Faculty Training Leads to Quality Distance Learning Courses

Anthony P. Trippe

Rochester Institute of Technology
Electrical, Computer and Telecommunications Engineering Technology Department

Abstract

Distance learning courses have been growing in number and the Internet is now a commonly accepted mode of instructional delivery. The attention of many educational researchers has now turned to examining the quality of online courses. One aspect of distance learning that is often found to be associated with course quality is faculty training. This paper reports on the experiences of the author related to teaching more than sixty online courses and to the types of preparative training he received. Suggested training opportunities and a list of training topics which an organization should make available for its faculty is included.

Introduction

In an effort to attract and keep students enrolled, the distance learning organizations of most universities and colleges provide a number of support services for students. However, research has shown that one of the factors highly correlated to student retention in the online environment is faculty performance. (1) It is generally accepted that there is also a connection between student satisfaction with the faculty conduct and student learning. (2) (3) Student satisfaction rises when students are challenged by the faculty and interested in the material. It is important to stress to faculty members that students must feel that their instructors know and care about them. In courses where this bridge exists between students and faculty, the students become much more motivated to learn and their desire to continue learning rises.

To ensure that faculty can create a challenging, productive and stimulating learning environment, new faculty members must first possess proper credentials, content knowledge, and technical manipulation skills. (4) In addition, online faculty need to demonstrate a high level of comfort to work in a virtual, asynchronous environment. These factors are required by most institutions. Online faculty should be encouraged (better required) to attend training and mentoring program prior to the conduct of their first DL course.

Experiences from the Virtual Classroom

I present these distance learning faculty happenings based mostly upon my own personal experience and partly based upon the experiences of my peers. (5) Not all experiences in the online teaching environment can be generalized to all faculty and all institutions. Faculty development programs need to be established to fit the unique needs of the organization and its faculty members. However, if something works for one faculty member or one institution, that knowledge should be shared so that others may consider and possibly apply the lessons learned. My goal in presenting this case study information is to help us all to do our jobs a little better.

My initial distance learning courses were developed and presented for the University of Phoenix (UOP) Online campus in 1997. These were courses addressing business applications of information technology. Later courses in Operating Systems, Statistics and Computer Programming were prepared and delivered for UOP and Rochester Institute of Technology.

After a rigorous interview process, I was invited to attend a new faculty training workshop to be held online. I was told that if my workshop performance was satisfactory that I might then be offered the opportunity to facilitate my first course for UOP. One does not become a member of the UOP faculty until after completion of the first course. Up to that point, I was still considered to be a faculty candidate.

Initial Training Workshop Elements

The workshop started with an introduction to the UOP method of delivering courses via the Internet. All courses are conducted in an asynchronous environment. The focus of attention is on shared participation and responsibility of faculty and students. The desired result is self-directed learning. The dynamic process of individual and group study experiences maximizes each student's understanding and involvement in her or his degree program. Each member of the class (students and faculty) has his/her our own individual experience base. A key element of the UOP Learning Model is sharing that individual experience-based knowledge with each other member of the class.

Initial Training Workshop – Course Organization

The important points which were presented in my initial training workshop helped me to successfully complete my first distance learning course. I was trained to start organizing a course by deciding what the students were expected to learn and then to arrange into modules those materials and activities which support student learning. Each module is conducted during a fractional portion of the course. Each module contained a list of learning objectives, reading assignments, lectures, current events articles, discussion topics and measurement tools used to determine the level of each student's learning. I was shown how the online environment required the use of new learning aids and the modification of the learning aids used in the classroom.

Initial Training Workshop – Classroom Arrangement

I was shown how to arrange the virtual classroom into several rooms (newsgroups or conferences).

There is the main meeting room – a discussion board. This is where participants post their biographies, daily written message assignments, weekly summaries, questions, responses and comments. Also, this meeting is used to comment on other student's biographies, messages and replies to faculty discussion questions.

Next is the Lecture Hall. This is where the faculty member posts the syllabus, lectures, supplementary readings and administrative notes. It is Read-Only for students and Read/Write for the instructor

The Assignments Room is used for materials to be viewed only by the instructor. Students utilize this meeting to post their individual written assignments. Notes posted to this meeting can not be seen by students. It is Write-Only access for students and Read/Write access for the instructor.

The Chat Room is intended for discussing topics not related to the course.

There are also one or more additional rooms to be utilized by student teams for exchanges and messages related to developing a team response for group projects.

Initial Training Workshop – Startup Sequence of Activities

The faculty member starts each class by posting his autobiography, the course syllabus, lecture and supplemental articles for the first module and a short note welcoming students to the class. Students sign into the class by posting their biographies and meeting and greeting each other. The faculty member can use this initial few days to prepare a tracking tool (paper or electronic spreadsheet) for each student. I call my tracking tool a student 'filter'. My 'filter' for each student is based mainly on their contributions to the class discussions. The form of this filter is a set of written notes in a format which allows for quick retrieval of the information. This 'filter' is a control by which I assess student learning. As we journey through a course, I can easily observe the growth and maturation of each student with respect to their learning of the specific, required course topics. And, the 'filter' is useful for detecting plagiarism and cheating. I am often asked how I know that the student on the other end is really who he says he is. I use my 'filter' to examine each participation message and formal written assignment submitted by a student and the moment a marked change in style or knowledge is detected, a flag is raised by my filter. It is then quick and easy to use a search engine to determine whether the student's material is original or came from another source. The use of such a 'filter' in the online environment makes it difficult for a student to present the work of another while he keeps on providing his own inputs.

If you have not conducted a distance learning course, don't kid yourself into thinking it is easy. The amount of work required of the faculty member before and during the course is significantly more than the amount of work for a traditional classroom course. In all of my courses, students are required to participate in the ongoing classroom discussion. I include participation as one of the components used to arrive at a student's final grade for a course. My normal requirement is that students must contribute a significant input to the class on at least a specified number of days out of the total days of each module. A significant input is defined as a message of a specified number of words addressing one of the topics covered during that module. Students are encouraged to share their knowledge or experiences or to ask questions which require deeper research into a topic. These regular journals of online discussion assist me to assess student learning. Students earn participation credit for their submissions as part of every module. Participation accounts for about 30% of the total course grade.

Faculty Training Topics – Performance Feedback

Asynchronous distance learning exchanges can be better than face-to-face exchanges because the faculty member has time to reflect on the answer. Also, the answer, once posted, is available to everyone in the class not just to the student who asks the question. I answer student questions with less than a 24-hour turnaround. In addition, I respond to selected student's participation messages in order to set the direction of the discussions. Sometimes I respond just to let the class know I am monitoring their exchanges and other times I respond to encourage a student who I perceive as being shy or who has reservations about his command of the English language.

Upon the conclusion of each module, I prepare and send a personal feedback message to each student. The message includes my assessment of the student's performance on each of the module assignments. The message concludes with grades for each assignment. A point value for each assignment is clearly listed in the syllabus. With the information in the feedback message, each student can determine his progress toward a final course grade. This approach eliminates most student complaints over course grades.

Feedback is a most important element of conducting a distance learning class. Faculty-to-student and student-to-student feedback encourages and builds a sense of community. The learning community environment strongly promotes individual growth and mastery of the course material. I address students by their names when I respond to one of their posted questions or comments to enforce the feeling of community. My best classes (the most rewarding) have been those where I was successful in promoting student-to-student discussions.

Suggested Faculty Training Resources

Analysis of my experiences integrated with input from fellow faculty members has led to the following suggested elements of training for distance learning faculty.

1. Training prior to the first online course – New faculty candidates should be required to attend an intensive training program that introduces them to the organization's standards, procedures and its teaching/learning philosophy. As part of this program, the faculty candidates should have an opportunity to present online lectures, create a syllabus, participate in and organize group exercises, provide feedback on sample student assignments, provide feedback on fellow student assignments and observe a distance learning class in action.

2. Support during the first online course – The distance learning organization may want to establish a policy under which a new faculty member is shadowed in his/her initial online course by a mentor who is responsible for assisting with technology (hardware and software) challenges as well as for providing course content support and assistance. The mentor observes assists and guides the new faculty member as appropriate throughout the entire duration of the course right up to the submission of final grades.

3. Ongoing continuous training for the online faculty member may include courses in:

>   A writing workshop is designed to provide all faculty members in all disciplines with the ideas and tools necessary to develop clear writing assignments, to assess student papers effectively, and to help students improve their writing skills.
>
>   A workshop which helps faculty members understand and utilize the power of critical thinking in any educational process.
>
>   A workshop that introduces the faculty to the basics of student performance evaluation, grading and feedback.
>
>   A workshop which highlights the philosophy and purpose of team projects through discussion of the nature of group interaction processes.
>
>   Other faculty training courses might address topics such as copyright infringement, strategies for dealing with difficult students, web page development to enhance course presentation materials and finally refresher courses on improving your syllabus or one that reviews the basic principles of planning and conducting a distance learning course.

4. An ongoing system of faculty evaluation can provide opportunities for faculty members to request/receive peer feedback. Experienced faculty members might perform in-class observations and hold feedback sessions to assist their faculty peers in further developing and enhancing their teaching skills.   A Peer Evaluation Program along with the Administrative Review process and student feedbacks pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of each faculty member.

Conclusion

It is the author's opinion, based upon his experiences, that rigorous training of faculty by an online educational organization is an important element in student satisfaction and in the success of the distance learning program. When a well-trained faculty member enters an online virtual classroom, his experience and knowledge of the course content can be communicated because he is comfortable in the use of the technology and aware of the presentation techniques which enhance student learning.

The presence of knowledgeable, experienced, personable, confident and most importantly well-trained faculty creates a classroom environment which produces student interaction and ultimately leads to a high level of student satisfaction with the entire learning experience.

Bibliography
1. **Thomerson, J.D. and Smith, C.L.** (1996), Student perceptions of the affective experiences encountered in distance learning courses, American Journal of Distance Education, vol.10, no.3, 1996, pp.37-48.
2. **Graham, C., Cagiltay, K., Lim, B., Craner, J., and Duffy, T. M**. "Seven Principles of Effective Teaching: A Practical Lens for Evaluating Online Courses." The Technology Source, March/April 2001.
3. **Gross, Ronald** (1991), Peak Learning, ISBN: 0-87477-610-4, published by G. F. Putnam's Sons, New York.
4. **Carlson, R.** (1999, September), Migrating Your Course to the Online Environment, Syllabus, pages 20-24.
5. **Betz, M., & Desiderio, M.** (unpublished). Educational technology in teacher education: 2001.

Author Biography
Anthony Trippe is a generalist with a BS in chemistry (1966), an MS in Mathematics and Computer Science (1972) and a Doctor of Business Administration (1982). He is an assistant professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology in the Electrical, Computer and Telecommunications Engineering Technology Department. He teaches technical programming and computer technology courses in the classroom and over the Internet for RIT. He is also an adjunct faculty member at the University of Phoenix Online Campus where he has been facilitating courses for over four years.

Contact: Dr. Anthony P. Trippe
               Rochester Institute of Technology
               Computer Engineering Technology
               78 Lomb Memorial Drive
               Rochester, New York 14623

               E-Mail: aptiee@cast-fc.rit.edu   Phone: (585) 475-6537