Informal Faculty Mentoring as a Component of Learning to Teach Online: An Exploratory Study

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Introduction

Distance education has become an important instructional method for institutes of higher learning over the last decade. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003) , during the 2000-2001 academic year, 56 percent of all 2- and 4-year institutions offered distance education courses, and this represents an increase of approximately 34 percent over a three-year period. According to the report, ninety percent of all institutions that offered distance education courses used asynchronous Internet courses as their primary technology for instructional delivery. Faculty development programs have become essential to prepare faculty to teach in the online environment. Institutions often provide training for their faculty by way of faculty development. These faculty development activities can be separated into two distinct areas: 1) how to use the technology needed to teach online and 2) the pedagogy that is specific to the online environment. Often, however, the faculty development activities provided by the institution deal with only the technical aspects of online teaching, and how to use course management programs for course development (Beaudoin, 1990; Palloff & Pratt, 2001) . Support for the use of technology must come from all levels of the administration (Moore & Head, 2003). This includes providing equipment for faculty to use in offices as well as at home (Lynch, Corry, & Koffenberger, 1999). Faculty who do not have the appropriate equipment to use may not continue with web-based teaching.

Another source of institutional support that is vital in implementing an online learning environment is to provide training that is both effective and adequate for the online environment (Bower, 2001). Effective programs must concentrate on how to teach online and not just how to manipulate the technology (Beaudoin, 1990). As faculty move to the online environment, traditional pedagogical methods must be adapted to facilitate the

needs of the students in this virtual environment (Cohen, 2001; Dillon & Walsh, 1992). Effective online teaching will not result from merely loading the printed material onto the course website (Jansak, 2000). Material must be presented in such a manner that it promotes interest and engagement. As the use of the Internet for course delivery has increased, the role of the instructor has changed. The online instructor must incorporate the best practices of traditional teaching without the benefit of face-to-face interaction (Cohen, 2001).

The purpose of this case study is to investigate and describe the informal faculty mentoring that occurs on university campuses to support online learning within the various university departments. Specific research questions included the following:

• Does informal faculty mentoring occur within university departments when a formal faculty development program that supports online learning is not in place for the university?

• If faculty mentors within the university departments do provide informal support of online learning, how do their colleagues identify them?

• What are the characteristics of the informal faculty mentors?

• What are the factors that motivate informal faculty mentors to work with colleagues in the area of online learning?

• What can be done to provide support to the informal faculty mentors so that they will continue to mentor their colleagues in the area of online learning?

Literature Review

The Sloan Consortium noted similar results to the National Center for Education Statistics when looking specifically at online education in higher education (I. E. Allen & Seaman, 2003). The Sloan Survey of Online Learning was sent out to all degree granting institutions of higher learning in the United States. A response rate of 32.8% was achieved for this web-based survey. Results showed that in the Fall of 2002, 11 percent of all higher education students in the United States took at least one online course. This number was projected to increase by 19.8 percent by Fall 2003 (p. 1). Eighty-one percent of all higher education institutions offer at least one online or blended course; this number increases to ninety-seven percent when looking only at public institutions (p.2). As the demand for online learning increases, it is imperative that faculty at these institutions are prepared to meet the challenges that are inherent to this environment.

What has caused this need to adopt technology in the higher education arena? Bates (2000) discussed various rationales that are often given for implementing technology into teaching. Because of the decline of interaction between students and tenured faculty, institutions are looking at ways to improve the quality of teaching. Technology is seen as a way to help improve this problem. A second rationale concerns the need to prepare students for the

workplace of the future. Technology is being used more and more in both professional and leisure environments and students must learn the skills they will need to use in those environments. Access and flexibility are key rationales for using technology in higher education. With the increase in adult learners for the purpose of reeducation and life-long learning, technology allows for this new population of students to access the expertise of university faculty in an environment that fits into their already busy schedules.

Although there has been an increase in faculty perception of the benefits of online teaching (Allen & Seaman, 2003), there are a variety of reasons why faculty are often reluctant to involve themselves in this environment. Among these reasons are a lack of comfort in their own technology skills, a lack of fulfillment when compared to traditional teaching (Lynch et al., 1999; Taylor & White, 1991), and a concern that they will lose personal contact with students (Blanch, 1994; Cohen, 2001; Landstrom, 1995). As faculty move to the online environment, traditional pedagogical methods must be adapted to facilitate the needs of the students in this virtual environment (Cohen, 2001; Dillon & Walsh, 1992).

Another adaptation that has occurred in the online environment is the role of the instructor. The online instructor must incorporate the best practices of traditional teaching without the benefit of face-to-face interaction (Cohen, 2001). No longer is the instructor the sole source of knowledge for their students, but rather, one of many resources that are available (Beaudoin, 1990). Because online learning is considered more student-centered (Yang & Cornelious, 2004), the role of the instructor becomes more of a "facilitator of learning rather than a dispenser of knowledge" (Norton, 2001).

Often, a faculty members' first venture into online teaching is to set up a website in conjunction with a traditional face-to-face class. While the majority of teaching occurs face-to-face, the instructor may post the syllabus or other course related documents in this web-facilitated environment (Allen & Seaman, 2003). Hybrid or blended classes give faculty the ability to incorporate the online component without losing the face-to-face interactions with students they desire (Blanch, 1994; Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx, 1999; Young, 2002). It also allows them the ability to move into the online environment in smaller increments (Jansak, 2000).

Traditional faculty development activities have followed the model whereby an "expert" leads training sessions attended by faculty at a location away from their professional setting, usually at a faculty development center. Much of the training for online teaching has been delivered in the same manner (Star, 2001). Faculty attend a designated session characterized by an instructor presenting information, handouts, some interactive participation, and little or no follow-up (Crawford, 2003) , with training provided that deals primarily with the technology aspect of online teaching but neglects to address the role of the instructor in the online environment (Dillon & Walsh, 1992) . While faculty may feel more comfortable in this environment because of past experience, they need to learn in the environment they will be using to teach their own classes. Pairing a novice online instructor with someone who has more experience in this type of teaching helps to decrease obstacles and provide concrete examples of what has worked and not worked in the online environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2001) . Although mentoring may occur in both a formal and

informal manner, mentoring that occurs within faculty development activities would be considered formal, since the mentors are chosen in advance and are part of the structure of the training activity. There is also the likelihood that the mentoring that occurs during online learning activities is not done on a one-to-one basis, but rather, uses a faculty expert as a group mentor. Armstrong (1999) looked at how faculty at traditional four-year institutions learn to teach online. Faculty, who were involved in the study, were from institutions that had formal training available to learn how to teach online, but this training was not a requirement. Results showed that the majority of faculty favored people as their main resource for information and assistance. Criteria for choosing a resource person included not only technical expertise, but also good communications and interpersonal skills. Armstrong also found that accessibility of these resources was a primary influence in pursuing multiple learning strategies for distance education. Continued support during the time in which faculty were teaching their course was encouraged.

As with any faculty development activity, time is a factor. It is not always convenient to attend training sessions at designated times (Forsyth, 2002). Deubel (2003) gives suggestions for working within the parameters of a busy schedule: reading literature about online learning, participating in training to use the necessary technology, and finally, seeking out experienced instructors for help when needed. This form of mentoring allows the mentor and mentee to work "just-in-time," when it is convenient to both parties, or when specific help is needed (Franklin, Turner, Kariuki, & Duran, 2001; Sederberg, 2003).

As the need for online courses increases, it is necessary for faculty to learn to teach in this environment. Without a formal faculty development program in place, faculty will look to others for the information they need to learn how to teach in the online environment. By looking at how faculty are learning to teach in the online environment and exploring the concept of informal mentoring as a method for providing this information, faculty development programs can be designed to facilitate and support this type of interaction.

Methodology

This case study investigated the role of the informal mentor and how this type of faculty development activity impacted a mentee's ability to teach in the online environment. Participants were faculty who were currently using an online component in their classes at a small Southeastern university, where no formal faculty development structure for online teaching was in place in order to determine whether informal mentoring was occurring. During the Spring 2006 semester, a total of 112 courses were being taught completely online using the Blackboard course management system, with additional courses offering an online component. In choosing a department to investigate for this case study, the departments of Business, Education, and Computer Science were eliminated because of the technology component that was integrated throughout all the coursework in those areas. The History Department was chosen because online components were being offered in a number of courses and there were no specific technology components required to obtain a degree.

Interview methodology was used in this case study in order to get a deeper understanding of the interactions that occur between the informal mentor and the mentee. Interview requests were emailed to all members of the History Department who had a Blackboard course site during the Fall 2005 or Spring 2006 semester. Two sets of interviews were conducted. The initial interview was conducted with those individuals who did not have a lot of experience teaching online classes. During these interviews, participants were asked to name those people who had contributed to their knowledge of online teaching, how they identified these people, and the characteristics that made them good mentors. These identified individuals were also emailed and requested to participate in the study. Information obtained from these interviewees included the motivational aspects of mentoring and the types of institutional support that could enable additional mentoring to occur. A total four individuals participated in the interview process.

Limitations

Because this study consists of a single case and a small sample size, generalization of the findings may be limited. Additionally, unintentional bias may occur on the part of the participants as well as the researcher, and these biases may have an effect on the data collection and analysis of that data.

Data Analysis

Two members of the History Department were interviewed initially. Both were Assistant Professors who had additional responsibilities in the department other than teaching. While they were familiar with the Blackboard course management system and had used it as part of their course development, only one had previously taught a totally online course. The other two interviewees were people who were identified as being informal mentors and were instrumental in facilitating the development of online classes. Neither of these two people worked in the History Department, but did work at the university; one was an Assistant Professor and the other worked in the area of Distance Education. All of the respondents were asked about how they learned to teach online classes and if there was someone who helped them in this process.

While only one person interviewed had any experience in programming, all felt that they had more than adequate technology skills. "I don't know anything at all about programming but you don't need to know anything about programming to teach online courses." Most considered themselves self-learners; they did not attend workshops to learn to use technology but often asked others for help when necessary. "I've never had a formal class on how to teach online, which I think would be great."

Convenience is one reason that instructors may look to the online environment. "I was teaching some very large sections of World History, 200 students, so it was just almost a necessity there for posting grades." Using a course management system as a means of supplementing a traditional course helps to increase the productivity of the instructor as well as provide additional benefits to the students. "I use it mainly for informational purposes, I post my Power Points every week and study guides for the freshman level

courses." In addition, the online component allows the instructor to continue with the class when other opportunities arise. "I have to go to a conference and instead of me missing a class we just say for this week, we're going to have an online class."

Often, when an instructor wants to learn to use an online component in their courses, they look to those who have more experience. These mentors were friends or colleagues who were teaching online courses and encouraged them to try. "It was mostly having people I knew on campus that I could call or have come by and see me. If I had a questions I would say, come over and could you sit down with me and help me with these questions." "All of the people that I have mentioned are friends of mine. If I know that they have taught a class it's pretty easy for me to go to them and say, 'Hey, I need help with this.'" All of the respondents noted that these mentors worked with them on an informal, as-needed basis.

Once the technology aspect of navigating Blackboard has been accomplished, the pedagogy of teaching online classes becomes an issue. New users of online teaching realize that in asking someone for help, it needs to be a person who knows how to teach, as opposed to only being able to use technology. One instructor talked about it in very simple terms.

Just because a person knows a lot about technology, doesn't mean they know a lot about teaching online courses. The pedagogy part is an important part because you have to know something about teaching; how do you relay information to students. You just can't post it on a site, you have to have some kind of method of relaying messages to students back and forth, what kind of information is good to put online, what kind of information is not good to put online, that kind of thing.

Along those same lines, presenting content is more than just putting information online. One respondent talked about how his mentor stressed this idea.

Definitely in engaging students. Not in just putting information there, but putting information in that would actually engage students and make them want to take online classes. It is important to try to make the technology part of it as invisible as possible and let them concentrate on the content, on what's actually going on in the class instead of the technology, Make the computer as invisible as possible.

While all the respondents agreed that they did have adequate technology skills, they still looked to someone for guidance as they ventured into an unfamiliar teaching environment. The characteristic that was valued most was patience, by both mentors and mentees. "It has to be a person who is very approachable and very patient because most people who are not as comfortable with technology, need somebody with a lot of patience who can sit down and almost start at ground zero and work their way up with this person." One mentor talked about working with others to learn how to teach online. "The positive experiences I've had with people trying to show me how to do things on an online basis had kind of transferred over to how I try to approach other faculty members." "They probably have a lot of, what most people see as small questions, so you have to have patience and understanding."

I definitely have had faculty members that have never taught online and were kind of scared to get into it. They would call me up and I'll go to their office. I try to be patient with them and easy going and I just walk them through. Definitely, there's a difference in using the technology and trying to engage the students, it's two different worlds. So first of all, I try to teach them the basics of using the technology, like the control panel, how to put up announcements and things like that. And then I would try to help them develop their content in an engaging way. That's what I try to do when I go in to help someone.

When asked about the type of support from the institution that would be beneficial to informal mentors, the majority of the respondents agreed that attending conferences would help them to become more knowledgeable in the area of online teaching. "I think the technology that the faculty should be recognized and encouraged, and we should be sent to technology conferences."

I'm lucky enough to work in a department where they don't mind sending me to any conference that I think is helpful. I go to the National Bb conference every year and there's always a best practices track and in that track you can go in and see what professors at other schools are doing. That's very helpful what I learn there I always try to bring back here.

Working with faculty to teach them about the online environment brought its own rewards to informal mentors.

It is rewarding to me in that, because I realize that I was in the same situation. I felt like online courses were something above me that I couldn't do, I wasn't capable of doing because of my background. I feel good that I bring other colleagues up to the same point that I am as far as their comfort level for teaching these courses. I feel good that I can share some of the information that I've had.

In looking at the overall experience, I enjoy taking a professor that has taught in the traditional way and found some resistance in not wanting to move online. I like working with someone like that and helping him or her convert their content to an online format. I think that is rewarding and a good overall experience if you get a chance to do that.

One instructor also commented on how teaching online classes has been rewarding to the university as a whole.

It is also helping the university because we have so many students trying to take courses and there's no way we can find enough people to teach the extra classes. We don't have the classroom space for students to drive to campus to sit down and take a course, so it's helping the university because if we offer more online courses, we can have more students taking courses. Some of our students come from all over the state, maybe five, six hours away and I may never see these students and if it weren't for online courses they wouldn't get to take this course here.

Discussion

One of the ways to categorize mentoring is to look at the degree of formality that is associated with the process. Mentoring can be done both formally and informally. Formal mentoring is usually characterized by the structure of the process. An organization matches individuals, based on specific criteria, for the purpose of developing a relationship of support and assistance (Bell, 2000; Ferronato, 2005; Roberts, 2000). The performance of the mentor is usually monitored and may by recognized by the organization (Chao et al., 1992; Mullen, 1994; Singh et al., 2002). Often, the mentor will receive some sort of training in the mentoring process and may be remunerated for their work (Mullen, 1994). The individuals involved are usually assigned to work together, which does not allow for any type of interpersonal relationship to develop prior to the onset of the mentoring process (Singh et al., 2002). Formal mentoring has become a strategic method in helping to indoctrinate new employees into an organization (Caldwell & Carter, 1993; Janas, 1996; Kariuki, Franklin, & Duran, 2001) as well as providing support for new learning (Caldwell & Carter, 1993).

Informal mentoring usually occurs naturally between the mentor and mentee, without other entities becoming involved in the process (T. D. Allen et al., 2005; T. D. Allen et al., 1999; Chao et al., 1992). There is often a willingness by the mentor to help the mentee, and a desire by the mentee to receive guidance and assistance from the mentor (Chao et al., 1992). The only intervention by the organization may be an initial introduction of the individuals (Singh et al., 2002), thus there are no formal requirements of the mentor and no evaluations of the mentee. The mentor is often considered a role model by the mentee (Ferronato, 2005; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Roberts, 2000); however, the informality aspect of this type of mentoring allows for co-learning to occur, where both parties are able to share and exchange knowledge (Singh et al., 2002). Both mentors and mentees tend to seek out partners whom they consider to be competent (Mullen, 1994). Because there is no formal required online training for faculty who want to teach online, new users in this study responded that they would seek guidance from others. This was evidenced in the interview responses where mentees looked to colleagues or friends who were already using online instruction and providing encouragement to them to try. Yang and Cornelious (2004) recommend that each department or college should have a mentor who can help inexperienced faculty when they have questions about teaching online. Mentors in this study indicated that additional support could be provided by enabling them to attend conferences that deal with online instruction as a way to increase their own knowledge.

Conclusion

Peer relationships play an important role in how an individual is able to function within an organization. Kram and Isabella (1985) studied peer relationships as an alternative to formal mentoring. They found that peer relationships provide similar functions as mentoring relationships without the formality that often occurs in the mentoring process. As more and more faculty move to the online environment as a way to present content in their classes, these informal relationships will be vital in providing new online instructors with the knowledge and comfort level to work in this area. While structured faculty development activities will continue to be a means of instruction, the network of informal mentors, and their ability to work with friends and colleagues with the patience needed to

answer "the small questions" will continue to expand across campuses, providing needed support in the area of online teaching.

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