ONLINE TEACHING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

The study utilized a descriptive research approach to analyze the professional development needs of participants. Researchers for this study wanted to know the kinds of support and incentives that are being offered for faculty members who are teaching online courses, the kinds of professional development opportunities that are being offered, the topics faculty members are interested in learning more about, and their preferences for delivery methods of professional development sessions. A self-report survey was selected as the method of research. The population consisted of 37 faculty members who teach online education-related courses at a university of approximately 8000 students in Southern United States. Data were summarized utilizing descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages.

KeyWords: Online Teaching, Distance Learning, Technology.

INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago, students obtained a college education strictly through a face-to-face setting either on campus or at an offsite location. Today's students can also obtain a degree by engaging in online or hybrid programs. Institutions for higher learning have offered online classes for quite some time, but in recent years their popularity has increased. The demand has grown so much that many schools offer completely online degree programs, through which students can complete an entire degree without having to step foot on a college campus. This interest and growth in education via the internet, accompanied by the rapid development of technology, suggest that more schools will follow the trend of providing online classes and degree programs. The current well-developed technological era assists in the success of online courses and meeting the needs of students. Enrolling in online classes or degree programs provides flexibility for students to adjust the pace of the class. Many individuals now have the ability to complete a college program when they would otherwise be unable to do so, for instance, single parents or individuals who work while traditional classes are offered.

The need for distance education or online learning has grown exponentially in recent years (Thomsett-Scott & May, 2009). With this growth, educators need to be prepared to face the challenges of online teaching (Treacy, 2007). Whitesel (1998) noted that while technology is important, the teachers actually impact student learning. Understanding how to effectively communicate content through web-based instruction can sometimes be difficult or challenging to faculty (Pedersen, 2000). According to Smith, Ferguson, and Caris, "Other faculty members have some experience teaching online, but haven't shared their experiences, nor have they read literature on distance education. Their knowledge remains fragmentary" (2001, p. 1). Kearsley and Blomeyer (2004, np) also point out that educators are not always willing to attend professional development to learn to teach online.

Online teaching is forcing educators to step out of the normal classroom environment into a virtually unexplored way of communicating their content (Marek, 2009). Educators need to be aware that they are not designing a course in a traditional way. Teachers tend to take

components of a regular classroom setting and manipulate the components to fit an online environment, in most cases condensing that content to fit half the time spent in a regular classroom setting (Watson & Gemin, 2009). Also, educators have to plan for the unforeseen problems that come from students with various levels of technical experience and connections (Smith, 2000).

According to Perry and Edwards (2004), educators who teach online have the same responsibility as face to face teachers to challenge students and to affirm them. Being able to ask questions and interact with peers as well as the teacher responsible for the class is a critical component for a successful online learner (Bowen, 2006). Bowen (2006), states that students are more engaged when they have opportunities to apply instructional components. To effectively teach online, educators need to be aware of their own teaching styles and understand how to modify or rearrange their style to fit their web-based instruction (Marek, 2009). Parsal (2000) wrote that training faculty for web-based instruction should include "any program delivery or productivity tools required to execute their responsibilities" (p. 5).

According to Tallent-Runnels, et. al. (2006), online educators felt the need to be compensated for any professional development or training regarding their online classes. These researchers also found that faculty felt technical support and training were needed to enhance their knowledge in the online learning field. Ash, as cited in Adams and Dority (2005) discussed the importance of support from administration for online learning, including maintenance of functional technology and currency in teaching methodologies.

To investigate the field of online courses and degrees, this study addressed the following research questions:

- What kinds of experience do faculty members have in creating and teaching online courses?
- What kinds of incentives are provided for faculty to develop online courses?
- What topics are faculty members interested in learning concerning online course development?
- In what format do faculty members want these

topics presented?

- What kinds of support are available for faculty who teach online courses?

Method

The study utilized a descriptive research approach to analyze the professional development needs of participants. Researchers for this study wanted to know the kinds of support and incentives that are being offered for faculty members who are teaching online courses, the kinds of professional development opportunities that are being offered, the topics faculty members are interested in learning more about, and their preferences for delivery methods of professional development sessions. A self-report survey was selected as the method for research. The population consisted of 37 faculty members who teach online education-related courses at a university of approximately 8000 students in Southern United States. Data were summarized utilizing descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages.

Results

In regard to research question one, 48.6% of faculty teaching online courses teach graduate level courses, which means that the majority of online classes taught in the college of education are at the graduate level. Also, 47.4% of the faculty have experience teaching several online courses and are comfortable with most Moodle features; 65.7% of faculty have experience with Moodle features such as quizzes, surveys, grades, and chat, and 55.9% of faculty are comfortable with the mentioned features. Researchers also found that 41.7% of participants feel confident in their abilities to create the structure and organization of online courses; 36.1% strongly agree to being confident in the area of designing the aesthetics of online courses; 33.3% of faculty agree or strongly agree that they are confident with designing online discussions; 47.2% agreed to being comfortable with creating instructor-student interactions and content-student interactions; 42.4% agreed that they are comfortable with creating student-student interactions. However, the faculty are more confident in designing online group work in which 55.6% of the surveyed faculty feel confident; 61.1% feel confident with developing mechanisms for learner

support; 63.9% feel confident with ensuring ADA Accessibility standards are met; and 51.4% of faculty feel confident in creating opportunities for online community building (Table 1).

Two main incentives are offered to faculty members for developing online course. One is to participate in an online training program that focuses on online pedagogy and instructional methods for online teaching for four weeks. At the completion of the program faculty members at this university receive one thousand dollars for participation. The second incentive offered is for faculty members to create an online course and submit it to Quality Matters, http://www.qmprogram.org/higher-education-program, which is an evaluation instrument to assess online course design. Upon completion with a passing score, a faculty member at this university can receive two thousand dollars.

In regard to question three, the 37 polled faculty members were directed to select the topics they would be interested in learning more about. Researchers found that an equal amount of 66.7% of the 37 participants were interested in learning about designing online group work and creating opportunities for online community building. The second most popular topic was identifying online course delivery tools to best meet course objectives and learner needs, 54.5% of the surveyed faculty chose this. Researchers found that 61.8% of participants were interested in learning about providing support through the use of technologies

such as audio lecture (e.g. Audible, iTunes, PPX), video lecture (e.g. Camtasia), and web 2.0 tool and emerging technologies (e.g. RSS). Faculty members felt that they would benefit the most from the faculty development presented in short online tutorials.

For question five, there are two main supports provided to the surveyed faculty. A help desk provides technical support for Moodle, the online assessment system, and ideas on pedagogy. Also, a lab on campus offers technology help for faculty members as well as students.

Recommendations for Practice

Provide professional development for faculty members who are teaching online. Provide incentives for faculty members to complete the professional development opportunities. Practice makes perfect, so give willing faculty members many opportunities to teach online.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study should be replicated at other universities. A longitudinal study could be conducted to track changes and growth in online teaching. Further research could be conducted regarding the best incentives for completing professional development. Also, research should be conducted regarding best instructional strategies for online teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Faculty members need to be better prepared for developing and providing support for online classes. Data show that faculty members with much experience in teaching online classes are more apt to be comfortable in the design and organization of online classes. Researchers also found that there are several incentives to encourage teachers to seek training which can enhance the efficacy of students' learning.

Faculty members who are developing online classes feel more comfortable using some sources than others. To present classroom materials effectively and ensure that students reach their maximum potential in the online classroom, instructors should feel comfortable with the software being utilized. Advancements in technology have made online learning feasible. Almost everyone has access to computers whether at home or at a reference

	Agree	Disagree
Teach graduate level courses	48.6%	51.4%
Experience teaching online	47.4%	52.6%
Experience with Moodle features	65.7%	34.3%
Comfortable using Moodle features	55.9%	44.1%
Confident in ability to structure online courses	41.7%	58.3%
Confident in designing aesthetically pleasing online environment	36.1%	63.9%
Confident in designing online discussion	33.3%	66.7%
Comfortable with creating instructor-student interactions and content-student interactions	47.2%	52.8%
Comfortable with creating student - student interactions	42.4%	57.6%
Comfortable with designing online group work	55.6%	44.4%
Confident with developing mechanisms for learner support	61.1%	38.9%
Confident with ensuring ADA Accessibility standards are met	63.9%	36.1%
Confident in creating opportunities for online community building	51.4%	48.6%

Table 1. Participant Confidence in Online Teaching Strategies

center, such as a library or computer lab. Professional development for faculty who teach online could further enhance the online learning experience.

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