Chapter 8

Train the Trainer:
A Competency–Based Model for Teaching in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes an online competency-based model for teaching adult learners in virtual environments. This model, informed by prior studies for online teaching, expands emergent themes within best practices and identifies competencies for course design, delivery and management of adult-centered online learning environments. The use of part-time instructors, in academic and corporate settings, to facilitate learning in virtual environments requires formal processes to develop web-based teaching skills that meet the needs and expectations of a multigenerational mix of online adult-learners. The competency-based model uses a generative approach to developing instructors as adult learners and builds on adult and constructivist learning theories. The model provides opportunities to improve web-based teaching skills and encourage behaviors that influence student engagement, retention and learning. This chapter guides the reader through a step-by-step process of understanding competencies needed to facilitate virtual learning with suggestions for implementation and practice in corporate settings.

INTRODUCTION

The significant increase in the number of adults enrolled in online courses (NCES, 2005; Sloan, 2005) and programs in academic and corporate settings necessitates a closer look at how effective teaching and learning can maximize the value and benefits of distance learning for adult learners,

instructors, organizations and business. The swing from traditional to online learning environments has prompted more interest in assessing the quality of instruction and instructional design to meet the needs of a diverse population of learners. The virtual environment, which provides flexibility and convenience, seems more conducive to learning for adults in both academic and corporate settings. The online format itself accommodates the characteristics and learning styles of adults in allowing self-paced and

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self-directed learning that is authentic and relevant to real life situations and job roles. The mastery of competencies for teaching online requires an understanding of the adult learner and integration of adult learning theory with technical elements of course design, delivery and management to create virtual learning environments and learning experiences that meet student expectations for personal growth and professional development, as well as organizational needs for skilled and informed employees. The business case for distance learning is strategic in terms of cost-effectiveness, productivity and profit. Web-based training allows for custom training and can be used modularly to focus on specific skills as needed. Virtual learning changes the way corporate training and professional development is delivered and accessed and the way information is managed and disseminated (Rosenberg, 2001).

Instructional practices within virtual environments and analysis of instructor-student interactions, as well as alignment of learning objectives with organizational goals, can yield positive predictors of student learning and program success. In the business world, the Internet creates with the organization a learning culture that expands and encourages the generation and sharing of knowledge for the future. To meet the learning demands of the employee and the performance needs of the organization, management must continually assess the role of virtual learning and support the case for expanding its development and use. Companies like, AT&T, Anderson Consulting, Dell Computer, IBM., Lucent Technologies and Merrill Lynch, just to name a few, moved to Web-based training and online learning in an attempt to reinvent their training and development programs and increase the value-added scalability of instruction and application in the workplace (Rosenberg, 2001).

Despite the proliferation of online courses and programs, there are few studies on what constitutes effective teaching in virtual environments (Grant & Thornton, 2007; Newlin & Wang, 2002). A common mistake online course developers and instructors make is trying to emulate traditional classrooms or training with technology mediated interactions without the benefit of good pedagogy. A study, utilizing Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" as applied to online pedagogy, identified and analyzed best practices used by online instructors, which clarified the skills, knowledge and characteristics needed to effectively facilitate learning in a virtual environment (Grant & Thornton, 2007). Competencies most relevant to instructional design, course development, delivery and evaluation were identified, and with best practices, informed and shaped the competency-based model presented in this chapter. Integrating adult learning theory and generational characteristics and learning styles, expand this model's use with today's adult learner. This competency-based model provides opportunities to acquire knowledge, master skills and practice techniques to improve online teaching and encourage behaviors that influence adult student engagement, retention and learning. Recommendations for implementation and adaptability of the model to different institutional and corporate structures and instructor needs are proposed.

The first section will provide background for the development of the competency model. The second section summarizes the characteristics of instructors as adult learners and considers the implications of adult and constructivist learning theories in online learning. The third section describes seven competencies for teaching online, which, when mastered and applied, cut across a matrix of identified best practices and themes. The fourth section presents the process of validating the competency model and outlines the online training course in which the model is taught. The final section discusses the implications for practice and future development of online instruction for academia and business.

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