

How to Support Faculty as They Prepare to Teach Online

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Abstract: A survey, an in-depth interview, and a review of the literature were used to explore the changes faculty undergo as they transition a course from traditional into online delivery. It was discovered that group trainings, ongoing individual training, mentoring, and a variety of critical reflective activities best supported this group.

Purpose

As noted in the literature, faculty undergo a transformation when they are about to teach online for the first time (King, 2000; Schifter, 2000). It is not unusual for new online faculty to express anxiety about their technology skills and raise questions about their ability to teach online, create a sense of community, manage student work, facilitate interactive learning, and insure integrity in testing (Biro, 2003). Professional development can support faculty in this new role of online instructor, but in order to do so it must recognize faculty as adult learners and foster critical reflection that is crucial to transformational learning (Cranton, 1996; King, 2000, 2003; Lawler & King, 2000; Mezirow, 1997). Critical reflection that supports this transformation should be learner-centered, participatory, interactive, and involve group deliberation about reasons, evidence, and judgment (Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 1997). Gillespie (1998) and Gandolfo (1998) also note the crucial role that instructional design has in assisting faculty in transforming their course for online delivery.

To focus on one issue deemed critical to the success of online courses—faculty preparation—this research highlights the following: 1) the experiences, expectations, and needs of one group of distance learning faculty; 2) faculty reflections with regard to what it was like preparing to teach online for the first time, and; 3) recommendations for professional developers on how to best collaborate with, and support, these faculty members.

Relevant Literature

Professional Development

The literature is replete with information about preparing faculty to teach online and the pedagogical shift that occurs (Baumgardner, 2000; Cyrs, 1997; Gandolfo, 1998; Roach 2000). Many traditional models of professional development for educators overlook the application of adult learning principles, so it becomes imperative that developers think of faculty as who they are—adult learners—and the ways in which their learning, growth, and change as practitioners can be facilitated and supported (Lawler & King, 2000; Licklider et. al, 1997-98).

This literature communicates many related concepts; namely, adults learn when actively involved in the planning and implementation of learning, and there must be opportunities for reflection, self-assessment, and self-direction if faculty are going to consider changing their practice, as when they consider teaching online for the first time. Since learning is both an opportunity and a risk, Cooper and Boyd (1998) note that for faculty “the drive toward competence is linked to self-worth and efficacy” (p. 58). Licklider et. al (1997-98) further note that successful developers view faculty development as adult education activities. Specific adult learning principles are helpful in guiding faculty development. These include active participation, collaboration, and learning for action in the respect that the “initiative should be designed with application in mind” (Lawler & King, 2000, p. 23) because adult learning theory recognizes that adults want to apply what they have learned.

Instructional design also plays a crucial role in assisting faculty in transforming a traditional, face-to-face course into one suitable for online delivery (Gandolfo, 1998; Gillespie, 1998). Instructional design can enhance the understanding of how technology supports teaching and learning while helping faculty avoid the pitfall of “...first using a new technology in old ways” (Gillespie, 1998, p. 45). Gandolfo (1998) insists that if faculty continue to teach via the web and other technologies just as they have taught in traditional classrooms, there will be no improvement in teaching and learning. Gandolfo encourages faculty and administrators to remember that “technology must be subordinated to issues of overall instructional design” (p. 36). Faculty who do not see technology for instruction “as one of many tools in our repertoire, and not as the focus, will not effectively redesign instruction” (Gandolfo, p. 35).

Among the considerations Baumgardner (2000) outlines as necessary to converting a traditional class into online delivery are asking faculty to think through the process, emphasizing that effective communication is key to a successful online class, then having faculty decide how to capture their lecture for online delivery, developing modules in lieu of class “times,” and reminding institutions that college-wide support is significant to online success.

Transformational Learning

Emancipatory learning, which is reflective in nature, is described as knowledge gained through critical self-reflection and knowledge that challenges one’s assumptions about learning, the use of knowledge, our role in this process, and social expectations (Mezirow, 1991). Education (i.e., professional development) that fosters critical reflection is learner-centered, participatory, interactive, and involves group deliberations as well as group problem-solving. It fosters small group discussions about reasons, evidence, and judgment (Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 1997).

Additionally, Cranton (1996) notes that faculty may not always view themselves as adult educators because their teaching philosophy may reflect institutional goals or their purpose of becoming a content expert. Moreover, faculty often do not see themselves as adult *learners*. Because practitioners continually make judgments that are often intuitive and based on a set of continuously changing criteria or circumstances, they need to be able to observe their actions, critically ask questions, and reflect on their actions within their own context. The *process* of gaining emancipatory knowledge *is* transformative learning (Cranton, 1996).

Research Design

Research Method

A qualitative approach was chosen that would allow the researcher to explore faculty perceptions and expectations with regard to preparing to teach online. The first phase involved conducting an in-depth interview while the second phase consisted of administering a survey that was designed to expand on what was learned in the interview. Finally, a review of the relevant literature and theoretical framework was ongoing in order to frame the issues as well as identify and understand emerging themes.

Participants and Setting

The setting for this research was the adult undergraduate department of a private, four-year, degree-granting institution. The department has been offering online courses to adult students since 2000 and has also been offering more frequent and structured professional development activities for faculty members who are preparing to teach online. The researcher was interested in learning more about faculty perceptions and expectations as they undertook this task, as well as identifying professional development activities that faculty found most helpful in

this endeavor. Finally, the researcher wanted to evoke the words, experiences, and reflections of faculty members in order to provide rich detail and greater understanding of their needs.

The criteria for selection for the in-depth interview meant searching for a new online instructor who had taught at least one, but not more than two semesters in the online format. The researcher wanted the interview to focus on first-time experiences and felt that someone who was still new to the process could more accurately recall initial concerns, experiences, and expectations. A one-hour, face-to-face interview was conducted on campus and tape-recorded so that a transcription could be made and content analysis performed in order to uncover categories and themes.

The participants in the survey were online faculty members who had taught at least one semester in the online format and intended to teach online again. The number of faculty who met this criteria numbered 24. Following completion of the in-depth interview, a 20-question survey was designed to solicit similar information with regard to faculty experiences and expectations, but also to further explore themes revealed in the interview. This survey was administered online to the 24 faculty members; a total of 20 completed surveys were returned.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was performed on the transcription of the interview and of the faculty responses to the survey. Overall, the majority of faculty found value in both group *and* individual training. Specifically, faculty utilized individual training to further explore their own philosophy of education and to continue to learn details of the course management system that had been introduced in group sessions. In addition, several faculty noted the helpful aspect of mentoring opportunities while they prepared to teach online, even if these opportunities were as informal as e-mail exchange or dialogue at group training sessions.

Discussion

As a result of content analysis, three categories were developed and several emerging themes were identified. The categories developed through content analysis were 1) *first training session*, 2) *formal training session*, and 3) *support*. In exploring the details of the first two categories—*first* and *formal* training sessions—faculty found that learning more about instructional design was valuable, that is, how to go about planning their first online course. Also deemed valuable was an overview of the course management system to be used for delivering the online course. Several faculty members noted that “having someone help me think through issues involved in online teaching” provided them with a good beginning to this process. Others said that the first session “softened concerns about technological competence.”

Within these categories, several themes emerged as being helpful to faculty as they prepared to teach online. The first major theme could be termed *groups* (i.e., group trainings that occurred face-to-face, as well as interactions through e-mail or online discussion boards). Several faculty made the distinction between group interactions that occurred face-to-face versus those which occurred via e-mail or phone, noting that they would not be able to “really use the software without all of the face-to-face training” they received. Others noted that the face-to-face group training was positive because it “helped to hear what other faculty members do in their online courses.”

A second emerging theme was the opportunity for ongoing *one-on-one training* in instructional design. While not all faculty members found value in individual training, most did. They explained these benefits in terms of pedagogy and technology. For example, several faculty members noted that individual training helped them “create and teach with limited technological skills.” Others noted that individual sessions reinforced or clarified their learning from the group

sessions, and several noted that one-on-one training gave them confidence in making the transition, helped refine goals, and helped resolve technical issues.

A third theme, *mentoring*, was noted by some as enhancing training. Although no formal, structured mentoring program exists at this time that would pair experienced online instructors with new instructors, the concept underlying peer collaboration was noted by several faculty members. Specifically, one faculty member said that the few times he communicated via e-mail with an experienced online instructor, he felt that he received valuable insight and affirmation of his approach. Yet others, when asked what advice they would offer first-time online instructors, indicated that “speaking to those who have done it” was helpful, as were devoting enough time to the instructional design process and allowing ample time for course revisions.

Implications and Recommendations

The researcher combined an in-depth interview with a group survey and review of the literature in order to explore faculty perceptions and expectations with regard to preparing to teach online. Based on the data gathered and analyzed, the following recommendations can be made to professional developers and administrators who work with faculty as they prepare to teach online.

First, *offer group trainings* that encourage faculty discussions about pedagogy and best practices. As noted by the single interviewee and group responses, nearly every faculty member placed high value on the group trainings because they introduced the instructional design process, provided an overview of the course management system, and allowed for general discussion of the teaching and learning process, student assessment, course management skills, and the exchange of ideas and strategies among instructors.

Second, *provide ongoing individual training* so faculty continue to integrate their teaching and learning philosophy with the best uses of educational technology. Again, nearly all faculty found value in continuing to work one-on-one with an instructional design specialist or technical support person about issues related to course planning, testing and assessment, and management of student work and e-mails. Faculty who had taught more than one online course also noted the value in having someone review their course, offer suggestions, and help collaborate on online learning activities.

Third, *implement mentoring opportunities* between experienced and new online faculty. Faculty members often found value in talking with a more experienced online instructor as they prepared their own course for online delivery, yet actually having opportunities to meet and talk can be a substantial hurdle. Faculty developers can help bridge this gap by creating multiple opportunities for experienced and new online faculty to meet and collaborate. This may be as simple as creating an online discussion board for everyone to use, or it may involve scheduling on-campus meetings during evening and weekend hours, with light refreshments, that can serve as convenient gathering places and times for online instructors.

Finally, *design a variety of professional development* activities for online faculty that include elements of critical reflection which can facilitate transformational learning. It is well documented in the literature that faculty undergo a philosophical shift and transformation when they prepare to teach online. Faculty developers can assist online instructors with this transformation by incorporating critical-thinking opportunities into training sessions. This may begin by asking reflective questions during group training to facilitate faculty discussion about their own learning. It may also involve more structured opportunities for faculty to write reflective essays or to journal about their transformational learning. Also, faculty developers can

provide resources and literature about transformational learning so online instructors can explore further this theory and process.

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