Chapter 8

Faculty Training and Mentoring at a Distance:
Learning Together in the Virtual Community

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ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that a good instructor is the key to student persistence in an online course. Because of this, the hiring, training, and evaluation of good online instructors has become high priority for most online institutions. Providing good training and also providing incentives for keeping good online faculty have become critical concerns for most colleges and universities. However, not all universities are able to provide good training even under the best of circumstances. Many factors can wreak havoc with well-intended plans to provide training for online faculty. This case looks at the characteristics of a good online instructor as well as the faculty training needed to ensure high quality course design and delivery. Models of effective faculty training and evaluation are reviewed. Two cases, Delgado Community College in New Orleans and Excelsior Community College in Kingston, Jamaica are also reviewed to illustrate how critical needs for the delivery of high quality faculty training were met at a distance under less than ideal conditions. The cases illustrate the importance and impact that good training can make.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities are faced with an increasingly diverse student body, competition for enrollment, changing policies and societal demands, as well as technological changes that are impacting the way instructors teach and students learn. A response to this has been increased development and adoption of online courses, with mixed results. Many administrators view online learning as a way to increase flagging enrollments and extend the reach of the institution or, in simple terms, as an easy way to maximize profits and attract new students. Many students view online courses as a more convenient way to go to school and even

sometimes, mistakenly, as an easier way to earn credit. Faculty who are given the responsibility to develop and teach online courses, however, might not see online education in such a positive light. The absence of good training to support new and seasoned online instructors alike is part of the problem – good faculty development for online teaching is the solution.

Evidence suggests that a good instructor is the key to student persistence in an online course. Because of this, the hiring, training, and evaluation of good online instructors has become high priority for most online institutions. Providing good training and also providing incentives for keeping good online faculty have become critical concerns for most colleges and universities. However, not all universities are able to provide good training even under the best of circumstances. Many factors can wreak havoc with well-intended plans to provide training for online faculty. This chapter begins by looking at the characteristics of a good online instructor as well as the faculty training needed to ensure high quality course design and delivery. Models of effective faculty training and evaluation will be reviewed.

Following that discussion, two cases, Delgado Community College in New Orleans and Excelsior Community College in Kingston, Jamaica will be reviewed to illustrate how critical needs for the delivery of high quality faculty training were met at a distance under less than ideal conditions. The cases illustrate the importance and impact that good training can make. Additionally, the cases provide evidence for the organizational change that occurs when faculty development for online teaching goes beyond the simple use of technology in teaching.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FACULTY TRAINING FOR ONLINE TEACHING

Faculty are rarely provided with training in the pedagogical skills they need to teach online.

A 2002 survey of faculty who teach in various disciplines and are located throughout the United States, yielded results that appear to be the norm of faculty experience, as 75% indicated that they had received approximately 30 hours of technical training in the course management system they would be using; however, only one-third reported receiving any pedagogical training. A subset of surveyed faculty were interviewed; they described the difficulties they were having engaging students in online discussion and their perceived need for pedagogical training (Pankowski, 2004). Given that White and Weight (2000) note that teaching techniques that work in the face-to-face classroom may not work online and that faculty are asking for additional support for effective teaching, it is clear that pedagogical training is lacking. Milam, Voorhees, and Bedard-Voorhees (2004) note, "…the online paradigm holds that learning itself may be different in the online environment" (p.74). Given that learning itself is different online, shouldn't faculty training be addressed differently as well?

Faculty Online

Teaching online requires faculty to move beyond traditional models of teaching and to adopt what may be new practices for them that facilitate student learning. Gone is the traditional lecture and in its place is the need to create a strong learning community (Palloff and Pratt, 2007), facilitate good discussion, and engage students in collaborative learning. Thus, the ability to present oneself well in text, known as the creation of social presence, has been receiving significant research attention and is now considered a critical factor in community building and in teaching online classes. Both instructors and students need to be able to present themselves as "real people" in the online classroom. This ability is positively linked to student satisfaction with online learning as well as successful achievement of learning outcomes (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2003; Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Picciano, 2002; Rovai & Barnum, 2003).

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