

Chapter 12

Faculty–Faculty Interactions in Online Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that peer support helps improve faculty activities such as research, teaching, and technology competencies. Using a mixed research method design, this research study investigated resources available to faculty as they teach or prepare to teach online courses at a large Midwest public university. In addition, the study explored the nature of peer interactions that existed between faculty who taught or planned to teach online courses. The determinants of such interactions as well as the benefits and the challenges involved in initiating and maintaining the interactions were examined. Findings from this study have implications for the development and implementation of training and support programs intended to help faculty successfully teach online courses.

INTRODUCTION

A large number of colleges and universities across the United States are transitioning traditional face-to-face classes into fully online, blended, or web-facilitated courses. This is partly due to the need to maintain a competitive edge and make classes more accessible to a growing and diverse student population. Additionally, online teaching offers new and exciting opportunities to expand the learning environment for diverse

student populations. For instance, in a recent study of undergraduate students at an American university enrolled in both traditional and online courses, students preferred online courses to the traditional classroom saying that they learned more in these classes, spent more time on these classes, and found them to be more challenging and of higher quality than traditional classes (Hannay & Newvine, 2006).

According to Allen, Seaman, and Garret (2007), almost 64 percent of all institutions offer at least one online course and 55 percent of all higher institutions offer at least one blended

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course. Additionally, Allen and Seaman (2007) reported that “Almost 3.5 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2006 term; a nearly 10 percent increase over the number reported the previous year” (p. 1). Further, nearly 20 percent of students in higher education were enrolled in at least one online course during that term. As a result, at some point in their teaching career, university instructors are asked to consider teaching their classes either partially or fully online (Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008).

Krueger and Stretch (2000) argued that “there is minimal scientific evidence to support on-line course development as a superior, or even an equivalent pedagogical tool compared to the traditional teaching approach (p. 12).” However, with declining enrollments, increased competition among universities for students, and rising tuition, online instruction is being heralded as the innovative and sound strategy of the Twenty-first Century University to overcoming some of these challenges. Even so, high quality online instruction would require a comprehensive view of the online teaching and learning process and the commitment to diversify instruction to better meet the needs of all online learners.

The pathway of course migration to online environments often begins with the assumption that instructional designs, grading procedures, and other methods that typically work in the traditional classroom would remain the same in online settings. When instructors come to terms with the reality that these two environments are entirely different, they suddenly become frustrated (Franklin & Blankson, 2001) and realize the need for professional development activities and support programs that will help them effectively teach online.

Converting a face-to-face course into an online one that is successful (Whitlock, 2001) requires knowledge and skills related to teaching in online environments. Teaching online requires more time and energy to master the necessary skills needed to plan, prepare, and deliver the course; demand

on instructor’s time increases when they teach online (National Education Association, 2000). In a broad sense, there is demand for more time to manage, for instance, an interactive discussions board, electronic mail, listserv groups, web pages, interactive television (ITV), on-line cameras, whiteboards, and supplemental Web-based materials.

For a smooth transition to online teaching, faculty should first integrate technology into their face-to-face courses and get familiar with online teaching environments before they take on the challenge of teaching online (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Basic training is also required for instructors who have a desire to teach online courses. Such training would include software programs, online syllabi, online teaching strategies, organization of materials, and strategies to promote participation and facilitate interaction (Ko & Rossen, 2001).

Although online teaching training programs have been useful, most of them are offered in a similar manner with faculty attending one-time expert-led workshops which hardly include any follow-up activities (Crawford, 2003; Thompson, 2006). In addition, faculty participation in these one-time “one-size-fits-all” workshops does not necessarily ensure mastery of the desired skills required for effective online teaching (Bentley & Mumma, 1999).

In order to make courses ‘work’ online and to fully realize the promise of online teaching, Lan, Sheridan, Nelson, and Christensen (2002) suggest the need to encourage and cultivate interactions among groups of dedicated educators who are not only instructional leaders in their respective disciplines, but are also confident and self-sustaining technology users. Sorcinelli and Yun (2007) also encourage the building of networks of “multiple partners in nonhierarchical, collaborative, cross-cultural partnerships” (p. 58). These interactions or support systems provide faculty with opportunities to draw on each others’ experiences and strategies which might also help improve faculty research, teaching, and technology competencies.

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