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Abstract

This article explores various models of online faculty development programs as described in the literature, and finds that they fall into a wide range of models from those that are highly structured to more organically grown examples. The Online Teaching Fellows program at the University of Rhode Island is shown to be an example of an internally-created course that follows best practices of both the structured and organic models. The author's experience as a participant in the course is described illustrating how the lessons learned informed his strategies for effective teaching in an online credit course in information literacy.

Introduction

In their report on online education in the United States for the Sloan Consortium, Allen & Seaman (2011) found that there is no one way that institutions train faculty to teach online. Most institutions use some combination of training and mentoring. Only six percent of institutions that offer online courses do not have some kind of training; that is down from the nineteen percent reported in their 2009 survey. Seventy-two percent offer internally-created training courses and fifty-eight percent offer informal mentoring with fewer institutions using formal mentoring in training online instructors. In fact, all forms of training had increased in the two year period between reports with the highest increase among internally-run programs.

This has been the case at the University of Rhode Island (URI) where the Provost's office recognized the need for pedagogical support for online instructors and authorized the Online Teaching Fellows program during the spring semester of 2011. This article shows how URI fits into this mix of programs, and tells the personal story of my participation in this online professional development course for distance learning instructors as well as the lessons I learned and applied to my asynchronous credit course on information literacy.

Online Faculty Development

The findings in the literature on training online instructors are as varied as the approaches that institutions take but there are common threads. What may seem obvious to online instructors, faculty training should emphasize the pedagogical aspects of teaching online rather than the technical; in other words, faculty should learn why they use the technology rather than how they use it (MacDonald & Poniatowska, 2011). This theme resonates throughout the literature. Fish & Wickersham (2009) find what others have found, that faculty must restructure how their course content is delivered and must learn to communicate differently than they do in traditional classrooms. Their literature review shows that online faculty must restructure how course content is delivered, learn to use new technology, and engage in ongoing faculty development. In a survey of participants in MarylandOnline's Certificate for Online Adjunct Teaching (COAT) program, Shattuck, Dubins & Zilberman (2011) found that the most important role of the online instructor was to set the tone for communicating online and to serve as a guide. Graham & Thomas (2011) also pointed to the influence of a community of like-minded learners and that modeling a training course made a difference in faculty thinking.

Models of online faculty development range from highly structured ones to those that are more organically created. Many institutions use the Quality Matters Program (QM), a formal peer review process of certifying the quality of online courses, which was established in 2003 by MarylandOnline (2010), a consortium of independently-governed higher education institutions. With a structured peer review process and a rubric based on best practices, it formed the basis for a successful inter-institutional project in Maryland, the COAT program, to offer online teaching training for adjuncts at member institutions (Shattuck et al. 2011). The pilot program was taught online with a primary objective to provide instructors with the experience of online learning from the student's perspective.

In another large-scale program at Ashford University and University of the Rockies, instructional design professionals team up with faculty using instructional design principles, QM standards, and e-book publishing to implement an online faculty development program with internal quality assurance reviews and external peer review (Pascal & Riemer, 2010). Even with different missions, the two universities use templates to guide teams and provide guidance while program directors select their own course development teams.

Fang (2007) suggests a new faculty development model that takes a systematic approach to performance analysis that requires administrative support to maintain the learning management system (LMS) and enable effective communication channels to share and form effective social networks for coaching. He offers five categories of development: formal training, communities of practice, performance support, formative evaluation, and knowledge sharing. Fish & Wickersham (2009) also say administrations must share the responsibility of supporting faculty through offering professional development opportunities, keeping the LMS up to date, providing release time, and facilitating ongoing assessment. There are some models where the administration plays a pivotal role like the Distance Education Mentoring Program (DEMP) at Purdue University Calumet where the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs mandates all faculty who teach online be certified (one way is through completing DEMP); faculty receive release time and a stipend (Barczyk, 2011). DEMP is based on Quality Management principles of customer satisfaction and continuous improvement.

Others take a more organic approach like that at the University of Missouri and Graceland University described by Graham and Thomas (2011) who recommend a mind shift from a centralized distance learning unit toward one that is built on an understanding of the university culture and the needs of the online faculty. There the approach is to include instructional design as a way of thinking and being, and to add a sense of wonder and confidence for faculty so that they are able to design or improve upon online courses in an ongoing manner, using a structure that supports faculty exploration and innovation in best practices without requiring them.

Some models combine both highly-structured and organic approaches. In a case study of participants in the Tutors Moderators course, a three-week introduction on facilitating online groups at Open University in the United Kingdom, MacDonald & Campbell (2010) describe how tutors learn by doing and sharing with their peers by replacing course content with a series of learning activities. Tutors choose three out of five activities and report back each week (for three weeks) on a near-synchronous schedule.

A needs analysis survey at Sacred Heart University showed that organization, planning, and patience are most important in online faculty training (Ginzburg, Chepya, & Demers, 2010). The authors found the most commonly requested topics for training are instructional design, digital communications and managing online discussions; technology training was low on the list. Objectives of the training, among others, were to become familiar with "presence learning" and "e-personality," employ time management skills, and learn to build an online learning community in order to maintain a sense of connection. Participants' comments in a post survey said that experiencing the training as a student was useful for designing online activities and changing face-to-face strategies to reflect the unique situations in online courses. Wilson & Stacey (2004) embrace a flexible model for online learning using local and/or discipline-specific ideas and practices with an emphasis on innovation rather than on technology. They point to an emphasis on group collaborative learning in a professional development setting where faculty can establish teacher presence online and help establish an online learning community. Task areas include

welcoming students, establishing ground rules, managing communication, modeling social behavior, and establishing their own identity.

Distance Learning at URI

For at least the past ten years, the University of Rhode Island has attempted to address the burgeoning distance learning needs of the University. The focus has mainly been on the technological aspects of subscribing to and maintaining an LMS. WebCT was introduced in the late 1990s when faculty began to use the system as a supplement to face-to-face classes and, after some attention from the Curriculum Affairs Committee, as a delivery method for asynchronous instruction. Information Technology Services (ITS) ran plenty of workshops on how to use WebCT tools for courses but these focused primarily on the mechanics of designing organizing pages, creating and giving quizzes, posting on the discussion board, etc.

With the growing interest in offering asynchronous courses, the URI administration made efforts to address the pedagogical aspects of distance learning. In the mid-2000s I served on a distance learning committee that began to investigate online faculty training options like subscribing to the Quality Matters program or creating an internal course by exploring and applying best practices in the field. However, The Vice Provost chairing the committee left the university followed by the retirement of the Provost and the President in the following two years, and any online faculty development discussion was put on hold.

Circumstances brought the various issues surrounding distance learning to a head when the university faced a decision about how to replace the soon-to-be obsolete WebCT as its LMS. With input from faculty and staff, ITS chose to purchase the Sakai Collaborative and Learning Environment rather than subscribing to Blackboard. URI's Chief Information Officer formed the Sakai Advisory Committee made up of faculty, administrators, and staff to set priorities and address growing pains during the implementation of Sakai on campus. When the technical issues surrounding the implementation were mostly resolved, the committee pressured the new administration to finally address the issue of training faculty in the pedagogy of online learning. The Provost responded by working to create the Office of Online and Distance Learning (OODL) which joins the existing Instructional Development Program, Office of Student Learning Outcomes, Assessment, and Accreditation, and the Instructional Technology Center to support faculty in the advancement of teaching and learning (Joint Committee on Academic Planning, 2010).

Online Teaching Fellows

The Provost appointed Associate Professor of Communications Kathleen Torrens to serve as the Interim Director of OODL, and she promptly implemented URI's first Online Teaching Fellows (OLTF) program, a training course for faculty who had some experience teaching online. Its goal was to reinforce faculty's online teaching practices, to provide a forum to communicate with like-minded faculty, and in the future, to form a basis for a sustainable faculty mentoring program.

I fit the criteria for inclusion: since 2001 I have been teaching LIB120 Introduction to Information Literacy, a 3-credit, general education course offered by University Libraries, during the regular semester in a traditional classroom and asynchronously in the summer sessions. Learning objectives for the course parallel the Association of College & Research Libraries' "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" (2006). Students in the course learn to identify an information need, find, evaluate, and use information effectively and ethically. They pick a topic to research over the semester and use finding tools and search strategies to compile a road map of their research called the Paper Trail which consists of annotated bibliographies (useful and non-useful sources), reflective journals, and other evidence of learning the research process. I converted the face-to-face version of LIB120 to the WebCT environment in 2001 and later into Sakai. I kept up with the technological training the University offered, but I learned the pedagogical skills as I went along.

Professor Torrens based her design of OLTF on her experience with UMass Dartmouth's myCourses Training, an online workshop where faculty can experience navigating an online course as a student would in order to better understand what issues can arise when designing an online course (Board

of Trustees, 2011). The OLTF program, like a majority of training courses at institutions of higher learning, is an internally-created course growing organically out of the faculty's insistence on pedagogical training for the growing distance learning community. It has received administrative support first in the creation of the OODL, and in the form of stipends for OLTF participants.

Although I had online teaching experience, I still had some issues with facilitating discussions effectively and creating sense of community in the course. Since I had no formal online teaching training - I had learned by doing - I felt the OLTF would give me a strong foundation for future sections of LIB120 online, especially after reading the objectives of the course: at the end of the six week program, participants would 1) demonstrate their successful navigation of an online course, and 2) obtain, explain, and justify at least 3 strategies to use in an online or blended course of their own design.

Like many models of online faculty training courses, the OLTF program modeled best practices by including activities for active learning organized into the four units as well as reflection and discussion among peers in the course. Unlike many models, there were two face-to-face meetings, one before the course started and a second meeting where participants shared what we learned in an electronic poster session. Each unit began with a Start Here section which not only laid out what students could expect from the unit and what tools we would be using, but also served as a way to build in redundancy so that major points would be reinforced throughout the course.

The four units, organized into Sakai Modules, were titled Fully Online, Blended/Hybrid, Assessing your Course, and Assessing Your Students. Each module contained what might be called content in a credit course: articles to read, videos by experts, some assessment tool like a short quiz or poll, and most importantly, a discussion area. The initial discussions set up a couple of the important themes found in the literature - building a sense of community and infusing an instructor's presence in the course. The introductory prompts asked us to introduce ourselves, identify our greatest challenge in teaching online, and share something we've done that no one else has. This was a fascinating look at the eclectic backgrounds of participating faculty and in sharing, made me feel almost conspiratorial about working with such a group. The challenges everyone identified were just as varied depending on a person's experience with online teaching and his or her area of study, but several expressed concern with their technical capabilities and time management skills, especially participating as a student.

Since my LIB120 online section is taught asynchronously, the Fully Online module was most helpful to me. It reinforced strategies I had been using in structuring my course, but also gave me a different way to look at them from a student's point of view. For instance, I had already been "chunking" content information to make it more easily accessible, but the OLTF course helped me formalize the design of each "chunk" to include learning objectives, activities and/or discussions, and some way to assess performance.

With Professor Torrens modeling best practices, I saw the instructor's role as more of a guide or mentor to students rather than just a content provider. With clear expectations and directions from her, we engaged with the material through threaded discussions, posting and reacting to others and creating a conversation online that modeled the list of best practices. In a related "Take a Moment" break in the middle of the module, we were asked to post our thoughts on online teaching. This was one of a few important breaks that gave us time for reflection and peer review, reinforcing the community aspect of the asynchronous course and mentoring each other. We posed questions and provided advice to each other giving us the wisdom of others' expertise. In one of the threads we explored the chunking concept applied to podcasts and self-produced videos, much like the short videos embedded into each OLTF module to reinforce each topic. In another we discussed how to enhance our presence in the course. The official wrap-up discussion at the end of the module was more formally structured with several questions posed about the content of the unit as a sort of self-assessment exercise. Again, discussion and peer comments made for a valuable learning experience and one to model in our own courses.

A separate discussion forum on instructor presence in an online course highlighted how important an instructor's involvement can be. The concept of presence produced a lively discussion. On its face, presence would seem to only have positive effects; students feel as though the instructor is really there for them and shares in the communal aspects of the course. However, the topic brought out ideas from faculty

that questioned that premise. If the instructor is too present, will students think he or she is being too judgmental or critical? Does a student's class rank or major play a role in how comfortable he or she is with online interactions with instructors? Should teacher-created videos be used to literally substitute for face-to-face instruction? When or how often should an instructor interrupt students' discussion on a topic? There were no ready answers to these questions, but there were plenty of opinions, experiences and speculations to share.

Strategies for creating blended courses, where there is a mix of face-to-face and online components, were explored in the second unit. Although I focused on the asynchronous aspects of OLTF, I paid close attention to the blended course content and discussions. In 2010 a colleague and I created LIB220 Issues of the Information Age, a "spin off," if you will, of LIB120 using a problem-based learning model. Designed as a blended course, LIB220 lasted only one semester as such, reverting to face-to-face format the next year partly because of the pitfalls discussed in this module. Half of the 40 students met in a classroom on Monday, the other half on Wednesday with readings and activities to be completed online; the online participation met with very limited success. Had I been immersed in an OLTF program at the time, I would have learned about finding the right strategies for mixing online and classroom activities and could have discussed my problems with a supportive group of like-minded professionals. As I read through the OLTF content and engaged in the discussions, I filed away some strategies to pursue if or when the course returns to a blended format: enhancing communication techniques in order to give clear and redundant directions, being more aware of how students interact with each other, the instructor and the content, and assigning grade points to the completion of online activities. This last strategy seemed a good solution the problem of motivating students to complete the work required in the online portion of the course. The OLTF discussion also explored the use of varied multimedia content to accommodate the perceived interest in entertainment as education by the so-called millennial generation.

One of my main incentives for participating in the OLTF was to learn to effectively assess my students' activities on the discussion board, and this was thoroughly covered in the unit on assessing student learning. When I converted the face-to-face LIB120 content to an online environment, many of the assessment strategies fit conveniently into the LMS; exercises, assignments, presentations, and quizzes were easy to post, grade, and return to students. However, in fitting the 14-weeks of regular semester content into the 10-week online summer session, I decided to spread the "issues of the information age" portion of the course across the semester using the discussion board, hoping to raise consciousness about how information can be used and misused in this information age. I would pose what I thought were provocative topics at the time (government surveillance, the USA PATRIOT ACT, e-books, illegal downloading, Wikileaks, etc.) but the discussions never took off to my satisfaction. The content of this unit made it plain that I should be clear about the goal of each discussion, communicate my expectations to students, and provide definite criteria for successful postings, things I had only touched on. Most useful to me were the many examples of rubrics and guidelines for setting up and grading discussions linked in the module which provided me with material I could use to adapt and create my own assessment criteria.

The discussion posts for this unit exploded with everyone's experiences with rubrics and with a more philosophical thread about the effectiveness of online learning in general, giving skeptics of online learning a forum. We returned to the themes of presence and losing control in discussions so that students take a more active role in the direction a topic takes just as the threads in this forum took on a life of their own.

The last unit covered assessing our course sites by using principles of best practices, rubrics and checklists. Self-assessment actually begins during the initial design, making sure the activities and content support the learning objectives, the site is easy to navigate, and the instructor's presence strikes the right balance of facilitation and intervention. For our last discussion, we were asked to post three discussion prompts that would check for understanding of the content of our course, invite interaction, and lead students into some discussion. This gave us all a chance to practice our skills designing questions that would not only give us an indication of student learning but also how well the students are engaging with the course. The peer reviews of our postings brought out more collective wisdom of the group.

Lessons Learned

One of the objectives of the OLTF program was to obtain at least 3 strategies to use in an online course of our design. I certainly met that objective and applied my new skills to the subsequent online summer section of LIB120. The three most useful strategies I came away with were instilling presence, enhancing discussions, and establishing strong communication lines.

With all of the discussion of presence in an online course, I concentrated on building more of myself into the course. For the last few years I had been recording audio podcasts to help orient students to the weekly modules, but this summer I turned to video, presenting myself as a talking head in the first week so student could connect my face to my voice. This first video podcast supplemented my introduction on the discussion board which set the tone for the rest of the class as they posted information about themselves. I tried to inject some humor into the rest of the podcasts and to use examples from my own experience using the resources they would be working with. In the first graded discussion that tied information organization theories to real life, I described my family's totally unorganized piles of music sheets of all kinds - actual sheet music, pages of typed and handwritten lyrics, chord charts, song lists, music books in all genres, tablatures - and asked students to help me organize them in several ways using strategies they learned in the course content. I tried not to be overbearing in my announcements to the class, generally resorting to "gentle reminders" about due dates or changes in course information, but also making sure the information was replicated elsewhere in the course.

I finally had a chance to adapt guidelines and a rubric for the online discussions of information issues from the many examples identified in the OLTF course. The guidelines first ask students to answer my prompt with an original post and then reply to at least one other student; other recommendations suggest setting the length and timing of posts, citing outside resources or their own experiences, and using proper netiquette. The grading rubric had three simple elements: the quality of the original post, the reply, and the understanding of the related readings and other relevant sources. This new regimen gave my discussions much more depth than my past sections, but it didn't quite meet my expectations. Most students made sure they met the minimum requirements and often a discussion would end there. I realized that timing my intervention with the right kind of follow-up questions or comments is a skill that needs cultivation. It will take some more practice on my part to work with the balance that my fellow OLTF colleagues and I discussed between too much intervention in a discussion and not enough. Too much, and students feel you have taken over and closed the discussion; too little, and students stop and wait for guidance.

Communication is really essential to running a successful asynchronous course. I had always sent out an email message before the course started outlining how the course worked and how best to navigate the LMS, but somehow it never seemed enough for some students. I learned to add redundancy to make sure students could not avoid this important message. I added the message to Sakai's Announcements and pointed to it from discussion postings; my first video podcast used the message as a guide to add another layer of redundancy. Adding the video component to my podcasts helped out the visual learners in the course and those who need some entertainment value in their education (a theme in one of the OLTF discussions). I had thought that an audio podcast alone would force students to follow along with their browsers, actively engaging with the resources, but I believe the screencasts using Camtasia clarified many of the course elements that were hard to describe verbally, like finding links on a busy screen or identifying the important parts of an assignment. Of course I made sure that I responded as quickly as I could to students' questions even though I gave clear expectations in my initial orientation message that it may take me up to 24 to 36 hours to respond.

As for being a student in an online course, I gained quite a bit of empathy for my online students. I was conscientious about completing the readings and contributing to the discussions but I realized the importance of developing good time management skills. I had to fit OLTF coursework into a semester of teaching, attending conferences, and performing my normal library duties while still reflecting on the materials by the deadlines to be able to make the most of the course. Most of my summer students work full time or take several other courses (or both) so I came to understand how the lessons I learned about communication, redundancy, and course design can make it easier for them to succeed. There is still a lot of

work for LIB120 students to complete, but the less time they spend trying to figure out how to engage with the material, the more they will spend on completing the work and engaging with other students.

Also, I was somewhat intimidated at first about jumping into a discussion like many students who are reticent about commenting in class, whether it is online of face-to-face, but after some thoughtful responses to my posts, I became more confident in my participation. Of course, the "students" in OLTF are all professionals and so there was little need for the moderator to intervene because the conversations never really stalled; the discussions developed organically. I hope to be able to create the same sense of community in my course by setting up discussions to encourage the kind of interaction I experienced. One big difference between OLTF and our students: there were no grades in the OLTF program. We learned for the sake of learning and to enhance our online students' learning experience.

I believe the OLTF program succeeding in achieving many of the important goals of online faculty development expressed in the literature: designing a course following best practices of online pedagogy, creating a sense of community among students and instructors, and clearly communicating expectations. The lessons learned in the course have certainly informed my teaching skills and I'm sure that is the case for my OLTF colleagues. There will be a permanent Director of OODL in the coming months and hopefully this model online professional development program will continue to grow.

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