

Chapter 61

Learning to Teach Online: Negotiating Issues of Platform, Pedagogy, and Professional Development

Christina M. Tschida

East Carolina University, USA

Elizabeth M. Hodge

East Carolina University, USA

Steven W. Schmidt

East Carolina University, USA

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of distance education in higher education has left a high demand for faculty willing to design and teach online courses, often with little or no training. The path from face-to-face to online courses is not an easy one and can be filled with frustration and doubt for many faculty. Professional development often focuses on technology tools rather than pedagogical issues of online learning or course content. This chapter focuses on research that examines the experience of several faculty from the college of education at a state university in the Southeast United States, as they learned to teach online. It presents their negotiations of issues of online platform and pedagogy and their efforts to find professional development to meet their needs. The implications for institutions of higher learning are important as distance education continues to increase and more and more faculty are asked (or told) to transfer their courses online.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s college enrollment has grown rapidly to almost 20 million undergraduates seeking an education (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). However, the economic downturn and public scrutiny of the educational system has brought about a series of changes both within and outside of academia that is unparalleled to other time periods in history (Kezar & Eckel 2002, Zusman, 2005). Since the early 1990s we have witnessed an astonishing explosion of distance education courses and programs in higher

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0164-0.ch061

education. With the growing amount of competition between public, private, and for-profit institutions, the academy is forced to address the current culture inherent in institutions of higher education so as to advance institutional change and embrace the opportunities that distance education provides. Enrollment in online courses has grown at rates far beyond traditional higher education enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2007). More than 96% of the largest colleges and universities in the United States offer online courses (Gaytan, 2009) and more than 31% of all students in U.S. colleges enroll in at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Schmidt, Hodge, and Tschida (2014) note that while technological advancements have influenced this growth, budgetary issues affecting institutions of higher education across the country have made online education vital to many institutional fiscal plans. Colleges and universities see distance education as an effective means for sustaining growth (Moller, Foshav, & Huett, 2008; Young & Lewis, 2008). Online learning is cost effective in a variety of ways. Physical classroom space and accompanying tools and equipment are not necessary in the online classroom. From a content perspective, courses can be developed, copied, and reused by other instructors. In addition, the replication and standardization of online courses offers, to some extent, quality control in terms of content presented and course design (Wise & Rothman, 2010).

From the standpoint of the student, online programs and courses offer flexibility to learners whose lifestyles or life responsibilities do not match traditional college schedules (Ke, 2010; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leindhardt, 2006; Young & Lewis, 2008). For example, low-income students enrolled in distance education courses are more likely to have fewer enrollment gaps and stay enrolled in their programs, suggesting it is due to the easy accessibility of courses and convenience of completing coursework on their own schedules (Pontes & Pontes, 2012).

This rapid growth in distance education has not only changed the characteristics of the students, but directly impacted the traditional culture of academia rooted in curriculum, governance, and faculty (Zusman, 2005). Colleges and universities have reassigned faculty teaching traditional face-to-face courses to online courses, often with little or no training (Batts, Pagliari, Mallett & McFadden, 2010). Academia has ignored the fact that faculty knowledge, beliefs, and instructional practices are formed by the social contexts in which they operate and the institutional culture that shapes their work (Windschitl & Sahl, 2002; Little, 1990). The move to online teaching can be quite unsettling for some faculty who are successful in the classroom but then struggle to interact with students in cyberspace or design online courses. Colleges and universities have found themselves behind the curve in terms of professional development and support for their faculty, leaving many faculty alone to figure out how to make the transition between face-to-face and online teaching.

This chapter examines how institutional culture affected faculty transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching and how they negotiated issues of design, structure, and community in their online courses. Data presented in this chapter are from a larger study examining how faculty in the college of education, at a state university in the southeast, learned to teach online. It addressed how faculty negotiated the processes associated with transitioning from face-to-face to online learning. Also, it considered what faculty learned about teaching online based on their own transition processes. The voices of faculty members, through their quotes gathered during this research process, are presented throughout this chapter.

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