Organizing Faculty for Distance Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The process of organizing faculty for distance learning shares characteristics with planning for classroom instruction. It is necessary to understand faculty and their characteristics as a group. This includes knowing and understanding their expectations, their general work conditions, the type and level of education that is typical, as well as the general professional personality and culture of the faculty body. Consider well the faculty-learners' characteristics, and based on those select the most fitting assessment techniques, media, and methods.

There are also co-requisite conditions that must be satisfied to successfully mobilize faculty to teach via distance. These include the provision of equipment: hardware, software, and any other necessary technology. The faculty must be capable of and inclined to use the technology. There must be an overt expression of the expectation that teaching online is an institutional priority. Faculty, in turn, need to be aware of, understand, accept, and endorse the expectation. There must be incentives for teaching online, and they must be of the sort that will motivate faculty.

READINESS OF THE FACULTY-LEARNER TO UNDERTAKE DISTANCE INSTRUCTION

A strong predictor of faculty using computing technology in instruction is the effect of subjective norms (Marcinkiewicz & Regstad, 1996). This is the perception that one is expected to use educational computing by one's colleagues, administration, students, and learned societies. It is similar to "peer pressure." In order to profit from this perception, an institution must create the conditions necessary to enable this perception. With institutional intentions and plans clarified, the faculty organizer must examine the demographic characteristics of the faculty body. This will inform subsequent decisions regarding the methods, media, and assessments that will comprise the professional development efforts.

Characteristics of Faculty Learners

In planning instruction for faculty to teach via distance, consider that most individuals working in higher education teach; even most administrators start from teaching faculty positions. Individuals often enter teaching because of their love of learning. Faculty members are also supportive of each other and have a decided preference for practical tips and tactics versus theory when learning about instruction, though they do expect tips and tactics to be grounded both in theory and effective practice. It is a professional expectation of the professoriate to be intelligent—faculty members are regarded as experts in their fields of study.

Thus, we can broadly conclude that faculty-learners love learning, are mutually supportive, practical, and intelligent. These broad assumptions, adjusted according to institution-specific data, can provide insight into the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of your faculty-learners. All instructional planning for training methods, the media used, and the assessment should address the characteristics of faculty-learners.

Useful Methods

One potential dilemma in training faculty members to teach via distance could be a scholar's intimidation at learning to use educational technology for the first time (Hall & Hord, 1987; Rogers, 1995; Kotter, 1996). To defuse the possibility for embarrassment and maintain the willingness for your faculty to learn, practice two elements of student-centered learning: (1) customize the lessons to the level of the learner, and (2) allow the

learner to practice during instruction. This will slow the pace of the instruction which will, in turn, require the faculty developer to practice patience when teaching highly intelligent professors. The emphasis on practice also means that the actual technology must be present and available during the training experience.

Faculty tend to learn well from each other, and so it is helpful to use partners, mentors, panels, or other peer-learning methods in teaching professors (Doyle & Marcinkiewicz, 2001; Marcinkiewicz & Doyle, 2004). Promote "show and tell" activities in which experienced DL teachers demonstrate what they do and discuss their experiences. Pairing veteran distance learning faculty with novices is also an effective model of support that will not be intimidating to those just starting out.

An effective development program will include a number of activities that may vary in order, focus, or duration. There should be an early opportunity for faculty-learners to experience distance learning as students (Ko & Rossen, 2001; Marcinkiewicz, 2001). The faculty-learners should also practice teaching in a supported context—preferably with their peers for starters. As faculty gain confidence and skill, the mentoring process can be applied, pairing newer faculty with partners more experienced in the medium, and offering extended training and support as needed.

Because faculty members tend to focus on practical applications, training should be grounded in direct applications (Hall & Hord, 1987). Encourage faculty-learners to bring their instructional material to training sessions and allow unstructured work periods for them to migrate their material into the virtual environment. When illustrating a point, make specific references to actual experiences.

It is advisable to avoid technical terminology or jargon unless it is relevant and necessary for the topics or procedures being learned; otherwise, you may intimidate or confuse the faculty-learners (Doyle & Marcinkiewicz, 2001; Marcinkiewicz & Doyle, 2004). If terminology is not a learning objective, do not focus on it.

Instruction can be divided into three phases: presentation, practice, and proof of learning. Place particular emphasis on practice and proof of learning. In particular, allow plentiful opportunities for practice combined with ubiquitous opportunities for low-stakes proof of learning. The faculty-learners should be trying and trying again. If their learning is incorrect, there should be little or no consequence other than that they will need to be reoriented in their learning with opportunities for fresh attempts at mastery.

Useful Media

In view of the characteristics of faculty-learners and the suggested methods, select media accordingly. Teaching via distance typically requires the use of instructional technology. Increasingly, that technology is Web based, though many programs still offer videoconferencing, correspondence, radio, TV, and other delivery mechanisms. Regardless of which distance technology you are employing, begin training sessions with human instructors (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Doyle & Marcinkiewicz, 2001; Marcinkiewicz, 2001; Marcinkiewicz & Doyle, 2004), and continue with the human approach until faculty have gained independence and confidence in the new environment. Even after faculty have moved to more automated media, continue to use human instructors to troubleshoot or respond to complicated questions, and assure faculty of the availability of such assistance.

Much distance learning requires the use of equipment, and the use of the equipment itself is often the subject to be learned. The media must also be available.

Another medium that is appropriate is the human voice, as used for discussions between peer panels and the faculty or between faculty members. Be guided by Bruner's (1964, 1966) model of cognitive preference: emphasize kinesthetic experiences when the topic is novel to learners, progress to using motion picture or audio presentation, and use text as learners gain confidence and familiarity with the topic being learned.

The only way to know if your methods and media have served their purpose is through assessment. Faculty-learners should have ample opportunity to assess their learning, and faculty developers should also be assessing and evaluating the progress of their learners, adjusting instruction as necessary.

Useful Assessment

The design of instruction should support continuous communication between the faculty organizer and the faculty-learner. The design of assessment should not be different. Generate continuous feedback in the form