

Preparing Faculty for Distance Learning Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the recent development of delivery and communication technology and the success of distance learning, educational organizations are starting to use distance teaching to reach students so that they can learn anytime and from anywhere (Daniel, 1997). At the same time, businesses and organizations are increasingly using distance learning technology to bring the training to employees rather than send the employees for training. As a result, faculty and trainers are required to make the transition from classroom face-to-face teaching to distance teaching. One of the drawbacks in making the transition to distance delivery is faculty and trainers may not be prepared to function in the new role which is a major challenge for administrators (Agee, Holisky & Muir, 2003). Also, distance teaching is seen as an add-on for faculty in dual mode institutions (Wolcott, 2003), and resources are not available to prepare staff to work in the distance learning setting. At the same time, the commitment to distance learning from senior officials tend not to be as strong when compared to traditional delivery especially in dual mode institutions where there are both face-to-face delivery and distance delivery, and faculty have to teach both classroom delivery and distance delivery (Betts, 1998; Hislop & Atwood, 2000). Hence, it is important that administrators support distance delivery for it to be successful. According to Betts (1998), administrators who show interest in distance learning and who have experience in distance learning will influence faculty to use distance learning methods. To make the transition to distance delivery, training of faculty is important to make sure they are prepared to perform effectively and efficiently so that they can be productive and meet the needs of learners when working in the distance learning environment. The faculty should experience the distance delivery method as a student, and the format of the training should model the distance delivery process (Moloney & Tello, 2003). This entry will describe why training

of faculty is important and what type of training should be provided for distance teaching.

SKILLS REQUIRED BY FACULTY TO FUNCTION SUCCESSFULLY IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Over the decades distance learning has evolved because of technological development that influences distance delivery systems (Rumble, 2003). The correspondence system that involved the mailing of print materials was followed by educational broadcasting, which involved television and video. These were followed by multimedia systems, which utilized the power of the computer to present video, graphics, pictures, and so forth to learners and made the learning interactive using feedback and simulation. The current delivery system is using the Internet for online teaching, which is growing at a very fast rate. The next generation of distance learning will make use of wireless mobile learning devices that will allow learners to learn from anywhere and anytime without being connected to a physical system (Soloway & Norris, 2004; Thornton & Houser, 2004). Faculty will have to be trained to function in distance teaching using different delivery methods.

As faculty move from face-to-face delivery to distance learning, their role will change drastically to function effectively in the distance learning environment (Ally, 2000). The faculty role will shift from a dominant person in front of the classroom to being a facilitator of learning by managing the learning process, providing one-to-one coaching to learners, and supporting and advising learners. Since the student and faculty are not physically present in the same location in distance learning, the faculty has to use strategies to compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact. Depending on the geographic distribution of students, the faculty can use synchronous or asynchronous communication tools to

communicate and interact with learners. An important question is: “What areas should faculty be trained to function in in the distance learning environment?” In a study conducted by Irani (2001), faculty suggested that training for online delivery should include training on instructional design, technology use, and software use. Keeton (2004), on the other hand, reported that the areas that faculty see as important for distance learning are those that focus on the processes of learning. As a result, faculty should be prepared on how to facilitate and provide support for learning. The next sections describe areas that faculty should be trained on to prepare them for distance teaching.

Faculty must be trained on how to be good facilitators of distance learning. The faculty has to facilitate learning by role modeling behavior and attitudes that promote learning, encourage dialogues, and promote use of appropriate interpersonal skills (Addesso, 2000). Good facilitation skills are important to compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact in distance learning, and to connect to the learner and create a high sense of presence (Hiss, 2000).

The distance learning faculty must be trained on how to recognize different learning styles and how to cater for the different styles. An effective distance learning faculty must recognize that students have different styles when learning, and some students prefer certain strategies more than others. Distance teaching should use techniques that will satisfy and develop different learning styles, and the distance learning faculty should include activities for the different styles to allow learners to experience all of the learning activities. At the same time, appropriate learning support should be provided depending on the learning style of the learner (Ally & Fahy, 2002).

The distance learning faculty should be trained on the importance of feedback and how to provide effective and constructive feedback to students. Timely feedback is important in online learning to maintain presence in the learning process (Bischoff, 2000). Faculty should make students feel comfortable and should show enthusiasm about the course materials to keep students motivated. As a result, appropriate training on when and how to provide feedback to learning is critical in distance learning. The faculty has to adapt to the learner needs and provide timely feedback to learners. Motivating students can be done by letting them know what they are learning is beneficial and then challenging students by suggesting additional learning activities.

The distance learning faculty must have the expertise to advise students when they encounter problems, since students encounter academic and personal problems during their studies. The faculty has to acknowledge the problems and, in some cases, address the problems. For students’ personal problems, the distance learning faculty should establish an open and trustful environment so as to recognize the personal problems, assess the personal problems, and provide appropriate intervention to solve the personal problems. If the student’s personal problem cannot be solved by the faculty, the student should be referred to a professional counselor. One of the key competencies for training faculty on advising students is deciding when to help a student with a problem and when to refer the student for professional help.

The distance learning faculty must be a good problem solver to interpret students’ problems and provide solutions to the problems. This implies that the faculty must have the content expertise to solve content problems. The faculty solves content problems by keeping up to date in the field, interpreting learners’ questions, communicating at the level of the learner, providing remedial activities, and conducting follow up on help provided. Interaction with learners requires good oral and written communication skills. Distance learning faculty are required to develop and revise courses on an ongoing basis. Also, they provide written feedback to learners as part of the tutoring process. Training programs must train distance teaching faculty on how to write and communicate effectively and clearly, and at the level of the learner. As part of the problem-solving process, faculty need good listening skills to understand what the learner is saying in order to respond to the learner. A training program for distance learning faculty must include training on how to listen effectively. As part of the tutoring and coaching processes, the distance learning faculty needs to know how to ask questions to elicit information from learners. Training programs for distance learning faculty must include training on how to ask appropriate questions to elicit information from students and to diagnose their problems.

Distance learning systems make use of technology to develop and deliver training materials. The faculty must be trained on how to use the technology. This is critical in distance learning since the faculty must model proper use of the technology. Also, faculty in distance learning must have the right attitude to work with learners at a distance. Faculty should be patient,

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