

Chapter 44

A Model for Online Instructor Training, Support, and Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is a popular learning option for millions of students in US colleges and universities. Online facilitation plays an important role in student learning. With a growing number of courses offered online, there are many challenges associated with the quality of online instruction. This chapter presents information on a large-scale online project for preK-12 educators. The author presents detailed information on a model for training, support, professional development, and monitoring of online instructors. The author also discusses implications for further development and monitoring of online instructors' knowledge, skills, and dispositions that promote successful online experiences and learning for students.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the author will describe and discuss a model for online faculty recruitment, training, support, retention, and professional development. The purpose of this chapter is to present the successes and challenges associated with a situated large-scale online professional development project for preK-12 educators in the

US. The author will provide detailed information about the context, content, implementation, support systems, and online facilitation monitoring processes associated with this online project. The author will also share data and examples related to the online instructor training, support, professional development, and quality assurance processes that contributed to the success of this project. The professional development, mentoring, and support of online faculty play a key role in the quality of online facilitation and student learn-

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ing. Selection, certification training, mentoring, support, and monitoring of online facilitation are necessary, complex, and multi-layered processes.

BACKGROUND

As advances in technology influence and become a major part of our everyday lives, interest continues to grow in the use of the Internet to provide professional development for teachers. The flexibility that online learning provides has made it a strong catalyst for improving teacher content knowledge and pedagogy. That is, overcoming problems with gaining access and a lack of face-to-face interaction are easily surmounted by the need for educators to find time in their busy and demanding schedules to obtain the professional training needed to keep up to date in their field. Furthermore, providing teachers with access to high-quality professional development via a long distance medium not only reduces monetary costs but it also has potential for providing valuable just-in-time learning for teachers.

Online professional development can expand educators' experiences to include content-rich learning opportunities in an interactive virtual environment that is personalized to the subject area and grade level that they teach. This is especially true for teachers in rural areas who may otherwise be challenged to find high-quality professional development that fits their specific needs (ACME, 2002). The preparation of online faculty, to teach and help students learn online, is a core factor for student and program success. The professional development, mentoring, and support of online faculty will determine both the quality of online instruction and student learning in online learning environments. Selection, certification training, mentoring, support, and monitoring of online facilitation are complex and multi-layered processes.

Students' satisfaction of online facilitators/instructors was found to contribute significantly

to their satisfaction of online courses (Finally-Neumann, 1994; Williams & Ceci, 1997). Promptness, approachability, communication skills, content knowledge, and encouragement of facilitators were considerably related to student satisfaction of online courses (Bolliger, 2004). The first three were also found to be a key factor in predicting participants' overall satisfaction of online facilitators to a great extent (Wang, Huh, & Zygouris-Coe, 2007). Northrup (2002) found that timely feedback was a key factor in supporting online learning.

Competencies in the aforementioned factors are what online facilitators should have in order to effectively facilitate asynchronous discussions so that their participants can maximize their potentials with satisfaction with their learning experience. Despite emphasis on the importance of facilitator skills in asynchronous discussions, there is a lack of research identifying applicable indicators for measuring quality of facilitator asynchronous discussions.

According to Anderson and Moore (2008, p. ix), distance education is "the most significant development in education in the past quarter century." The rapid growth of online distance education courses requires university faculty to face new challenges and different decisions in the areas of course management and design, delivery, student communication, creation and maintenance of a positive and engaging learning environment, assessment, and use of new technologies. Online teaching and learning place unique demands both on instructor and students. The most successful online course experiences for students and instructors depend on the preparation and expertise of a well-prepared online instructor (Jones, 2006). Such expertise is not developed overnight. It requires a model for faculty recruitment, training, support, and professional development and many resources.

According to Levy (2003), faculty members are faced with a number of new situations when teaching an online learning class as opposed to a traditional class. Some of these include the

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