Chapter 2.2
Transitioning to E–Learning:
Teaching the Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the ongoing development of an online instructor training program, initiated in spring 2002. Involvement of the learner-instructors (professional development instructors learning to teach online) in the design and development of this online instructor training program was key to its overall success. Significant outcomes of the program include a core group of experienced and highly dedicated online instructors, a new model for continuous professional development and support, and the formation of an active and dynamic learning community.

INTRODUCTION

RETA (Regional Educational Technology Assistance program) at New Mexico State University (NMSU) is a professional development program funded by agency partnerships, Technology Literacy Challenge funds, a Technology Innovation Challenge Grant through the U.S. Department of Education, other grants, and the New Mexico Legislature. Its primary mission is to expand the number of educators skilled in effective use of technology to support educational goals (Gonzales, 1998; Gonzales, Pickett, Hupert, & Martin, 2002). RETA has been very effective in reaching New Mexico educators. Between the 1998-1999 and 2001-2002 school years, RETA

delivered over 1,400 workshops to almost 8,600 educators. In 2002, RETA extended face-to-face professional development workshops for K-12 teachers to include an online component. This change was motivated by the scope of work for RETA's Technology Innovation Challenge Grant (Gonzales, 1998) and was facilitated by institutional and national events.

Since 2001, NMSU has emphasized distance education as a way to better serve student needs. This focus began with the appointment of RETA's founder as NMSU's first vice provost for distance education. Since that time, NMSU rapidly expanded online course offerings and invested in distance education tools, including WebCT, a course management system, and Centra, an online classroom.

These events coincided with a national increase in Internet access. In 2001, 77% of instructional rooms in public schools had Internet access (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001), and more than 50% of Americans were online with 2 million new users connecting every month (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). This growth in Internet access helped insure that our audience of K-12 educators could participate in online workshops.

RETA's expansion to online professional development also aligned with the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act's (ESEA) *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and its emphasis on quality professional development and technology. The act emphasizes teacher professional development, requiring "ongoing professional development for teachers, principals, and administrators by providing constant access to training and updated research in teaching and learning through electronic means" (20 U.S. Code 6301, available at http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg34.html). Because of this emphasis, we anticipated a need for online professional development.

E-LEARNING PROGRAM

The RETA online instructor training program is a blended program designed to transition RETA instructors from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. The primary goal of the program was to train the learner-instructors in technology skills, pedagogic challenges, and administrative issues related to online teaching and learning. Ideally, instructors in the program would have experience in online teaching and learning as well as strong written communication skills due to the primarily asynchronous nature of our program. This was unrealistic, and in the end instructors who made a commitment to the training had limited online teaching and learning experience. However, they did have strong written communication skills, and most importantly, attitudes conducive to risk-taking and self-advocacy related to individual and community needs.

The process we envisioned for training online instructors was designed to:

- Use the expertise of the learner-instructors in training to give us feedback on their training, and
- Enlist learner-instructor help as co-developers of the workshops they would lead.

We only met the first goal, however, because our expectations about involving the learner-instructors in online instructional design were unrealistic. Our final process focused on training the learner-instructor and evaluating the training program (Figure 1) as follows.

1. Train learner-instructors, via Centra, in online technologies, pedagogy, and workshop content.
2. Mentor and support learner-instructors as they teach online workshops.
3. Develop and revise RETA Online Certification Competencies (see Appendix A

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