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Online Faculty Development: What Works?

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted with online faculty. Faculty talked about the training and support services they utilized and found most effective when teaching online.

Keywords: faculty development, online education, elearning, professional development

Introduction to the Study

In fall 2011, 6.7 million students in higher education were enrolled in at least one online course. In 2014, the number of students enrolled in at least one online course was 7.1 million. Administrators in higher education have grown increasingly aware of the growing demand for online education. In 2014, 70% of higher education institutions identified online learning as a key component of their long term strategies (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Increased student enrollment in online courses has created a need for more faculty to teach online. Faculty in higher education institutions find themselves under increased pressure to offer more courses online. Betts (2009) notes that faculty play a key role in the success of online programs. While the need exists, 33% of faculty teach an online course and there is a recognized reluctance among faculty to adopt online instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

For faculty to successfully transition to teaching online, training and support need to be provided. A number of research studies that have been conducted on the factors that motivate and demotivate faculty from adopting online instruction, have identified infrastructural, pedagogical, and technological support as important for faculty success (Bruner, 2007; Gautreau, 2011; Shea, 2007). Faculty development or professional training is one way to provide pedagogical and technological support.

Context of the Study

Acknowledging the importance of faculty development for online instruction, various institutions of higher education now mandate faculty development programs before their faculty can teach online courses. Some institutions also require regular re-certification to ensure that faculty remain current on new technologies and the institution's content management system (CMS).

A four-year public university in the Midwest has been offering more than 36 fully online programs and various blended courses for more than 10 years. Thirty-five percent of students have taken at least one online course and 6% of students are enrolled in fully online programs. Given this history in online education, the university has an established Learning and Technology Center (LTC). The LTC provides technological and pedagogical assistance to all faculty on campus including those teaching online courses. The center offers regular training workshops in different technologies and teaching pedagogies. The center has also introduced a certification program specifically for online and blended teaching. Unlike institutions that require faculty to attend training before they teach online, this university does not mandate training. All services offered by the LTC are optional and faculty have the freedom to utilize these services at their discretion. In addition to organized workshops, the LTC also offers

individualized phone-in and walk-in sessions.

At this university, faculty are solely responsible for the design, development, and delivery of their courses face-to-face, blended, or online. It is therefore, imperative for faculty to be familiar with and competent in the use of the CMS in addition to online teaching pedagogies and other technologies.

Purpose of the Study

The use of the CMS has become a necessity on this campus. For faculty who are teaching online, it is crucial that they are familiar with the various features of the CMS and aware of other technologies they could leverage in their teaching. However, a majority of online faculty at the university do not access the resources of the LTC. A qualitative study was designed and conducted to assess:

1. What training and professional development opportunities do faculty utilize? and,
2. What form of training and support do faculty find most beneficial?

Review of the Literature

Inexperience with technology, insufficient training, and unfamiliarity with online pedagogies have been identified as factors that demotivate faculty from teaching online (Bruner, 2007; Shea, 2007). Providing technological and pedagogical support to online faculty has been identified as a motivator (Gautreau, 2011). Keengwe, Kidd, and Kyei-Blankson (2009), from their study of 25 participants, highlight the importance of training and development for faculty as necessary to ensure the adoption of technology. Green, Alejandro, and Brown (2009) identified training provided to all levels of online faculty from beginners to veterans as being important to the retention of online faculty. Lackey (2011), in her interviews with six faculty who were experienced and inexperienced in online teaching, discovered that preparation for online teaching needs to include technical and pedagogical training. In recognition of the importance of training, institutions of higher education have started offering various faculty development programs to prepare faculty to teach online.

There is as yet no consensus on the best way to approach faculty development. A number of different models have been proposed for faculty development. Fang (2007) suggests a faculty development model that included formal training, communities of practice, performance support, formative evaluation, and knowledge sharing. Reilly, Vandenhouten, Gallagher-Lepak, and Ralston-Berg (2012) present a multi-campus year long faculty development program for elearning. This program was targeted at nursing faculty and utilized a community of practice model. Vaill and Testori (2012) contend that effective faculty development needs to incorporate a three-tiered approach including orientation, mentoring, and support services. Meyer and Murell (2014) collated information on faculty development programs offered by 39 institutions in the period 2010-2011. They discovered that community building, training on the institution's CMS, student learning styles, and instructional design models were common aspects of the programs.

Research has also been conducted on faculty response to different training and development programs. Paulus et al. (2010) studied nursing faculty response to a series of workshops that focused on community building through hands-on practice. Lackey (2011) studied the faculty development programs to understand their experiences and what activities they found beneficial. While there is research on faculty response to training programs, there is a dearth in studies that consider what forms of training and support faculty access independently.

Methodology

Participants

Faculty who had taught one or more fully online courses since spring 2013 were identified. They were sent an invitation email to participate in the study. A total of 25 participants were identified to participate in the study. Faculty who had taught one or two online courses were classified as novice instructors and faculty who had taught three or more courses were classified as experienced. Experienced faculty totaled 52% ($n=13$) and 49% ($n=12$) were novice faculty. Fifty two percent of the participants were younger than 50 years of age. The participants were assigned identifiers such as P1, P2, and so forth, up to P25.

Procedures

Data for this study were collected from two sources. Semi-structured interviews of 60-90 minutes were conducted with the participants. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. In addition, faculty were invited to share an online course with the researcher for observation. Five faculty participants were teaching courses in the semester and were willing to share access to their course sites with the researcher. The research was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board and confidentiality of students in the courses was assured. The researcher observed the course sites for the period of one academic semester and notes were recorded.

Data Analysis

This research was designed to examine the personal experiences of faculty regarding the specific phenomenon of training and support. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was identified as an appropriate methodology to analyze the personal experiences of the participants. Data analysis followed the IPA phases of reading the interview transcript and observation notes, identifying themes, clustering, and tabulation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Findings

Analyzing the data, it became clear that faculty were accessing training and support not only through the institution's LTC but also through avenues that were outside the institution. The training provided by the LTC was classified as formal training and all other forms of training were classified as informal training.

Formal Training. Of the 25 participants in this study, 60% had attended some form of training at the LTC and all of them found it helpful in some way. There was a marked difference in participant demographics in formal training. Sixty seven percent of those who had taken some form of course at the LTC were experienced faculty of whom 60% were over 50 years of age.

The participants who had received training at the LTC identified their training in different ways. Some like P2, P8, P14, and P24 attended training on the technical aspects of using the CMS. Others like P5, P9, P13, P15, P17, P20, and P21 had attended technological and pedagogical training. P5, an experienced faculty, enjoyed his experiences at the LTC. He had attended an intensive beginner course at the LTC before he started teaching online and he "just thought it was very helpful." He then took the course again after 5 years and again "found it very helpful." This was a common refrain among these participants. P1, also experienced, responded with a "Yes, yes. Emphatically yes" when asked if she had found the training at the LTC helpful. However, she added that it was "[n]ot a 100%."

In addition to attending workshops at the LTC, P15 also "met individually" with a staff member from the LTC "when I was thinking about how to teach" a specific course. P2 remarked

that, “If I go to the LTC with a question, they’re absolutely wonderful. . . I don’t know what I’d do without them.” P9 mentioned that she was always able to find someone on campus to help her with new technologies. Her course site reflected the various technologies and teaching strategies she learned and later incorporated.

P17, an experienced faculty, acknowledged that she had not attended any training when she first started teaching online. She just “figured it out on her own” which she admitted “was not the smartest thing to do when we have such great resources on campus.” After four years, she was “so dissatisfied with how [her] class was going” that she decided to go to the LTC. For her this was a transformative experience that she “really, really enjoyed.” An observation of her course site showed the pedagogical and design changes she had incorporated after her training at the LTC. P19, a novice, discovered that her students were having difficulties navigating her course site on the CMS “so [she] actually went and took some . . . courses and figured out about the quick links and hyperlinks.” As with P17, P19 immediately incorporated these strategies into her course and found that her course design had improved.

Participants P9, P15, and P20 had gone further with their training and obtained the online and blended teaching certification. P17 was in the process of applying for the certification. The certification was attractive to the participants as it credited them for the courses they were already teaching. The other opportunities for training that faculty opted for were informal and unstructured.

Informal Training. The avenues for personal development in online instruction that faculty pursued were not limited to institutional resources or the LTC. Participants independently sought training and support from conferences, colleagues, academic communities, and mentors.

Experienced faculty participants like P1, P9, P10, and P18 regularly attended conferences and workshops on online instruction. P1 said that, at conferences, she picked up ideas on new technologies and then tried them in her courses. It was at these conferences that P18 was introduced to Camtasia which she went on to actively use in her online classes.

A number of participants who were younger than 50 years of age preferred to approach their colleagues for informal training and ideas on teaching online. Within their collegial groups they shared ideas on best practices. So P3 participated in departmental meetings of online instructors and they formed an informal support group among themselves. P6 was also part of a group of online instructors but the group focused more on content issues than aspects of online teaching.

P4 and P23 were part of a dynamic national academic community. This community created resources which they then shared with each other. P4 commented that quite often, she did not have to create content materials as someone else had already done so. P23 also leveraged these resources. In addition, given her experience, P23 contributed to the scholarship of the community by sharing online strategies that had worked best for her.

Mentors played a significant role in training and support. P1 commented that her mentor “was very instrumental in helping me transition from kind of that face-to-face to online and I was like . . . here’s my toughest class, let’s work on this one together.” She added that the “one-on-one attention I got from [my mentor], it improved my online and improved my face-to-face classes.” P4 started teaching online after she was encouraged and mentored by P23. P19, a novice, had a mentor “and she has been very helpful.” P19 also went on to mention that, “I want to meet somebody in my personal life who is willing to do Google Hangout or willing to do Skype so I can practice on it. . . I feel like I have to figure out how it works.”

Most of the participants felt very comfortable with technology and enjoyed playing with

technology. They turned to resources on the Internet for information when they needed it. So, P19 mentioned that, “I do [watch] a lot of the YouTube videos that others have put up.” P17 said, “I just found new software this weekend . . . so I’m very excited about making digital flashcards.”

Discussion

This study revealed that faculty were approaching training and support as adult learners. Knowles (1980) described adult learners as (1) being self-directed in learning, (2) possessing real life experiences that were resources for their learning, (3) more oriented to their social roles, (4) seeking immediately applicable knowledge and being problem oriented, and (5) motivated by internal factors. The participants in this study exhibited these qualities.

As self-directed learners, the participants accessed training and support from a variety of sources. Some participants like P1, P2, and P5 opted for the training provided by the LTC; P4 reached out to her peers across universities; P19 was motivated to look for tutorial videos online; conferences were a forum to learn new technologies; and, P6 elected to stay within his departmental community of professors.

Mentors and communities of practice were the favored forms of training and support. The individualized support that mentors provided was very important. Mentors also supported the participants through the course of a semester or longer. This sustained help and the ability to discuss personal problems within their courses was appreciated. These mentors were most effective when they were members of the same community of practice. So P4 and P23 worked well together as did P19 and P1 with their respective mentors. While mentors were desired, participants did not identify any one form of training as being more beneficial than another.

The participants were very aware of their roles as faculty and wanted to create positive learning experiences for their students. It was this mindset that prompted them to seek training. Some experienced participants like P1, P2, and P5 preferred to receive training prior to teaching online. Younger participants, below 50 years of age, preferred a “just-in-time” approach. So, participants like P12, P17, and P19 tried to figure out online teaching on their own and went for training when they identified specific problems. Even in these situations, the LTC was not always the first choice. P19 wanted someone in her “personal life” to help her rather than visiting the LTC. All participants found their training meaningful only when it was relevant and immediately applicable.

One disturbing trend was observed with the younger participants. They equated technical proficiency with the ability to teach online. Since they were comfortable with technology and knew how to use the CMS, they saw no need to attend any training programs. The need for different pedagogical strategies while teaching online was overlooked by them. It was only when they encountered specific problems that they sought out training.

Implications for Adult Education and Conclusion

This study shows that faculty access formal and informal training resources equally. They utilize resources that they perceive will best suit their needs be it training from the institution or peer support. While the participants preferred mentorship, they found all forms of training beneficial. When training is not mandated, younger faculty tended to seek formal training almost as a last resort; preferring to confer with colleagues and peers.

This study also highlighted the tendency among younger faculty to equate technological prowess with online teaching ability. As millennials like P11 start teaching online, this

misconception takes on greater implications for institutions. Younger faculty need to be made aware that online instruction requires a re-conceptualization of teaching. While some institutions address this problem by mandating training, institutions where training is optional need to consider how best to train the new wave of digital native faculty.

Faculty are adult learners and faculty development should be approached from an adult education perspective. Institutions need to recognize the different sources of training as equally effective and offer a variety of options to their faculty. With more choices, faculty will have different avenues to pursue and will not feel limited. They will also feel more in control of their personal development.

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