

Developing Online Faculty Competencies

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BACKGROUND

The use of technology in education and the associated professional development are relatively new phenomena. Even so, they have gone through several stages of evolution. Each stage has been influenced by both the available technologies, our understanding of the psychology of learning, and the readiness of faculty to use technology with their students.

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

By the late 1980s the role of faculty development in this area had changed its focus. No longer was the goal to simply make faculty competent users. Rather, it was to help them develop strategies to increase the effective student use of technology for learning. Faculty were exposed to concepts such as the use of collaborative learning in technology-based learning environments, and requiring students to use technology for research, data collection, and to present findings. Faculty roles shifted from using technology to teach, to using technology to facilitate learning.

The explosion of Internet resources in the late 1990s presented another change in the use of technology in education: online distance education began to gain popularity. This new capability changed the role of the faculty yet again. The personal relationship between faculty and students, which was so often a critical component of classroom instruction, took on an entirely different character. Online distance education courses created instructional envi-

ronments where faculty and students might never meet, speak, or even see each other. Preparing faculty for this new instructional reality is the topic of this paper.

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 Teja, 2001), and may be synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination.

As with all new instructional technology, online distance education offers exciting opportunities for learners 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. This capability is transforming the delivery of education. Consequently, online distance education recently has been the focus of numerous research studies and position papers. These reports (e.g., The Institute for Higher Education, 1999, 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, faculty roles, 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

Responsibility for achieving these benchmarks is shared by institutions, faculty and their program areas, and students. Faculty are responsible primarily for the benchmarks associated with Course Development, Teaching/Learning, and Course Structure. Preparing faculty to effectively serve in these areas requires careful consideration of faculty attitudes and readiness, instructional design knowledge, online teaching skills, course development and maintenance skills, and knowledge of relevant legal and ethical issues.

Concerns-Based Approach

For most faculty the transition from teaching in a classroom to online teaching is a significant change. It involves exposing faculty to a number of activities and experiences that over time will increase their knowledge, skill, and confidence.

The readiness of faculty, or to be more precise, the level of readiness of faculty for online distance

education training, should be assessed prior to faculty development interventions. Loucks-Horsley (1996), while studying faculty acceptance of change in science curricula, proposed that faculty readiness for change can be determined by the types of questions or concerns they express about the change or innovation being considered. This concerns-based approach identifies a seven-level hierarchy of faculty readiness (see Table 1).

Faculty concerns move from the lowest level, Awareness, upward. Naturally, different faculty will move through the hierarchy at different rates. Some may never reach the upper levels. Training should be geared to the level of readiness being expressed by faculty. Therefore, a series of training interventions will likely be required to reach faculty at different levels of concern. Institutions, having limited resources, may need to make decisions about their ability to provide training to faculty at every level.

Characteristics Influencing Adoption of Technologies

There are many political, economic, ethical, and resource issues at the institutional level that impact a faculty person’s ability to prepare for and use online distance education (Sales & Emesiochl, 2004). In addition, an individual’s growth, as reflected in the concern-based approach to faculty development discussed above, is strongly influenced by his/her personal beliefs, as well as the environment in which he/she lives and works.

Table 1. Typical expressions of concern about an innovation (Loucks-Horsley, 1996)

Stages of Concern	Expression of Concern
6. Refocusing	I have some ideas about something that would work even better.
5. Collaboration	How can I relate what I am doing to what others are doing?
4. Consequence	How is my use affecting learners? How can I refine it to have more impact?
3. Management	I seem to be spending all my time getting materials ready.
2. Personal	How will using it affect me?
1. Informational	I would like to know more about it.
0. Awareness	I am not concerned about it.

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