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Professors as Students: How Faculty Learn to Teach Online

Abstract

Research shows that university faculty members teach students based on how they, themselves, were taught as students (Kugel, 1993). However, what happens when an entirely new method of instruction appears? The ways in which these instructors learn to teach online, and the evolution of the online instructor, are foci of this research study.

Introduction

In 2012, 6.7 million college students took at least one online course. This is an increase of 570,000 over 2011. Today, 32 percent of all college students are taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2012).

In discussing how professors learn to teach, Kugel (1993) summarizes "Most of what they have learned, they have learned from watching others and, as they start to do it on their own, they usually wish they had paid more attention to what their professors did as they taught" (p. 317). However, distance educators lack a model or benchmark for online teaching, because many of them have not even taken online courses as students.

A 2012 study conducted by Inside Higher Ed found that 58 percent of the almost 5000 faculty members who responded to the study described themselves as more fearful than excited about the growth of online education (Kolowich, 2012).

Research questions:

- How do university professors learn to teach online?
- What have online instructors learned about online teaching, and how has that learning shaped their practice?
- What are characteristics of ideal online instructors?

Results

- Learning to teach online is a haphazard process that is mostly informal.
- Learning to teach online involves a good deal of trial and error.
- Support from colleagues in the same discipline was helpful.
- Formal training was not helpful, as it mainly focused on technology rather than teaching.
- The motivation to be a successful online instructor was primarily based on concern for student learning.
- As instructors matured, they:
 - ✓ Focused more on student needs
 - ✓ Improved communication with students
 - ✓ Became more creative in their online teaching
 - ✓ Had more confidence in their online teaching
- Characteristics of ideal online instructors:
 - ✓ Content knowledge
 - ✓ Technology knowledge
 - ✓ Instructional design skills
 - ✓ Responsive to student needs (in a timely manner)
 - ✓ Devote a great deal of time to online teaching



Methods

This was a qualitative study that employed the use of focus groups. Researchers conducted a series of focus groups of online professors. All had face-to-face and online teaching experience, although their individual levels of experience teaching both face-to-face and online varied. Professors teaching a variety of subjects were represented.

Data included transcripts, notes from participants, and notes from researchers and focus group facilitators.

Conclusions

It is important to develop a body of knowledge on how instructors learn to teach online so that best practices can be found and used by future online instructors. This research will help to develop that body of knowledge.

This research has practical implications, as well. An understanding of how faculty learn to teach online is helpful for those who develop continuing professional development for faculty members.

This study also presents information on what these instructors found unhelpful, and what methods and strategies did not work. Unfortunately, many of these methods focus group members found unhelpful are still being used today (Schmidt, Hodge & Tschida, 2014).

References

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