

Faculty Development for Moving From Class Rooms to Learning Spaces.

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Abstract: The recent popularity of distance learning has brought increased pressure for change in institutions and for those who teach in them. Cheaper computers, greater capabilities, applications programs, inexpensive telecommunications, and more savvy groups of learners have built pressure for faculty and administrators to change for survival. One university has embraced a number of formal and informal methods to prepare, develop, support, and encourage faculty to adapt and change. These methods include faculty-driven efforts, administration sponsored peer-learning, monetary rewards, and availability of grant funds to encourage better use of technology in distance learning, and in taking that knowledge back into the traditional classroom.

Introduction

The process of facilitating learning, or providing “education” has remained basically unchanged for several millennia. Much of what happens in classrooms today—at primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels—is modeled after the Aristotelian approach of gathering students about the feet of the master. The teacher gathers students in a classroom, decides what is to be taught and proceeds to dispense information. Incremental changes in that model have been facilitated by technology beyond chalkboards and chalk, (opaque projectors, film-strips, films, overhead projectors, videos and television), though the model has remained relatively intact. The model has remained, however, largely teacher-centered, linear, and prescriptive in that the teacher sets the agenda, timing, and method of delivery.

Technology and Change

During the last decade, the application of relatively cheap, easy-to-use and fast-evolving technology has permitted and even required different ways of approaching learners and learning. Inexpensive and high-powered computers, affordable mass storage, generic and application-specific software, and telecommunications have come together to drive a revolution in education whether in the classrooms or on to the anytime-anywhere concepts, with many hybrids in between.

The application of technology to the teaching and learning process is not a panacea. Its potential is both broad and deep, it does not appear to answer every student or every learning need. There are some students for whom technology will be especially helpful, and some who might not find the benefits so great. There are some topics for which technology can provide a tremendous advantage, and others where application is more difficult to envision and apply.

Pressure for Change

This technology revolution has had a significant impact on colleges and universities. Traditional post-secondary educational organizations now face demands from customers (students, those who employ them, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders) for greater flexibility and quality of course offerings. The need for flexibility is demonstrated by increased demand for learning from non-traditional learner groups, working adults, and for learning opportunities in technical and other fields that are not readily

available to large groups of people. The need for “anytime-anywhere” learning is becoming obvious.(Boettcher 2000)

For-profit organizations of various types are adding to the pressure for change by moving to the forefront of higher education and providing alternatives to those offerings long considered to be the exclusive province of traditional higher education institutions: not-for-profit universities, colleges and community colleges. In response, universities have begun to adapt and to adopt new practices, tools and technologies. The implementation of that change also requires retooling and developing faculty to effectively use the new opportunities.

Both academics and the marketplace have shown that distance learning in various forms can provide acceptable levels of learning. (Chernish and McNeil 2000; Industry Report 2001; Grayson 1999; Bond and Finney 2000). The one challenge is to develop faculty and institutional capabilities to deliver learning which is more effective and more efficient than the current model permits. (Olcutt 1999)

University of Houston

The University of Houston has offered continuing and some limited forms of “alternative education,” “continuing education,” for much of its history. As an urban institution serving a broad range of student needs in its four campuses, faculty members have been developing different and experimental learning delivery initiatives as a matter of course. Many of these efforts have been independent and only loosely coordinated or communicated among peers. Some might be described as “skunk works” efforts to push the envelope without the sanction or even the knowledge of central administrators.

The University has formally delivered coursework by distance for more than a decade, first using instructional television (ITV), and also using online tools. This outreach has brought about recognition that many of the traditional models, rubrics, and methods from the classroom require rethinking. Use of technology also surfaced the need for new and different skills for dealing with graphics, programming, application of telecommunications and related skills; skills which most faculty members do not have, and do not care to develop mastery.

The university has evolved a collaborative model for distance learning which brings together faculty members (subject matter experts, or SME’s), instructional designers, technical support personnel, and administrators in a team. This team develops materials, content, and approaches to move learning from the classroom to cyberspace; and it also provided opportunities for improvement of traditional classroom activity as a valuable byproduct of distance learning efforts.

Faculty Development

Over the past decade, a number of informal and more formal approaches to preparing faculty for changes in educational and learning practices have evolved at the University. Among them are the following:

Moles. In 1994, several faculty began meeting informally to discuss technology issues in education. They chose the name “Moles” not because it represented any acronym, but rather that moles were furry creatures that burrowed underground without the benefit of sight. The Moles group grew to conduct monthly meetings and informal electronic communications to provide peer support and to share developments and challenges. Issues of technology (in distance settings, and in the classroom), sharing innovative efforts, and quiet encouragement had been, and continue to be Mole roles. Much of the leadership and innovation in the Moles came from the late John Butler, associate dean in the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics who also maintained a Moles web page (<http://www.uh.edu/~jbutler/professor/uhmoles.html>).

COWS. The University Distance Learning office began more formalized development and support for system faculty several years ago when Sandra Frieden offered an off-site seminars that become known as COWS, Campus Online Workshops. These three-day gatherings for a broad range of system faculty from all University of Houston campuses combined peer-interaction, as well as staff and technical expertise. Peers are able to share experiences, successes, and impediments in a manner that has veracity and applicability to other faculty present. Staff is able to contribute information regarding current capabilities as well as anticipated changes and upgrades in technological capabilities. The workshops also provide an

opportunity for introduction of instructional design principles to teachers whose previous knowledge of teaching and learning has come from their own experience in classrooms as students or professors. Finally, the COWS process provides an ongoing opportunity for faculty collaboration, interaction, networking and research.

Technology Grants. The office of the university provost has offered tangible support to faculty involved in distance learning through an annual competition for Faculty Development Improvement Grants (FDIP). This program permits faculty to propose small projects for application of technology to distance learning and to receive funds to implement the projects. FDIP grant funds can be used for hardware, software, technical assistance, multimedia development, and even teaching assistant support to further technological applications. The current round of grants will award up to \$6000 to successful proposals.

College staff Support. The information technology side of the University has also contributed to the development of faculty and technical skills for distance learning by creating a system of distributed support personnel in the various colleges. This technical support augments central staff technical expertise by placing knowledgeable and trained support personnel at the college level where they are able to develop working relationships with those involved in distance learning and application of other learning technologies.

WebCT. The University is currently using WebCT™ as the standard learning support system, for both distance and on-campus use. Many users have found the program to be very useful in a broad variety of areas, although the learning curve has been described as fairly steep. To aid new faculty users, and to upgrade those who have been using some of its functionality, the University has provided workshops, online materials, and technical assistance to users. As might also be expected and informal peer support system has evolved within and among colleges to use the program.

Compensation. Faculty who develop and deliver distance learning through the recognized University channels are eligible for, and receive, additional compensation. Current practice provided a fee for developing a course (paid only once, without respect to later revisions, whatever their nature), and a separate fee for delivering the course by distance. This compensation may provide the incentive for inexperienced faculty to address distance learning, and may encourage experienced faculty to develop new offerings, and to continue to participate in ongoing delivery of coursework.

Recognition. Additional incentive for faculty to attempt and to excel in distance learning initiative may lie in campus-wide recognition through naming of one faculty member as having made outstanding contributions to distance learning at the University. The award is of those few announced at annual commencement exercises and carries a handsome financial reward.

Other Issues.

On a less formal basis, many of those interested in distance delivery have worked outside of the formal University organization to team-teach innovative courses, participate in doctoral classes, serve as live case studies for graduate students, and to assist in the development of masters and doctoral research projects.

A number of these collaborative efforts have been used to begin to assemble a set of “best practices” for learning evolution in this new century. The experiences have produced results which range from different course structures, adjustments to the traditional “hours of class” requirements, portability of learning, greater convenience to students, and improved faculty skills.

Development of the collaborative approach has involved the use of several faculty and staff development tools at the University System, campus, college and departmental level. The efforts have involved three-day workshops, shorter and more focused seminars, an informal listserve discussion, and training in specific skills for teachers and technicians. All of these have provided significant development challenges for each of the team components: instructional staff, instructional designers, technical staff, and administrators.

Challenges. Challenges in the application of technology and implementation of distance learning abound. Issues such as economic feasibility, and quality of learning offered remain largely unaddressed. Distance learning is being offered by traditional educational institutions, by proprietary educational organization, and in many other forms and formats within and among industry. International opportunities exist and will present unique problems and challenges. Faculty, and institutions, is struggling with questions of intellectual property, ownership of materials, and residual rights to delivery of instruction that has been recorded for distance delivery.

Circularity. Development of faculty for participation in distance learning cannot be viewed as a stand-alone challenge. Distance learning is changing the very fabric of the higher educational process as it seeks to deliver more anytime-anyplace learning opportunities. At the same time, the lessons, techniques, and technology of distance learning must necessarily flow back into the traditional classroom.(Dollar 1999) More and more, classroom teachers are using technology in the actual classroom, or to support other related learning exercises. Classrooms are becoming paperless, learning resources are available from nontraditional sources (Armstrong 2000), the World Wide Web has become a primary source of information, and learners are becoming more able to utilize the multimedia learning resources and tools available online and otherwise. Those who design and facilitate the learning processes must do no less.

Perhaps the model evolving at the University can serve as a basis for development activities in other settings as well.

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