Developing and Transitioning Faculty to Online Teaching

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Abstract

This paper was prompted by the recent consolidation of Armstrong State and Georgia Southern Universities and the unexpected changes in enrollment preferences seen in the College of Education at the end of year-one. The Summer-2019 application and enrollment cycle produced only a handful of applications for traditional face-to-face programs while fully online programs experienced exponential growth, stretching teaching capacity. Without students, face-to-face programs were eliminated in favor of fully online programs requiring that all faculty prepare to teach online. In the midst of decreasing trend in postsecondary enrollment, enrollment in fully online programs continues to trend upward (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Given the persistent growth of online learning in higher education as the result of adding fully online courses to traditional on-campus programs of study and the persistent development of new fully online programs, the question of instructional effectiveness must be asked. Are faculty in traditional 4-year public universities prepared to effectively deliver online instruction and support the needs of online students? If they are, how were they prepared? If they are not, how can they be prepared? How can faculty be encouraged and supported to continue to develop and maintain those skills in light of the rapid changes in online technology? The pages that follow will explore the answers to some of these questions.
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In 2011, after decades of persistent enrollment growth, institutions of higher education (IHE) began to see a downward trend in enrollment. That enrollment slump was a little slower to hit public 4-year institutions, but by 2017 those enrollment trends had spread across the nation from west to east, impacting public university systems in every state (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The one bright spot in these statistics has been a continued healthy growth in enrollment in online courses and programs. Between 2014 and 2016 enrollment in online coursework grew 10% for undergraduate students (30%) and 13% for graduate students (36.6%; Friedman, 2018; Lederman, 2018).

In just over a decade, the percentage of undergraduate students enrolled in fully online programs more than doubled to 10.8% while enrollment of fully online graduate students rose to 27% during the same period (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In response to this growing demand, spurred at least in part by cost and accessibility (Lichoro, 2015), traditional 4-year public colleges and universities have responded by aggressively increasing their online offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2014) increasing the need for online instructors.

Faculty who have traditionally taught students face-to-face in college classrooms are being pressed into online teaching to meet the increasing demand for online instructors (Ching, Hsu, & Rice, 2015). To make a transition from face-to-face instruction to effective online teaching, faculty need to acquire new technological skills, develop new pedagogical practices (Ching, Hsu, & Rice, 2015; Lane 2013), understand the unique needs of online learners (Lackey, 2011), and accept a change in their role as instructors (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001). The faculty transition to online instruction is happening, effective or not.

*Inside Higher Ed’s 2018 annual survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology* reports that 44% of
surveyed faculty have taught at least one online course, a 50% increase in the last five years, but most believe that those online courses are not as effective as traditional classes in helping students achieve course learning outcomes. The overwhelming majority (89%) of faculty who taught online report that they participated in the design of their course, but less than half of those participated in any professional development on how to design an online course (Jaschik, S., Lederman, D., & Gallup, C., 2018).

**Online Learners**

Online learning is on the rise and new technologies are supporting that growth; there is not putting that genie back in the bottle. Enrollment is growing, especially at public college and universities, online course offerings and programs are expanding, and there is no shortage of students ready to learn online (Friedman, 2018; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Undergraduate students make up 90.1% of the enrollment in public universities and 99.8% of those undergraduate students are taking one or more online courses. Both undergraduate and graduate enrollment in online courses continues to grow both for students taking some online courses and those in fully online programs. There is a growing trend for students to enroll in fully online programs located in their own state, 56.1% in 2016. Many students want the flexibility on learning online but the support of campus resources with some taking their online course from a cozy spot on campus (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman).

As many two thirds of today’s undergraduate college students are *nontraditional*, a growing trend since the mid 90’s. Nontraditional students are typically financially independent, may have one or more dependents, have delayed college, work full time, attend college part time, and may not have a traditional high school diploma. These are the students
that find the convenience and flexibility of online courses and programs most attractive (Brock, 2010; Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001; Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold).

Nontraditional students make up a large part of the population on online learners. Their real-world responsibilities require flexibility in scheduling making online learning an attractive option. But these learners also have multiple roles in real life (employee, spouse, parent, caregiver, volunteer) that can distract them from their studies and often have academic needs that differ from traditional students. Delayed entry into college brings its own challenges related to time management and study habits, both of which are complicated by the multiple roles of nontraditional students (Hittepole, 2016; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Successful online learners are self-directed. While nontraditional students manage their real lives well, they often arrive in college with biases and fixed mindsets from previous challenging school experiences. Self-directed learners must demonstrate independence, organization, self-discipline, good communication, and the ability to receive and use constructive feedback in self-reflection (Lichoro, 2015). Nontraditional students often do many of these things in real life, but struggle to generalize those skills to their educational environment, requiring the support of faculty (Ross-Gordon, 2011). These support needs are part of the challenge that instructors face as they move from teaching face-to-face to online. The needs and learner profiles of college students are changing, driving an environmental change in higher education. How do IHEs ensure that faculty can keep up?

**Online Instructors**

Transition to online teaching requires that faulty assume new roles and responsibilities. No longer are they directors of learning and content gatekeepers but instead facilitators of learning. In addition, they must learn to relate differently with students and colleagues
In the online environment, successful students are self-directed learners, skills that often must be developed as students transition to online learning. Consequently, is the role of the online instructor to not only facilitate and engage students in active learning, but to support the acquisition of self-directed learning skills in those online students (Hittepole, 2016; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Vodanovich & Piotrowski, 2005).

Many faculty bring negative experiences and preconceptions to online teaching. They have concerns about the quality and time required to develop and teach online courses. They believe that students think online classes are easier, students learn less, and are less engaged (Seirup, Tirotta, & Blue, 2016). Faculty have concerns about the quality of online learning, integrity concerns related to plagiarism and cheating, and worry about losing their connections with students. Faculty worry about their lack of preparation to teach online, may have low technology self-efficacy, and express concerns about the extra time required to design online courses and meet the daily real-time needs of their learners (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Lichoro, 2015; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018; Seirup, Tirotta, & Blue).

Faculty feel that universities are pushing to put too much content online. Even those who embrace teaching online often feel unprepared and unsupported for their new role as online teachers. Many faculty members report little if any professional development in online pedagogies, content development, or engagement strategies for teaching online. They report a feeling of disconnect from students and feel student pressure for quick (less than 48 hour) responses to student questions (Lichoro, 2015; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2007; Seirup, Tirotta, & Blue). Students report frustration at the delays in responses from instructors to questions and from peers in discussion in the asynchronous format. At the same time many
students like the flexibility, convenience, and think time provided by asynchronous instruction (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004).

**Online Instruction**

Only high quality online instruction can ultimately compete with traditional face-to-face teaching (Chao, Saj, & Tessler, 2006; Lichoro, 2015) and accrediting agencies will continue to demand valid and reliable evidence of student learning. Ensuring the quality of online instruction must be an institutional priority (Allen & Seaman, 2007, 2014). There can be little argument that high quality online courses must be designed and taught by instructors trained to perform those tasks. When instructors self-select online teaching, they are more likely to be effective instructors even when administrative and technological support is inadequate (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001). This becomes a challenge when a transition to online programs is sudden and unexpected and faculty are forced into teaching online courses. So how do universities support the successful transition of faculty to online teaching? What defines a successful transition?

**Preparation of Online Instructors**

Online learning is here to stay and college faculty must be prepared to teach online. While faculty perceptions of their preparedness and the effectiveness of online instruction is evolving over time, it is not keeping up with the enrollment growth of online learners. The quality of online instruction is directly related to the ability of faculty to design and deliver effective online instruction using tools, pedagogies, and communication methods that engage students in active learning (Lackey, 2011; Lichoro, 2015; McQuiggan, 2012). Without that preparation student learning outcomes are at risk and the mode of instruction is likely to take a hit for poor outcomes rather than the universities and faculty themselves.
Two Cases

Online teaching and learning has value and its use will continue to expand for any number of reasons. In the case of Georgia Southern, the low number of applicants for the consolidated face-to-face programs has ushered in a sudden and unexpected move to eliminate on campus classes in favor of the preferred fully online programs. For this reason, I have chosen to explore two publications in detail. Case #1 is the outcome of a Delphi study published by Morh and Shelton in 2017 that sought to identify a best practices framework for developing and supporting online faculty. Case #2 is a 2012 publication by Carol McQuiggan, a manager and senior instructional designer in which she recounts the results of her action research describing how transformative learning that can occur as a result of professional development in online teaching and impact how instructors teach face-to-face. I chose this case because it closely matches my own experience as I pursued online teaching excellence through Quality Matters training and ITEC courses at Georgia Southern.

Case #1

Mohr and Shelton (2017) asked the research question, “What are best practices for offering professional development for higher education online faculty” (p. 126)? The study concluded by providing a list of professional development topics and institutional strategies that panel experts agreed would provide a framework for online faculty support. One might have assumed from the research question that the study outcomes would have included effective practices to engage instructors in professional development, but instead a list of topics and institutional considerations were derived.

The study involved a large and highly qualified panel of 57 experts. Great care was taken in identifying experts who not only had the expertise in online learning but would also
benefit professionally from participation in this study. Four rounds of surveys and responses transformed the original 83 items into 68 suggestions that consisted of 49 from the original list and 19 suggested and agreed upon by the panel. Professional development topics were organized into four groups including faculty roles, classroom design, learning processes, and online legal issues. Institutional strategies were grouped into three areas: supportive campus climate, institution specific expectations for online learning, and staffing support. The expansive list of topics which can be seen in the original publication, confirm the complex nature of preparing and supporting online learning in higher education.

**Case #2**

The purpose of action research is to ignite and understand change. In Carol McQuiggan’s study (2012), the catalyst was professional development designed to prepare faculty to teach online, the intended change was intended to be transformative and potentially impact how faculty teach in their traditional classrooms.

McQuiggan notes that when instructors begin to teach online they begin to revisit their own teaching practices. Online learning is student centered, the responsibility for learning falls on the student in contrast with the teacher-centric styles often seen in face-to-face classrooms. The reflection cycle of the action research process brings these types of differences into focus for faculty participants.

Three action research cycles (planning, acting and observing, reflecting) were analyzed and the researcher reported out six themes: connections with colleagues, preparation through reflection and discourse, reflections on assumptions, changes in face-to-face teaching practices, time and level of engagement in professional development, and design of faculty professional development programs. These themes led McQuiggan to suggest that to move
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Faculty to online teaching must be considered a transformation process rather than a simple change in instruction modality. As she concludes her implications for practice, McQuiggan reflects back on her own motivation for this study and says:

> The quote that defined this study and gave it deeper personal meaning is translated from the writings of Marcel Proust, “The only real voyage of discovery. . . consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes.” This is the opportunity online teaching gives all of us. It is a new landscape, different from our physically rooted classrooms, although many seem to try to simply move what happens in the classroom to the online environment. The Internet brings us new resources, new tools, new ways of being together, new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. We cannot afford to miss this opportunity to look at education through new eyes, to envision new possibilities, deeper and more effective learning, personalized learning, enriched and meaningful teaching experiences, and to provide wider access to learning. The magic is in the redesign of learning experiences, including faculty professional development programs (p. 57).

**Recommendations**

Based on the literature reviewed for this paper and my own experience with pursuing professional development for teaching online, I recommend that we approach the preparation of online faculty with careful planning and a goal that the experience will be transformational. Ideally, faculty should be able to self-select online teaching to ensure that they will be active participants in their own preparation. Using exemplary online instruction to prepare faculty has been shown to provide an online learning experience for these faculty/students that gives them a student’s perspective of learning online. Opportunities to reflect on their experience
and classroom teaching can help them connect these two experiences and rethink their general teaching practices.

**Conclusions**

There are numerous research, reports, and white papers presented by experts that can inform a university or college that is creating programming and training to prepare faculty to teach online. I agree with McQuiggan that the process should be transformational, if you are going to invest the time and resources into professional development, one should anticipate outcomes that will lead faculty to new insights about their teaching and how to address the needs of their learners. If we are going to make this transition to online teaching and learning let us do it right. Our preparation of faculty and students for this mode of instruction needs to be done with intention and purpose, to bring the highest quality learning experiences to our students. Nothing worth having is cheap or easy, neither will this type of investment in our faculty development.
References


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