

Learning to Teach Online

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According to the U. S. Department of Education (2018), over 30% of all undergraduate students experience some distance learning or online courses. This means that institutions and faculty must address the need for faculty preparation to teach online. Speck (2000) notes that there is a systemic failure to prepare teachers to teach online, and this contributes to an ethical breach by the institutions with respect to delivering a quality online product.

Traditional vs. Online Teaching

Dietrich (2015) related his personal journey from the classroom to the virtual world. He noted that the institution provided support for using the learning management system (LMS) for courses, including access to previous course shells for the same course. He said this was helpful, but that he still had to tailor the courses to his own style. He noted that the increased workload associated with online teaching required personal adjustments. (Dietrich, 2015).

Teachers tend to teach as they have been taught, modeling their behavior on favorite former professors (Marek, 2009). In an effective online course, interactivity is the key. Discussion and feedback must be at the heart of the course, with multimedia elements added to help students understand challenging concepts (Clark-Ibáñez & Scott, 2008). Many prospective online educators have never experienced online learning themselves, so they have difficulty understanding the benefits of this teaching format (He, 2014).

Formal Training

Formal training for faculty who are beginning to teach online must include training in using the institution's LMS, but that is not enough. Faculty also require training in e-pedagogy and specialized technology to enhance online learning. Ongoing support is also needed for successful transition to the online format (Santovec, 2010).

Simon (2011) described a case study at a public university in Colorado, which involved five teaching assistants in foreign languages completing an intensive course involving learning about online teaching and designing a refresher course for language learners. The participants reported that they felt more prepared to teach online after completing the course (Simon, 2011).

Those who teach in the online format must be particularly cognizant of developing presence in the virtual classroom, by frequent interaction, and by being aware of the tone of all responses. Formal training for online faculty must emphasize the importance of these techniques (He, 2014). Faculty may also opt for a certification program, offered by several universities. These programs may include course design, choosing technology, and teaching best practices (Carnevale, 2003).

Culture of Support

One source of support that is common is the reliance on more experienced online faculty to mentor and inspire new online faculty. While this is a good practice, it does not negate the need for formal training in online pedagogy and participation in conferences to help faculty hone their online teaching skills (Marek, 2009)

At many institutions, adjunct faculty members often deliver online courses. They also benefit from structured support mechanisms, such as webinars, mini-courses on technology, and assistance with media creation. In a recent study, these measures increased both student and faculty satisfaction with online courses (Gomez, 2015).

Conclusion

Becoming comfortable with new online pedagogy requires training and support. As the trend toward adopting online courses continues, the need for effective faculty training will increase.

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