

Preparing Teachers to Teach Online

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INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of today's teachers were never taught using computers. They have no firsthand experience using computers for teaching and learning and they may even believe computers are a threat to their jobs. Helping these teachers to become effective online teachers requires a systematic multi-layered approach to professional development. First, teachers have to be convinced of their institution's commitment to online instruction. Then, they need support and guidance as they move through various levels of understanding and concern about what online learning is and its role and value in education. Finally, teachers need to develop competencies that will enable them to be successful online teachers. This chapter presents a brief background on the use of technology in education, research on approaches to professional development, and specific information on the competencies required to be an effective online teacher.

BACKGROUND: TECHNOLOGY AND TEACHING

Even in the world's most advanced schools, computers have only been available for a few decades. During that time, huge advances have been made in the technologies available for use in schools, their educational applications, and our understanding of how to use them to promote learning.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as computers were just beginning to appear in classrooms, professional development focused on operating the computer and running software packages. This included basic operation and maintenance, programming, using productivity tools (e.g., word processors, databases, and spreadsheets) and eventually the use of grade-level appropriate curriculum-specific instructional programs.

By the late 1980s professional development had changed its focus. No longer was the goal to simply make teachers competent users. Rather, it was to help

them develop strategies to increase the effective student use of technology for learning. Teachers were exposed to concepts such as the use of collaborative learning in technology-based learning environments. They also began requiring students to use technology for research, data collection, and presentation of findings. Teachers' roles shifted from using technology to teach, to using technology to facilitate learning.

The introduction of the Internet and online resources in the late 1990s presented another change in the use of technology in education. Teachers and students began to browse this virtual library for information and resources heretofore unavailable to them. Computers became a tool for searching, retrieving, manipulating, and sharing information. Teachers began to see the online environment as an information repository that contributed to student learning and through which students could contribute to the learning of others. Teaching strategies began to make use of this rich resource by including online research and reporting activities.

By the early 2000s, use of the Internet for communication had evolved beyond mere text messages to include a full range of media — images, audio, and video. Online distance education began to gain popularity. All levels of education began to see online learning as a vehicle for expanding the reach of institutions and by offering educational services to potential students they could not previously reach. The concept of online education presented yet another opportunity to change the role of teachers. The personal relationship between teachers and students, which was so often a critical component of classroom instruction, took on an entirely different character. Online distance education courses created instructional environments where teachers and students interacted in a digital world and where they might never meet, speak, or even see each other in person.

Overview

Online distance education (also commonly referred to as distance education, online learning, online teaching,

and distributed learning), as the name implies, delivers instruction using a computer network, without requiring face-to-face meetings of students and faculty (Arabasz & Baker, 2003). These online courses, taught in virtual classrooms, are often facilitated by use of the Internet (Spector & de la Tega, 2001), and may be synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination thereof.

Online distance education offers exciting opportunities for learners, teachers, and educational institutions. Internet technology allows distance education to make efficient, content-rich, interactive learning opportunities available to learners at locations and in ways previously not possible. For an increasing number of institutions, this capability is broadening and extending their methods of delivering education. Consequently, online distance education has been the focus of numerous research studies, position papers, standards documents, and guidelines. These documents (e.g., Sales, 2005; Smith, 2005; The Institute for Higher Education, April, 2000; The Higher Education Program, and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers, May, 2000; Twigg, 2003a, 2003b), address the relative instructional effectiveness of online learning, educational quality, student needs, institutional support, instructional strategies, costs, required teacher competency, and more.

One report, *Quality On the Line* (The Institute for Higher Education, 2000), studied six institutions actively involved in online education and constructed a list of 24 “benchmarks that are essential for quality Internet-based distance education” (p.25). These benchmarks represented seven categories:

1. Institutional Support
2. Course Development
3. Teaching/Learning
4. Course Structure
5. Student Support
6. Faculty Support
7. Evaluation and Assessment

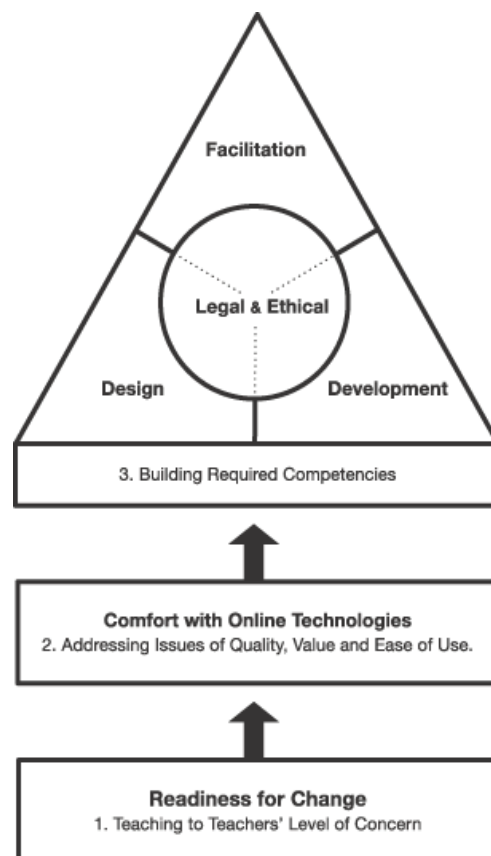
Across all levels of instruction, responsibility for achieving these benchmarks is shared by institutions, teachers and their program areas, and students. However, teachers are primarily involved in the Course Development, Teaching/Learning, Course Structure, and Faculty Support benchmarks.

MAIN FOCUS: A MODEL FOR PREPARING TEACHERS TO TEACH ONLINE

Preparing teachers to participate effectively in online instruction (e.g., Course Development, Teaching/Learning, Course Structure, and Faculty Support) requires carefully structuring professional development. The model below (Figure 1) illustrates the critical components such preparation should address.

Functioning both as a model and a hierarchy, Figure 1 suggests online teacher training begin by assessing and addressing teachers’ readiness to change as indicated through their expressions of concern about the impact of online teaching and learning. It then moves into increasing their comfort level with online technologies as they relate to quality of instruction, correlation of online instruction with the values of the institution, and the ease with which they can teach using online instruction. Only after these issues have been addressed should teacher preparation focus on developing their competencies to teach online.

Figure 1. Preparing teachers to teach online



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