HOW UNIVERSITY FACULTY MEMBERS DEVELOPED THEIR ONLINE TEACHING SKILLS

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INTRODUCTION

Online courses in higher education have grown tremendously in scope and volume in the past decade. In fact, the "explosive growth of distance education is transforming postsecondary education" (Moller, Foshay & Huett, 2008, p. 66). Allen and Seaman (2007, 2010) have tracked online enrollment for years and found that online enrollments have actually grown at rates that far exceed total student populations in higher education. In 2006, more than 96% of the largest colleges and universities in the United States offered online courses and nearly 3.2 million students took at least one online course during fall 2005 (Gaytan, 2009). Between fall 2007 and fall 2008 alone, there was a 22% increase in distance education enrollments (Shattuck, Dubins, & Zilberman, 2011).

Technological advancements have certainly influenced this growth, but budgetary crises affecting institutions of higher education across the country have also made online education vital to many institutional fiscal plans. Colleges and universities see distance education as an effective means for sustaining growth (Moller et al., 2008; Young & Lewis, 2008). There is growing evidence of the cost-effectiveness of online learning as courses can be developed, copied, and reused by other instructors. In addition, the replication and standardization of online courses offers, to some extent, quality control in terms of content presented and course design (Wise & Rothman, 2010).

From the standpoint of the student, online programs and courses offer flexibility to learners whose lifestyles or life responsibilities do not match traditional college schedules (Ke, 2010; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leindhardt, 2006; Young & Lewis, 2008). Pontes and Pontes (2012) note that low-income students enrolled in distance education courses are more likely to have fewer enrollment gaps and stay enrolled in their programs, suggesting it is

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due to the easy accessibility of courses and convenience of completing coursework on their own schedules.

Colleges and universities have embraced online education as a way of increasing enrollment and managing financial difficulties. As a result, faculty has had to change, as well. Faculty used to teaching in traditional face-to-face classrooms now find themselves transitioning to teaching online. In the process, they are learning that teaching online is not as simple as transferring face-to-face courses to the Internet. As Smith (2005) notes, "Teaching online requires a specific set of skills and competencies" (p. 1). Furthermore, "faculty cannot be expected to know intuitively how to design and deliver an effective online course" (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 23). Research says most teachers teach as they were taught. 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. Results of the aforementioned circumstances are understandable. A 2012 study conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* found that 58% of the almost 5,000 faculty members who responded to the study described themselves as more fearful than excited about the growth of online education (Kolowich, 2012).

Have faculty been forgotten in this rush to online learning? Or is it simply assumed that faculty are able to teach in any situation? The problem is that not enough is known about the online instructor in higher education and about the experiences of instructors who move from face-to-face to online teaching. It is within the context of higher education that this research project on the processes by which faculty learn to teach online was conducted. The purpose of this research was to better understand the experiences of these instructors and the pro-

cesses they went through when learning to teach online. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. How did university professors begin teaching online? What were the experiences associated with that initial online teaching experience?
2. What have these professors learned about teaching online as a result of their online teaching experiences?
3. How have these professors evolved as online instructors?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Given the current environment in higher education, it is easy to see that distance education is here to stay. Therefore, the need for quality online instruction must be a priority for institutions offering distance education programs and courses. However, due to the speed at which distance education has grown, most colleges and universities find themselves behind in understanding what it means to teach online (Orr, Williams & Pennington, 2009) and in offering quality professional development for faculty who are asked to teach online courses (Macdonald & Poniatowska, 2011; Orr et al., 2009; Shattuck et al., 2011). Despite rapid growth in online course offerings, "institutional efforts to improve online teaching [are] generally sporadic and ad-hoc in nature" (Orr et al., 2009, p. 264). In fact, according to Allen and Seaman (2010) "19% of institutions with online offerings report that they have no training or mentoring programs for their online teaching faculty" (p. 3). Further complicating the issue, adjunct instructors are more likely to teach online courses than are full-time faculty, often teaching from home or off-campus; however, "the most common training approaches … are internally run training courses (65%) and informal mentoring (59%)" (Seaman, 2010, as cited in Shattuck et al., 2011). Often professional development efforts are in the form of hands-on workshops and "concen-

trated on approaches to *using* the tools" versus how the tools might be used appropriately within a specific context of teaching and learning (Macdonald & Poniatowska, 2011, p. 124). Adjunct faculty are less likely than their full-time faculty counterparts to attend such on-campus workshops or engage in informal mentoring and face-to-face discussions about teaching online, missing opportunities for professional development, reflection, and dialogue about their practice.

Developing online courses requires mastery of technologies that many faculty are not familiar with, and that some actually fear. Also required is an understanding of how to plan activities for the online student that are interesting, motivating and self-directed (Orr et al., 2009). In a study conducted by the Educause Center for Applied Research in 2009, fewer than half of students surveyed at 125 institutions in the United States felt that their online instructors used information technology effectively (Macdonald & Poniatowska, 2011). Institutions face the dilemma of providing professional development that not only ensures understanding of how to use technology effectively but how to consider online learners and pedagogies.

As a result of these conditions, faculty involvement and acceptance has been slow. Many faculty members hold perceptions of online education as time-consuming and unable to support student learning (Baran, Correia & Thompson, 2011; Gaytan, 2009). Often, faculty asked to teach online have little or no experience with online course development, teaching, or learning, and they are offered little support from their institutions. They learn quickly that online teaching takes more time than face-to-face teaching (Gaytan, 2009). Faculty are also forced to rethink their assumptions about teaching and learning as well as the roles they play in online courses (Baran et al., 2011).

Some researchers have found interest among online instructors for collaborative approaches to online course design and delivery. Most often, collaborative efforts, or the creation of "instructional teams" including faculty and instructional technology experts or technical support staff have been discussed as ways to improve online teaching (Baran et al., 2011; Fish & Wickersham, 2009; Macdonald & Poniatowska, 2011; Orr et al., 2009; Shattuck et al., 2011). Professional development that is available for online instructors tends to fall into two categories: the collaborative teams model and the workshop model. The Jumpstart Program at Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis (IUPUI) is an example of the collaborative team model. New faculty go through a 4-day workshop during which they learn the basics of online teaching, create a vision for their work, and develop a learning module for their online course with the help of a "developmental support team" (Xu & Morris, 2007). Such collaborative course development models exist at some universities but require strong institutional support. More often professional development for online instructors comes in the form of workshops, training sessions, and one-on-one support (Macdonald & Poniatowska, 2011; Orr et al., 2009). The issue with these models is that they tend to focus on technology tools over pedagogy, leaving faculty to figure out when and where to incorporate such technology into their courses. As a result, faculty learning about online teaching and course development has most often happened in informal ways: through informal mentoring relationships and small communities of practice (Orr et al., 2009).

METHOD

In order to address the research questions, a basic qualitative approach using focus groups was employed. Merriam (1998) notes that a characteristic of basic qualitative research rests on the fact that individuals construct reality through interactions in their social worlds. Basic qualitative research examines "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds and (3) what mean-

ing they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). This is an appropriate method to examine the ways in which professors learn to teach online, because these processes involve individuals' perceptions based on reflection and interaction with their environments. The goal of basic qualitative research is to understand something (Merriam, 1998). In this study, it is to understand the perspective and views of the subjects with regard to their professional identity.

Data for this study were collected over the course of one academic year (2011-12). Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants (Patton, 1990). Merriam (2009) noted that a major benefit of purposeful sampling is that researchers can study information-rich cases, and can learn a great deal about the topics in question. The use of focus group sessions was determined to be the best approach for this study, as it allowed the researchers to gather data directly from participants and it allowed participants to hear and discuss each other's responses (Merriam, 2009).

Participants were instructors of online courses from various program areas and levels of experience within the college of education at a large southeastern university. The instructors varied in their professional status and each instructor in the focus group had taught a distance education course a minimum of 1 year. All instructors interviewed had taught both face to face and distance education during their teaching careers. Participants' level of technical literacy varied from novice to expert. Each focus group consisted of a mixture of novice and veteran instructors, a range of experience with online teaching, and members of different program areas to get a strong sample of experience across levels and programs as well as encourage discourse among instructors across departments.

Participants volunteered to attend the focus group sessions and were provided an introductory message regarding the topic of discussion. All signed confidentiality agreements and release forms prior to their focus group sessions. A series of three 90-minute focus groups

was conducted and audio taped. Two researchers participated in each focus group with one leading the semistructured discussion and the other taking field notes. Each focus group discussion was transcribed; transcripts were read and coded for themes by individual researchers then compared for reliability. Specific themes were identified and transcripts were reread for additional instances of each.

Findings come from transcripts of the three focus groups, field notes from the focus groups, and notes from researcher discussions following the groups. Researchers distinguished specific themes that arose from the focus group questions. The data were analyzed for specific words, context, consistency, frequency, specificity, and intensity of comments as suggested by Krueger (1994). Utilizing Krueger's systematic approach, the researchers were able to see trends emerge.

FINDINGS

Findings can be categorized according to the research questions. They are presented as follows: initial experiences, learning from early experiences, and the evolution of the online instructor.

Initial Experiences

Many faculty members had abrupt starts to their online teaching careers. Many respondents used phrases like "jumped right in" or "got thrown in" when describing how they started teaching online. One respondent said she knew she would be teaching online at some point in her career, but due to some personal circumstances, the day she started teaching online came sooner than she had expected. Another response was similar: "I knew there were online courses from the beginning, but I didn't know it would be my first teaching assignment." These types of responses came from faculty who had no previous experience teaching online when arriving at the institution. That was not the case with all partici-

pants, however. A few participants had had experience teaching online, as adjunct instructors or teaching assistants in graduate school, before they began work at the institution. Whether or not the participant had prior experience teaching online (before the faculty member came to the institution) seemed directly related to the subject matter taught by that faculty member. For example, instructors in the instructional technologies areas came to the institution with prior experience teaching online as adjuncts or graduate assistants. Those in other disciplines typically did not.

When asked about the circumstances under which participants started teaching online, most were either asked, by department administration, to teach online, or told that their courses were online (and inherent in that statement was the fact that they would be teaching online). One respondent was blunt in her assessment about the circumstances: "Administration says no one was made to teach online; however, I was made to teach online." Some participants came into their programs knowing that most courses were taught online, so the expectation was present throughout the interview/hiring process.

Preparing for that first online teaching experience proved challenging to participants. Many described their initial reactions using words like "terrified," "worried," and "apprehensive" at the initial thought. Most felt they were unprepared for the experience, and were overwhelmed at the prospect of having to teach using a method they knew little to nothing about. Overall, the transition to online teaching from traditional face-to-face teaching resulted in a great deal of role ambiguity and confusion for those with no prior online teaching experience. Almost all immediately made comparisons to what they knew, which was teaching in a traditional classroom setting. One participant noted, "I remember the 4 days between orientation and classes starting and having index cards [on] my living room floor. And trying to plan out, if I was doing this face-to-face, then this is how I would do it [online]." These comparisons caused further

angst, however, as most could not see how teaching, as they knew it, could "transfer" to teaching online. Planning and scheduling were also factors initially considered by participants. The idea of developing a course website, making sure course materials could be placed online, questions about what content would "transfer" to the online environment and what would not, confusion about what teaching online would actually look like, and uncertainties about whether students would actually participate and learn in the class all caused respondents to feel overwhelmed at the initial prospect of teaching online.

Role ambiguity and confusion was less for those faculty members who had prior experience teaching online or teaching in blended learning situations, and for those who had prior experience as an online student. As noted earlier, many of these faculty members had moved into the online teaching arena gradually and with supervision and guidance, as graduate assistants or as adjuncts. Some started teaching online in blended learning situations, as well, and were able to make the transition to complete online teaching by using what they had learned as instructors in blended learning classrooms. Experience as an online student was very helpful in understanding how to be an online instructor. The ability to look at online teaching from the standpoint of the online learner was beneficial to those who made the transition; however, most did not have this experience from which to draw.

While participants' initial reactions were all fairly similar (as noted above), the paths each participant took after the initial shock or surprise wore off were very different. First, many looked into formal support in the form of courses, tutors, "how to teach online"-type training modules, or other resources that might be available at the institution. However, the consensus among participants was that there was little formal support, nor were processes in place to help faculty members new to online teaching. Those who did find formal support found it to be somewhat archaic. One participant described a series of online training mod-

ules available to those who were new to online teaching: "It was more like independent study. It kind of reminded me of the correspondence courses I took a long time ago when I was in college where you would just work independently and submit something to your professor." Several faculty likened early examples of online courses they reviewed to correspondence-type courses. This fact became a motivating factor to these instructors, who were adamant that their online courses would not be like correspondence-type courses they had seen. The experience taught them that their online courses had to be something more in order for the online student to have an experience similar to the face-to-face student.

Those who did have prior experience teaching online used what they had learned in the past, at other institutions or in graduate assistantship experiences, to help them prepare for their initial online teaching experiences at the institution. Some asked for help from colleagues in the department and in the college—often from faculty members in departments related to online teaching and learning, such as the college's instructional technologies department. A few engaged in different types of self-directed learning activities, such as reviewing articles and websites on online teaching. Some called on colleagues at other universities, as well. When they asked for help from colleagues at their own university, some participants were met with a "do what you want"-type of response, which was frustrating to them, as they did not know where to begin. One participant noted that she was told by administration "just take your face-to-face class and put it online." This type of advice frustrated participants, as it was overly simplistic and often offered by people who had no experience teaching online.

Learning From Early Experiences

At some point in this learning process, each participant began to realize that teaching online meant not only teaching, but also designing the online course. They began to make distinctions between course design and development and actual online teaching. The support that faculty found at this stage was mostly related to online course design. As one participant said: "The one piece of support I got from the department was a professor that had been here for 10 years had given me the design of the course, but how to teach online was zero." There was consensus that learning to teach online involved learning how to put appropriate course content on a website, and develop activities, projects, and assignments. But a separate skill was still the actual process of teaching online. Participants struggled with the teaching component of online teaching, and the issue of facilitating learning among online students. One respondent discussed this issue as follows:

> One of the problems with distance learning that makes it difficult is so often, people want to do it by themselves. They want to take the course because it fits into their schedule. The problem is that's not how learning happens. If I want to sit in my bedroom and read a book then I'm just going to continue to think the same thoughts unless I'm out with other people. And I think that's the real difficulty of distance learning. It's got to be adept at helping collaborate and work together. It's really hard to change how people think and to affect them if they're not part of a community.

Before respondents started to teach online, many noted that they had preconceived perceptions of online teachers. Some made comments like, "online instructors were antisocial," or "aliens." However, some noted that they had taken online courses or developed them during their graduate program and understood the online teacher's role. Many participants described their perceptions of online instructors before they, themselves, began to teach online. Some participants noted that they were "skeptical" of teaching online and equated online teaching to "students and instructors being isolated." One participant who prefers face-to-face instruction stated that "I could not understand how someone could

teach online, it was so foreign." While others noted that the common perception of teaching online was that it was easier because it didn't require interaction. One respondent in the curriculum and instruction field noted frustration regarding the misconception that online teaching was easy. Many in the group agreed with one respondent who said that "because online education is marketed as you can earn an online degree in your pajamas that it implies that it is easy and relaxed." The respondents note that this is a misconception because in their view online instruction is an investment, is stressful, and is "more time consuming because you feel like you work 24/7."

Participants who had little or no prior experience teaching online were asked to reflect on their preparation for their first online teaching experience. The general consensus on their first online courses was summed up by one participant as follows: "I would be embarrassed to show you what I had done (for that first class). I had no help and basically had to figure it out on my own. It was terrible." Another stated "I knew those (first) courses were poorly designed. I wasn't happy with that but that's the process for improving as you move along." Upon reflection, most participants recognized that their initial attempts at online teaching were less than successful, and there was a motivation to improve that was expressed by many. That motivation was based, in part, on fear of failure. As one participant noted, "Everything that I learned I learned on my own because of that very factor—failure, and I didn't like what I saw." Another stated, "There's nothing like the thought of failing to help motivate you to seek it (help) out." Concern for the student was paramount in these discussions, and there was a great sense that instructors couldn't fail to give their students meaningful learning experiences. They simply did not want to let their students down. When discussing initial online teaching experiences, that motivation derived from the need to provide quality learning experiences to students was present throughout each focus group. Although many focus group

members have since gained a good deal of experience teaching online, that motivation was still present, and seemed to serve as an ongoing source of motivation for continuously improving online courses.

There were definite patterns or characteristics of instructors who had successful experiences learning to teach online, and they typically involved smaller steps toward teaching online (as opposed to jumping in, as was the experience of many). One participant who had prior experience teaching online discussed her experience at a different institution. That institution provided an in-depth face-to-face training session that all faculty new to online teaching had to attend before becoming online instructors. Another started out as a graduate assistant in an online course, which allowed her to learn how the instructor taught. One more talked about her experience developing a blended learning course, which was partially online and partially face to face, as a good way of moving gradually into online teaching. These experiences gave participants time to learn and provided them with role models from whom to learn. Participants who had more experience with technology, in general, seemed to have an easier time than those who were not tech savvy. Those who were interested in learning to teach online also had better first-time experiences than those who were not as interested in teaching online.

The Evolution of the Online Instructor

Even the most experienced online instructors in these focus groups did not see themselves as "there" yet, in terms of their online teaching abilities. Most agreed that with experience came more strategies and options they could employ. Reflections on early online teaching experiences were mainly focused on the overall course level: getting a course set up, and teaching a course, for example. As online instructors matured in their experience, they became able to focus more on individual student needs within a course. One participant

summed up her feelings about teaching online versus face to face as follows:

> It's like throwing darts at a dart board. You're just trying to find one way to hit a bull's eye with each and every student. It is harder (than teaching in a traditional classroom). Someone who is good at distance ed., (they) are finding different ways (to reach each student) and you are spending so much more time and it is hard.

The idea that online instructors find different ways to connect with students resonated with focus group members. Examples of those different ways were discussed by several focus groups. They included the use of video conferencing in place of face-to-face lectures, having students read course materials posted online and then participating in online discussions rather than face-to-face discussions, and holding Skype sessions to provide students with one-on-one feedback that would have normally taken place after formal face-to-face class sessions. All of these examples illustrate the creative ways online instructors have found to reach students. They also demonstrate the maturation process of online instructors, and the increasing complexity, based on an individual student focus, with which online courses are taught by these experienced instructors.

Focus group participants agreed that the finding of "different ways," along with changes to course content and advances in technology mean that they spend much more time on their online courses than they would have in similar face-to-face courses. One respondent noted that her online courses were continually evolving due to both updates in the field and new content being developed, but also due to new technologies becoming available. In any given semester, one or both of those areas may change. One participant noted that, "If you look at one course from one semester to the next, the course will have the same content, but the way that it arrived will be significantly different."

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As this study was focused on faculty in one college of a major southeastern university, more research is needed in order to determine the generalizability of the outcomes across departments, schools, and colleges in the variety of postsecondary institutions offering online courses. The researchers believe their findings are noteworthy and provide good bases for future research on this topic in other settings.

This research addressed the topic of online teaching in a college of education, where the focus of the college is in line with the topic of this research. Research in other, noneducation schools and colleges is advocated, as is research in other types of postsecondary educational venues, including community or junior colleges.

DISCUSSION

The haste to move to online teaching and learning caught many entities off guard. The advent of the online course meant entirely new ways of teaching in higher education. Courses were put online with little thought to the differences between online and face-to-face teaching. There was no consideration given to the different roles of online instructors, nor to the skills or knowledge needed by those new online instructors. There was also very little time for instructors to learn to teach online, as the growth of online learning happened very quickly.

When asked to teach online, instructors looked to their institutions for support and guidance. However, those institutions were able to offer limited support simply because they were in the same situation as the instructors. The concept of online teaching and learning was new to everyone. Institutions could draw from few resources in order to help instructors prepare, simply because there were

no resources. There was no history at which to look for guidance, there were no models to follow, and there was a paucity of research on the topic. That seemed to result in a "do what you think is best"-type philosophy with regard to support given to new online instructors, and further resulted in instructors learning through a trial and error-type approach while they were actually teaching. Formal resources at the institutional level only improved after a body of knowledge on online teaching began to be developed.

IMPLICATIONS

With the growing popularity of distance education, institutions must ensure quality online instruction, which includes supporting instructors in transitioning to online teaching via professional development. This study presents specifics on the paths instructors follow when they learn to teach online and their experiences regarding how they improved their online instruction. This study is different because it examined the trial-and-error processes used by novice online instructors as they learned to teach online, and documents the process of skill development in the online instructor. It followed the processes instructors took to develop expertise, as they became experienced online instructors.

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. For example, results of this study show that small group learning opportunities and the use of mentors were both helpful in learning to teach online. These types of activities could be implemented as part of continuing education for faculty members learning to teach online. This study also presents informa-

tion 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.

Crawford-Ferre and Weist (2012) note that "Most instructors new to online teaching begin with little to no training or preparation specific to this delivery model" (p. 13). To this point, the practice of learning to teach online has been a haphazard, often trial-and-error process. Will this change for the next generation of online instructors? What will the experiences of new online instructors 10 years from now look like? It is believed that research of this nature will help in the preparation of future online instructors.

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