The Transformational Impact of Learning to Teach Online

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Abstract: An action research study is being proposed in which professional development for faculty to prepare to teach online will be intentionally designed to promote transformational learning and inform classroom teaching practices by critically reflecting on and discussing their assumptions and beliefs about teaching.

There are a number of driving forces and demands of the 21st century that are putting pressure on institutions of higher education to make changes in their traditional ways of teaching and even changing the entire environment of higher education (Langley, O'Connor, & Welkener, 2004). Perhaps the largest driving force for change is the rapid growth of the Internet enabling distance education and changing the way we gather and share information, gain knowledge, collaborate, design and deliver instruction, and changing the speed at which we can accomplish these tasks (Diamond, 2005; Jones, Mally, Blevins, & Munroe, 2003; Lezburg, 2003; Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2006). It has spurned creative uses of new technologies, changed classrooms, and placed new and different demands on faculty (Lawler & King, 2000; Sorcinelli et al.).

As of fall 2006, almost 3.5 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in an institution of higher education in the United States. This is over double the number of student enrollees of over 1.6 million in fall 2002. Additionally, 11% of all United States higher education students took at least one online course in fall 2002, and this number increased to almost 20% by fall 2006. Much of this explosive growth was due to new institutions offering online education. Approximately one-third of higher education institutions account for three-fourths of all online enrollments, so there is still much room for continued growth (Allen & Seaman, 2003, 2007).

Some faculty have embraced online education (Allen & Seaman, 2003), but many faculty are only beginning to integrate technology into their teaching. Most have no experience with online teaching, having spent the majority of their years as a learner in a traditional face-to-face classroom (Brookfield, 2006). Their initial teaching model is typically born from that of their own teachers, and they teach as they were taught (Layne, Froyd, Simpson, Caso, & Merton, 2004). In this way, the teaching and learning environment has not changed much over the years (Conrad, 2004).

With few faculty having any online experience, it is not surprising that numerous changes have been noted in the faculty experience when teaching online. Several studies have found that when moving to the online environment, faculty note that which is unfamiliar, different, or absent and roles seem to change (Conrad, 2004; Morris, Xu, & Finnegan, 2005).

Learning to teach online may be a catalyst for faculty to reflect on and evaluate their current teaching practices. It is a potential opportunity to develop new ideas about teaching and learning (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006), and to restructure traditional classroom roles and relationships (Jaffee, 2003). What worked for them in the past in their traditional classroom may no longer be helpful or reliable in their online classroom.

An action research study is being proposed in which professional development for faculty to prepare to teach online will be intentionally designed to promote transformational learning and inform classroom teaching practices by critically reflecting on and discussing their assumptions

and beliefs about teaching. Additionally, the importance of relationships between the facilitator, faculty, and students in the transformation process will be explored.

During the roundtable discussion, those who design and deliver faculty professional development for online teaching, and faculty who are preparing to teach online or who have taught online, will discuss their experiences with online teaching and the implications of the proposed study. What changes in previously held assumptions and beliefs about teaching do faculty experience as they prepare to teach online?

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