It was totally helpful, but it felt more like consulting versus coaching as it wasn't really a two-way conversation.

Three participants, however, had expected to receive the information they requested through authoritative techniques. One stated, "just as I expected, she was able to tell me exactly what to do."

The process however was described slightly differently by faculty coaches. For example, one of the faculty coaches commented,

I then provide suggestions on things I think the faculty member should do. I will typically include anecdotes, examples, and advice here. When applicable, I will share personal and/or professional advice. Since coaching is a two-way conversation, I give the faculty member time to share their ideas so we can discuss how to integrate them.

In addition, common coaching topics identified by faculty coaches did not always align with what faculty participants indicated that they had asked for. One faculty coach described this phenomenon in the following statement:

I often have to take time to figure out what they really want to discuss. For example, time management is the most common topic. But, faculty usually don't state this when initially entering topics [in the database], but very frequently it comes up as an issue during our discussion. Engagement strategies...are a close second area of concern...but again, they might list it as helping students understand the content or something like that [in the database].

Similar to the structure of the coaching relationship, while the topic of interest was not always mutually understood, the participants reported satisfaction with the outcome of the process, generally expressing that this miscommunication did not hinder the coaching process.

### **Theme 3: Reciprocal Institutional Relationships**

While participants described their goal for the coaching session to secure pedagogical knowledge and affirm their current practices, upon reflection they also disclosed that they were also seeking to build relationships across the institution. One participant shared:

You know, it was just – it was probably the friendliness of it that made me keep coming back. And she was just so professional and helpful ... Now, I'm just it felt like having a connection with someone at [the institution].

The goals for these relationships were described in several other ways including a means to counteract isolation. For example, one participant said, "It gave me absolute confidence that, even if I screwed something up, you guys were there to help me, that someone would help, someone would get me past whatever the bad experience I was having was." Another shared, "So, I felt really lost. Like where do I belong? It's tough to get motivated and then all of a sudden, it's like I am part of something." A third summarized their increased feelings of belongingness and safety by saying:

You know, we should have another [set of] eyes and ears just to talk with without any consequence. You know, you weren't talking to anybody in your group, but you found somebody outside your group and they were helping you in those times consequence for what you said and what you needed to say.

Other participants sought to build relationships to better understand institutional acumen. For example, one participant commented:

Well, it's hard to know where academic policy is coming from.... And it's hard to know who makes decisions .... And, what are ways that you have in your classes and, I mean, I guess ... a lot of us have no sense of the politics. ...[The coach] is always straightforward about that.

The coaches acknowledged awareness of these "unwritten" goals and stated that they incorporate specific strategies for relationship building into the coaching process including sharing personal experiences and anecdotes while providing reassurance and listening without judgment. One coach shared.

The majority of the time, faculty come to coaching to verify if they are on the right track. They typically just want someone to bounce ideas off of and see how other faculty are teaching their classes.

Another coach reported that these practices were purposefully built into the coaching process to align with evidence-based practices about coaching as well as their experiences with positive outcomes.

I know that a trusting relationship is important to the coaching process in order to motivate the faculty member and to create better collaboration....I find it particularly helpful to disclose and challenges I may have experienced and how I overcame it.

### **Theme 4: Teaching Support**

While affective goals influenced the participants' decision to seek coaching, participants all identified specific teaching challenges that also prompted their action. These challenges were broad and included needs such as understanding performance expectations, developing strategies for collaborating with colleagues in a remote setting, knowing how to access and interpret policy, and learning techniques for communication with students. For example, one participant commented "specifically I was looking at ways to engage in the discussions forum a little bit more," Another stated that,

There seemed to be some inefficiency that I was experiencing between grading rubrics. Basically, I wanted to streamline my processes a little bit. I kind of felt like I wasn't being as efficient as I could or should have been at getting feedback placed.

A third stated, "I just wasn't sure how to follow the rubrics. What criteria should I be looking at." A final participant said, "I didn't know who to contact and when. I was afraid I was bugging people."

These broad pedagogical topics described by coaching participants minimally matched coaches' descriptions of the "most common coaching requests." Rather, the common coaching topic requests described by the faculty coaches aligned with the dropdown list in the coaching request database. For example, one faculty coach indicated that time management was the most common topic requested; however, none of the faculty participants indicated that as a reason for seeking coaching.

Often, the coaching participants' rationale for seeking coaching was described as less structured around a topic and more focused on an anecdote. For example, one faculty participant shared, "I just had this student. I tried everything and I had to keep failing her. I tried everything so I thought, 'how can coaching hurt?'" They went on to describe how the faculty coach helped them "drill down" the specific need, which the participant described as consistent feedback strategies. After several sessions with the coach, she indicated that she had "totally changed the way she was giving feedback" and it "felt like it was helping."

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The findings of this study added to the body of knowledge about coaching in higher education. The participants in this study reported outcomes of coaching aligned with previous research including a better understanding of proven pedagogical practices (Bloomberg, 2020; Lofthouse, 2019; McDowell et al. 2014) through a coaching structure that included reflection and feedback resulting in trusting relationships. Trusting relationships,

according to Lofthouse (2019) facilitate dialogue that addresses complex challenges within the instructional environment. This may be particularly important to remote faculty who have fewer opportunities to engage and collaborate with colleagues within the institution (McDowell, et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the findings from this study expanded the coaching discourse by suggesting that an additional outcome of coaching may be to affirm that faculty members' current pedagogical practices are meeting the performance expectations of the institution. Specifically, participants in this study indicated that affirmation of their teaching practices as appropriate appeared to be the most significant outcome regardless of their stated rationale for seeking coaching services. A structured coaching process in this program like those described by Gürgür (2017) and Lofthouse (2019) appeared to facilitate the sharing of this concern even though it was not revealed through the formal coaching request process. This is important because, while faculty participants in this study were overwhelmingly satisfied with the outcomes of the process, there appeared to be a miscommunication about the topics of interest of the coaching participant. In addition, faculty coaches and faculty participants differed in their expectations about the structure of the coaching process. According to Seehusen (2021), coaching as a professional development model is less understood by practitioners. This raises questions about how participants identify and express understand how the coaching program might support them as well as how the organization articulates and markets the program. Additional research could be conducted to address these concerns.

Organizations often offer professional development to meet the collective needs of the organization. However, it is important that faculty also have opportunities to meet their personal learning goals (Rosenberg, 2019; Wood, et al., 2016). This study confirmed the current research suggesting that coaching is a flexible, dynamic strategy to support individual faculty, including those in dispersed learning environments (Hodges, 2020; Martin, 2019; McDowell et al., 2014; Lewis & Ewing, 2016). Benefits to the faculty participants included an affirmation of current practices and an opportunity to build relationships across the institution. These outcomes appeared to be equally important to participants as receiving answers to their pedagogical questions. Any disparity between their initially stated goals and actual outcomes of the coaching session seemed inconsequential for the participants in this study. Rather, it is likely that the affirmation of current practices increased confidence which, in turn, may have positive impacts on instructional performance as described by Sadler (2013). However, additional research is needed to verify those conclusions and provide additional insight into how coaching can be used as professional development to support faculty members in their efforts to achieve their personal learning goals

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1. Describe your decision to seek coaching? How did you hear about coaching and what influenced you to participate?
2. What coaching techniques did the faculty specialist use to support you? How were those techniques helpful? Were there techniques used by the faculty specialist that were not helpful or that frustrated you?
3. How did you feel after the coaching session? Was there anything about the coaching session that you wish had been included?
4. How did the coaching session impact your teaching? What did you change or modify about your teaching as a result of the coaching session?
5. Would you attend another coaching session? If so, would you seek support on the same issue or another issue? What do you think could be done to improve the coaching process?

## **Appendix B**

### **Faculty Coach Written Questionnaire Prompts**

1. What strategies do you use when coaching?
2. Describe the structure of your typical coaching session
3. Describe any follow up that you do. How do you know if the coaching session was impactful?
4. How do you typically feel after a coaching session?
5. What are the most common reasons faculty come to coaching?

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[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)