

Chapter 5.22

Modeling Best Practices in Web-Based Academic Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter makes a case for the importance of preparing e-teachers by requiring them to have an experience as an e-learner. The chapter begins with a review of the challenges and criticisms of e-learning. Some of the literature indicates that e-learners have been dissatisfied with their learning experiences. Some academics have concerns about the rigour of courses offered through e-learning. The literature of academic development and e-learning is used to link theory with practice. The chapter provides examples of best practice in the preparation of academic staff for e-teaching. Two case studies of lived examples of e-teaching preparation are provided from a North American perspective. Future research directions are outlined, with research questions to be explored regarding the link between the preparation of e-teachers through e-learning and the quality of the e-learning experience for students.

INTRODUCTION

Academic staff in higher education are enthusiastic about getting involved in e-teaching, yet most are getting started with no experience as an e-learner. Experiencing e-learning from the learner's perspective is immensely helpful, if not essential, for effective e-teaching. Ideally, it would be best to experience a very positive and involving model of e-learning, which may be used as a model for one's own e-teaching. This chapter is a presentation of a lived example of academic development through e-learning.

The aim of this chapter is to make a strong case for the preparation of e-teachers through successful completion of a fully online programme to prepare for e-teaching. International examples of e-teaching programmes will be included, including lessons learned from participation in two North American Web-based e-teaching programmes: one generic programme (for anyone from any institution), and one programme offered by a university for new e-teachers.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-59904-814-7.ch003

BACKGROUND

Whenever new or innovative teaching methods are used, it is normal for sceptics and critics to express concerns about the quality of teaching and learning, and e-learning has attracted some criticism. While some studies have shown “no significant difference” between learning outcomes in face-to-face classrooms and in the e-learning environment (Joy & Garcia, 2000), other studies have shown high attrition rates in e-learning, student frustrations with inexperienced e-teachers, and frustrations of e-teachers with poor student participation and learning outcomes.

While all of these criticisms cannot be directly linked to the quality of the preparation of the e-teachers, some of the frustrations of novice e-teachers show that preparation for e-teaching is a significant issue that does contribute to the quality of the overall teaching and learning experience for students and teacher.

Academic staff who plan to begin e-teaching usually need some professional development to provide an introduction to the new learning and teaching environment. According to a recent study in the United States, two thirds of 320 colleges and universities surveyed require academic staff to complete some training prior to teaching online (Lokken & Womer, 2007). Professional development for e-learning often takes the form of face-to-face workshops, one-on-one assistance and mentoring, and sometimes hybrid or blended e-learning experiences. The focus of some professional development is on the use of the technology, or on the development of materials to put up on a Web site for students. Some academic development programmes are also focused on the use of e-learning technology to enhance student learning.

The main point of this chapter is to consider the potential benefits of a professional development programme that is provided fully online. Some universities currently provide professional development preparation for teaching online through

classroom instruction in computer labs or through blended learning formats. The premise of this chapter is that, while these approaches are useful, it may be even more effective for academic staff to have the opportunity to experience e-learning fully at a distance as their students will. This chapter will focus on the role of effective professional development fully through e-learning to prepare teachers for high-quality e-teaching that is focused on student involvement and learning. First the criticisms of e-learning will be explored to determine what needs to be done to improve the quality of e-learning. Second, best practices in professional development will be examined, including possible ways of translating these to the preparation for e-teaching. Third, research on the current practices in academic development for e-teaching will be explored. Finally, recommendations will be made for the improvement of the preparation of e-teachers in the future.

This chapter is not a research-based chapter, but rather a detailed review of the existing literature on the challenges of preparing academic staff for teaching in the online environment, and some of the best practices that are emerging in the field.

In this chapter, the terms *e-teaching*, *e-learning*, *Web-based learning*, and *online learning* refer to any instructional course component delivered using the Internet, whether provided fully at a distance or in a hybrid or blended format. E-teaching refers to the processes used by teachers, and e-learning refers to students learning online.

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, PROBLEMS

Several concerns are addressed frequently in the literature of e-learning: the quality and rigour of instruction, including learning outcomes; student persistence; and student satisfaction.

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