Training Instructors to Teach Online: Research on Competencies/Best Practices

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Introduction / History / Objectives

In 2008, Maryland Online (MOL), a consortium of higher education institutions in Maryland, awarded a grant to the Maryland Distance Learning Association’s Instructional Design Affinity Group (IDAG) to research the need for, and interest in, a “State-Wide Online Teaching Certificate for Adjunct Instructors in Higher Education”. The primary objectives of the grant were 1) to research what online instructor certification programs and training were already available, as well as their cost, structure and content (competencies), and 2) to recommend a model (or models) that would allow the development and offering of adjunct faculty training sessions or “certification” courses as a state-wide group.

Methodology

In order to achieve those objectives, it was necessary to first identify competencies needed by effective online instructors. This was accomplished by 1) performing a literature review of current knowledge in the field of online teaching, and 2) researching what competencies were included in selected, currently available, reputable training programs.

The literature review was used to identify online teaching core competencies and best practices (baseline rubric). This information was then used to systematically gather and compare data on seventeen already established online teaching programs. Research included programs throughout the U.S. Particular attention was paid to programs which received awards, were identified in the literature review as exemplary, or were administered by a higher education consortium.

Summarized Results of Literature Review

Competencies that appeared in the literature review encompassed eight general competency categories. Additional, more specific, competencies were identified within each general competency category. These competencies were subsequently used to compare the content of the seventeen online teaching programs. The eight general competency categories identified were:

1. Content management system skills (CMS)
2. Other technical skills
3. Instructional design
4. Social processes and presence
5. Managing assessment
6. Orienting students
7. Institutional knowledge (including basic legal such as ADA and copyright)
8. Pedagogy/Andragogy
Summarized Results of Program Research

In-depth interviews were conducted with the seventeen identified programs. The researched programs included public institutions, independent institutions, consortiums, and commercial/for-profit programs.

A comparison of the research results for the seventeen programs found the following commonalities in core competencies.

1. Most programs either required basic CMS knowledge as a pre-requisite to the training, or included it in the training.

2. Most programs did not include advanced technical skills in the initial training for new online instructors. The technical skills that were included usually related to what the instructor needed to know to operate within the CMS used by that institution. Types of technology skills ranged from basic (internet, plug-ins) to more advanced (podcasting, Flash).

3. About half of programs discussed basic course design principles. A few included instructional design components/classes separately. Most programs focused on advanced instructional design in a separate training program.

4. Most programs covered social processes and presence in online courses in detail.

5. Most programs covered grade book functions. About half covered creating/using grading rubrics. About half covered providing assessment feedback to students. About a quarter specifically addressed: 1) assessing student engagement in online discussions, groups, collaboration, 2) maintaining assessment integrity, 3) providing students with self-assessment opportunities.

6. Almost all programs covered how to orient students to online learning, guidance for new online learners, communicating technology skills, communicating information on where students can get help for academic/student/technical problems, and managing student expectations.

7. On the whole, basic institutional knowledge was either covered in the training or instructors were guided to a contact person at their home institution. Institutional knowledge was covered in various degrees of depth. Almost 2/3 (10 of 17) covered at least minimal institutional knowledge.

8. Pedagogy/andragogy was discussed in most programs, at least at the level of what is different about learning online and the importance of active learning strategies. Of those that covered pedagogy/andragogy, about half covered it in some degree of depth.

The full “State-Wide Online Teaching Certificate for Adjunct Instructors in Higher Education” grant report may be viewed at Maryland Online’s web site at http://www.marylandonline.org.

References


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