

Chapter 29

Effective Online Learning Begins with Effective Teacher Preparation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a description of four models for professional development for online instruction and analyzes each model according to clearly defined domains of effective online instruction including faculty stance, student self-regulation, faculty support, authentic practice, engagement, community development, and cognitive demand. Subsequent to model analysis, a decision model is provided for K-12 and university administrators, teacher educators, and policymakers to guide strategic decision-making in the determination of a model for professional development best suited to the needs and resources of their institution.

INTRODUCTION

We work in an institution that demonstrates a commitment to teaching and learning in community. The majority of faculty members teach undergraduate students exclusively, and with a student faculty ratio of 14:1 close interpersonal connections are highly valued. Many faculty members employ the Socratic teaching method, achievable with class enrollment capped at 24. Certain classrooms are designated as seminar classrooms wherein the furniture is arranged in a

circle. In other classrooms, student desks are light and on wheels, allowing for varied configurations within a class period. Faculty members new to the institution engage in conversations about “good teaching” with their mentors, tenured faculty in departments other than their own. Faculty discussions about new programs and alternate delivery systems (e.g., online instruction) demonstrate deeply held beliefs about learning that is socially constructed in a physical setting (e.g., traditional classroom). A challenge we face, as do many other institutions, is how to transfer our educational phi-

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losophy into an online environment and maintain high levels of interactivity, engagement, and close relationships with our students.

The Education Department is one of the few entities at our university that offers online learning, and explored models for effective teacher preparation online. This chapter synthesizes research on the development of online models of teaching. Four models for professional development for online instruction are described for decision makers. The following vignette traces the experiences of one administrator as she evaluated an education department faculty member using the university's criteria for effective teaching. This was the first time she had employed these criteria in an online setting.

Teacher-student interaction is an observable feature of effective teaching and learning, and one that is evaluated. In her former role as chair of the education department, one of the authors observed non-tenured faculty each semester for the purpose of formative assessment. As the reader might imagine, this entailed her attendance and note-taking during a regularly scheduled class period. As a teacher educator, she focused on student engagement, pedagogy, assessment of learning, and faculty roles within the class. In fall 2011, she conducted her first observation of online learning. She recalls feeling dubious about the experience, and exceedingly nervous. Would she be able to evaluate the same categories that she noted in the traditional face-to-face classroom? She clearly did not expect to because she had developed a Plan B for the personnel file evaluation of this faculty member if "it doesn't work out." The instructor provided her with login information, and she logged in at the appointed hour from the comfort of her home. Her name was added to the class list so that students were aware of her presence, and she was an active participant in the class. The instructor led a synchronous chat, inquiry with student-choice, group work and sharing, assessed learning, and used an online whiteboard to post answers. It was a transformative experience for

the chair. She saw the potential for online learning that was interactive and community-oriented. She became an advocate for more online learning options at the university. The following semester she joined five of her colleagues as students in an online course to learn how to teach online.

The nine-week course was organized into one-week units of study. An experienced online instructor provided an overview of the course and introduced us to features of the learning platform. Over the nine weeks, she completed assignments on her own time, posted the requisite number of comments, and responded to those of classmates. She got to know classmates from posted student bios. Assignments included reading online sources, completing workbook pages, writing reflections, rehearsing content through word sorts and flash card manipulation, and completing self-evaluations. There was one small group assignment in wiki. With the exception of the group project, she completed the two to three hours of homework each week on her own by the designated time for submission. It was a valuable experience because she was able to focus on practices she would adopt and those she would adapt. Features to adopt included: instantaneous feedback to quizzes, multiple tries on assessments, making the learning site visually appealing, and providing optional readings and assignments. She would have preferred fewer, but more meaningful activities, more small group assignments, and more research-based course readings.

These two experiences have prompted much personal reflection on the role online learning should play in our teacher preparation programs. In her current role as dean, she has much to consider about this new learning environment. What philosophy will our school adopt as we enter into online learning? Will our faculty embrace online learning and how can the dean support their pedagogical and technical needs during course development and implementation? What policy decisions need the dean's attention and what are the financial implications of offering courses

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