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Teaching with New Eyes: Transformative Faculty Professional Development for Online Teaching

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Keywords: transformative learning, faculty development, action research

Abstract: This qualitative action research study explored the changes in teaching assumptions and beliefs and face-to-face teaching practices fostered by transformative learning among higher education faculty as a result of participating in a blended professional development program to prepare them to teach online.

The rapid growth of the Internet changing the ways we gather and share information, gain knowledge, do business, collaborate, and design and deliver instruction, is one of the largest driving forces for change in higher education and teaching (Diamond, 2005; Jones, Mally, Blevins, & Munroe, 2003; King & Lawler, 2003; Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2006). While some instructors have embraced online education (Allen & Seaman, 2003), many are only beginning to integrate technology into their teaching. Most faculty members have no experience with online teaching, having spent the majority of their years as a learner in a traditional face-to-face classroom (Brookfield, 2006). Their initial teaching model was born from that of their own teachers, and they teach as they were taught (Gallant, 2000; Layne, Froyd, Simpson, Caso, & Merton, 2004). In this way, the teaching and learning environment has not changed much over the years (Conrad, 2004).

Distance education has been described as a new specialty that prevents instructors from teaching in familiar ways, having to rethink their teaching practices (Diekelmann, Schuster, & Nosek, 1998). While changes in their teaching practices may occur in the online classroom, they do not automatically lead to “reflection and identifying and naming the meaning of experiences after they had been lived” (Conrad, 2004, p. 41). Faculty professional development for online teaching needs to provide opportunities to reflect, experiment, and probe new learning principles (Buckley, 2002). Without reflective practice to learn new ways of thinking about teaching and learning, faculty will resort to what they already know and consider familiar, and continue their current practices in their face-to-face classrooms (Layne et al., 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this action research study was to explore transformative learning among faculty as a result of participating in professional development activities preparing them to teach online.

Theoretical Framework

Professional development for faculty preparing to teach online presents a unique opportunity to assess previously held assumptions and beliefs about teaching. Therefore, transformative learning theory, a comprehensive, constructivist theory of adult learning, provides the theoretical basis for faculty changes in this study.

A number of authors have advanced the evolution of transformative learning theory through their thoughtful critiques and contributions (e.g., Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Brooks, 2000; Cranton, 2000; Dirks, 2000, 2006; Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 1991a, 1991b, 2000; Taylor,

1997, 2007; Tennant, 1994, 2005; Tisdell, 2003). Cranton (2006) describes transformative learning theory as a theory in progress as new perspectives gleaned from research expand, contract, and refine it. I used a holistic theory of transformative learning as the guiding perspective in this study, integrating elements of the depth psychology perspective in gaining a deeper understanding of one's inner self through a process of individuation (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Cranton, 2000; Dirkx, 2000, 2006), the constructive-developmental perspective to include the entire lifespan (Daloz, 2000; Kegan, 2000), and the cultural-spiritual perspective to appreciate the role of culture, spirituality, and connections (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Brooks, 2000; Taylor, 2008; Tisdell, 2003). The importance of reflective practice is grounded within this theory.

Methodology

The questions addressed by this study explored faculty as unique individuals with a variety of assumptions, beliefs, and lived experiences that have informed how they teach, so qualitative research was a good fit due to its focus on understanding, its dedication to the study of the process of meaning making, and its depth and detail of analysis (Kincheloe, 2003; Patton, 2002). Action research is a form of inquiry that is intended to have both action and research outcomes (Gravett, 2004) as it aims to solve a specific problem and effect change through a repeated cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kincheloe; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). Since faculty professional development's desired outcome is teaching change, action research was also a logical fit for this study.

The purposeful sample was composed of seven faculty members teaching a mix of undergraduate and graduate courses in education, engineering, and public affairs. Three iterative cycles of action research were completed during a six-week summer faculty development program to prepare faculty to teach online by developing a course for hybrid delivery, and during the following fall semester. The faculty professional development model was created following a review of fourteen faculty professional development programs, noting elements aligned within an adult learning perspective: recognition of faculty's needs, concerns, and goals; individualized plan; use of faculty's experiences; learning environment in which faculty feel accepted, respected, and supported; active participation; reflection; collaborative inquiry; observation of an online course; authentic context in which to experiment and apply new skills; action plan; and, ongoing support. In preparing faculty to teach online, they were guided through professional development activities with the intent of fostering transformative learning. The professional development activities included a group face-to-face hands-on workshop, a synchronous online webinar with a colleague experienced in online teaching, individual consultations, reflective journaling activities, access to online teaching resources, and group and individual emails. Data collection methods included individual pre- and post-interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed, individual reflection journals, researcher's field notes, and classroom observations.

Findings

Based on my understanding from the study's literature review and the results of this qualitative action research study, there were six key findings: *1) Within the faculty professional development program, opportunities for faculty to talk to experienced online colleagues, explore examples of online courses, and reflect on their preparations to teach online were perceived by the faculty participants to be most effective in supporting change.* The literature confirms the

importance of dialogue, access to examples, and reflection within professional development programs, and the participants in this study recognized them as effective in supporting the changes they made for teaching online. During the post-interviews as faculty shared their thoughts on talking with their colleagues, they used terms that included “bounce some ideas,” “hear other people’s perspectives,” “figure out how it fits into my course,” and “things they see differently from being online.” The value of dialogue in considering alternate perspectives and trying them on was evident in these conversations.

2) *Reflective writing and discourse about preparing to teach online and teaching online provide the possibility for changes in previously held assumptions and beliefs about teaching.* One faculty participant illustrated this in her first reflection post responding to a prompt asking about the pre-interview, sharing that it was the first time she had “taken time to purposefully reflect on the extent to which past events and experiences influence what I do in my classroom today.” For this process to be transformative, the “reflection has to involve and lead to some fundamental change in perspective” (Cranton, 1996, p. 79-80). Initially, this participant believed that she had to lecture to her students due to the specialized nature of the course content, but realized new possibilities available to her through online teaching and its related tools. She became engaged in revising assignments to more actively involve her students in the co-construction of knowledge and meaning. By experiencing something unexpected, such as online teaching, and writing and talking about it, she was able to call into question her previous beliefs and revised her perspectives based on her new experiences.

3) *Reflective writing and talking about classroom changes resulting from online teaching help faculty become aware of changes in previously held assumptions and beliefs about teaching.* Five of the seven faculty participants found themselves thinking about what they were doing rather than mindlessly following the same steps they took in previous semesters. One participant realized that she had previously had the entire semester planned before it even began, and strictly followed her lesson plans with very little deviance. Now she found herself being more open and flexible than she would have been if she had not engaged in the reflective components of the faculty professional development program. She was able to transform a problematic perspective, the need to lecture, to change the way she taught to a method that better matched her constructivist teaching philosophy. Preparing to teach online was the catalyst for her to reflect on and evaluate her teaching practices.

4) *Learning to teach online with the intent of change impacts face-to-face teaching practices.* One participant came to the faculty professional development program looking for new ideas, and with an interest in differentiating instruction for his students. Another’s motivation to participate was to catch up with technology. Another participant wanted to learn what “the online can do differently from what I am doing now.” Still another believed that one has “to change your pedagogical understanding to teach online.” Several participants were interested in moving away from lectures. All had differing levels of intent to change. Feeling prepared for online teaching and open to new possibilities created a wider opportunity for changes in their classrooms.

5) *Faculty’s amount of time and engagement in professional development activities that include focused reflection may be proportional to their movement toward transformative learning and their resultant changes in teaching practices.* Lack of time is one of the greatest barriers to faculty’s participation in professional development (Maguire, 2005) and, therefore, also a barrier to change. Two faculty participants who participated the least in the program

shared that their lack of time was their major constraint. One felt challenged by the time he needed for his classes, administrative duties, and preparations for an accreditation visit. The other participant simply shared that she had been too busy to think about the program. Neither noted changes in their teaching, and one's online teaching experience was not all positive. On the other hand, the two participants who had been most engaged in the program had actively considered changes, reflected on them, engaged in the readings, used the program's resources, met with me in one-on-one consultations, and spent the time to prepare to teach online. It resulted in changed habits of mind for both of them, no longer believing that they had to lecture in order for their students to learn.

6) *Faculty professional development programs for online teaching should be designed to intentionally inform and change faculty's face-to-face teaching practices.* Exploring different tools and strategies for the online environment gave the faculty participants a chance to step away from the old "tried and true" teaching strategies that they had experienced during their years as a student. Face-to-face and online teaching were not held as separate activities, but were allowed to inform each other as faculty's assumptions and beliefs about teaching were explored.

Online teaching provides the opportunity to see and experience teaching through new eyes. It is a new landscape, different from our physically rooted classrooms. The internet brings us new resources, new tools, new ways of being together, and new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. The magic lies in the redesign of learning experiences, including faculty professional development programs,

Implications

The findings of this study provided implications for practice in faculty's preparations for teaching online. The professional development programs need to recognize faculty as adult learners and faculty professional development as adult education, and need to be conceptualized as taking faculty through a process of transformation rather than simply translating what they are currently doing in the face-to-face classroom and moving it to the online environment. Moving to online teaching provides a new way of seeing practice, and can become the disorienting dilemma needed for transformative learning. Bringing the origins of faculty's beliefs about teaching into their consciousness through reflection and discourse provides an opportunity for their critical examination. Opportunities for reflection and discourse are important, especially discourse with experienced online colleagues, in order to consider changes in teaching. The participants also need to be ready for change, and it is helpful when they approach faculty professional development with that intent.

This study explicitly used adult learning theory and research to design and develop a professional development program to prepare faculty to teach online. By doing so, it added to the adult education literature and has provided new insights into how instructors learn to teach online. The study addressed a gap in the literature by using the preparation to teach online as a catalyst for change in beliefs about teaching and teaching changes in the traditional classroom. By using reflective activities and discourse intentionally designed to shed light on uncritically assumed assumptions and beliefs about teaching, faculty's preparations to teach online informed their face-to-face teaching practices.

The quote that defined this study and gave it deeper meaning is translated from the writings of Marcel Proust, "The only real voyage of discovery. . . consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes. . ." This is how I view the opportunity online teaching gives

us all. We should use this opportunity to look at education through new eyes, to envision new possibilities, to provide deeper and more effective learning, to build enriched and meaningful teaching experiences, and to provide wider access to learning.

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