

Chapter 114

Beyond Onboarding: Building a Culture of Continuous Professional Development for Effective Online Instruction

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ABSTRACT

The rise of online programs has led to growing awareness that effective online teaching requires specialized instructional knowledge and skills. However, most online programs emphasize technology onboarding in lieu of ongoing professional development designed to support faculty in improving their online instruction. This chapter reinforces the need for comprehensive professional development efforts focused on improving online teaching and highlights the latest practices based on studies by the authors of leading online graduate programs. Evidence-based recommendations for providing ongoing professional development to support faculty's online teaching success are also outlined and fall into four overarching categories: (1) align organizational goals to create a culture of continuous instructional improvement, (2) model online learning principles in professional development efforts, (3) distinguish technology training from instructional development, and (4) employ multiple strategies to create ongoing, sustainable professional development efforts to support online instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of instruction in higher education has historically received scant attention, and faculty traditionally have received little to no preparation on how to teach (American Productivity and Quality Center [APQC], 2013). With the proliferation of online learning, including the rapid expansion of real-time or synchronous video-based classrooms, the reality of this situation has been brought to the fore (Vaill & Testori, 2012). There is growing awareness that, to teach online effectively, one needs additional instructional knowledge and skills (Ferrario, Hyde, Martinez, & Sundt, 2013; Hixon, Barczyk, Buckenmeyer, & Feldman, 2011; Howell, Saba, Lindsay, & Williams, 2004). With an increasing number of students and faculty experiencing online teaching, there is widening appreciation for the unique instructional challenges and opportunities that the online space presents (Orr, Williams, & Pennington, 2009). The limited knowledge about instruction collectively relied on by higher education faculty has been applied to the online environment, with variable results (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Kreber & Kanuka, 2006). Instructors who experience success teaching on-ground classes often find online teaching challenging; even the most engaging professor-centered talk or lecture falls flat in the online environment, a context more conducive to student-centered and participatory learning activities (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Teaching know-how associated with the college lecture simply does not transfer (APQC, 2013; Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Kreber & Kanuka, 2006). Consequently, calls for professional development to enhance online instruction have increased dramatically (Berry, 2017). It is agreed that technology training is not enough, and that faculty need support in developing the skills to use technology adeptly to facilitate engaging and effective online learning experiences (Vaill & Testori, 2012).

In practice, however, the emphasis within most online programs still rests on technology training during the faculty onboarding process coupled with ongoing technical support. There remains a gap between the recognized need and the provision of professional development activities focused squarely on improving online instruction (Berry, 2017). Pressures are mounting, however, for this gap to be closed. Multiple stakeholders are increasingly voicing concerns related to the quality of online programming and instruction, including ensuring rigor and compliance with traditional academic quality standards (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Benson, 2010; Bruce, 2010). The increasing acceptance of online learning is also leading researchers and practitioners to reflect critically on instructional methods used and concomitant learning outcomes (Baran et al., 2011; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Kreber & Kanuka, 2006). The continued growth and legitimacy of online learning in higher education means “there is an imperative to advance our understanding of how to facilitate effective online learning activities” (Kreber & Kanuka, 2006, p. 121).

Drawing on existing literature and on findings from studies carried out by two of this chapter’s authors, this chapter affirms the need for programs to shift from a technology training focus toward sustained professional development efforts to improve online teaching. The chapter highlights strategies and practices to improve professional development for online instruction, which can be adapted by other programs across a range of disciplines.

BACKGROUND

A review of the literature on professional development for online instruction reveals significant developments over the relatively short history of this growing domain within higher education. Prior to the

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