Chapter XII

Online Faculty Proficiency and Peer Coaching

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Introduction

By the time someone becomes a teacher, regardless of whether he or she enters the K-12 school system, higher education arena, or corporate training environment, he or she has literally had decades of experience with face-to-face instruction. While new teachers vary in their pedagogical training and student teaching experience, they still benefit from a lifetime of experience as students themselves. Accordingly, most of today’s teachers have a fairly common set of experiences and expectations to draw from when planning and evaluating traditional instruction. This is not so when the educational environment is shifted from the four-walled classroom to the online Internet environment. According to Bork (2002), the results of a survey of university instructors revealed that experienced online instructors had taught between four and seven online courses either partially or fully online. While not an insignificant number, it pales in comparison to the teaching experience of the same respondents (e.g., 36% having more than 20 years of experience and 34% with 10-20 years of experience), as well as the nonteaching history that such instructors invariably had.

Moving into the comparably new territory of online teaching and learning thus requires a renewed emphasis on training and continual improvement. The central question is not
whether this new approach to education is effective—the plethora of “no significant difference” studies largely render that question moot (see Russell, 1999, 2002 for hundreds of examples). Rather, greater attention should be given to ensuring that individual courses are pedagogically effective, and traditional faculty are trained to become quality online instructors.

In their 2000 report, *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education*, the researchers at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) identified 24 benchmarks for ensuring effective online education. Among the faculty support benchmarks were the following:

- “Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction and are assessed during the process” (p. 37).
- “Instructor training and assistance, including peer mentoring, continues through the progression of the online course” (p. 3).

Reliance upon student and faculty self-reporting instruments as the sole forms of evaluation are particularly problematic since the online learning environment is significantly less familiar to participants than the classroom. Such unfamiliarity is likely to result in feedback which by itself is ill-suited to meeting these quality benchmarks. Incorporating peer mentoring or coaching into the instructors’ training and support plan may enhance initial experiences with the online environment, which may contribute to improved teaching effectiveness. Furthermore, the use of peer coaching as a means of regular professional development will encourage faculty toward continual improvement of their online pedagogical strategies in light of increasing student and technological sophistication.

## Changing Faculty Roles

### Current Faculty Perspectives

In order to understand the current state of online teaching and the environment in which such a peer coaching model would be implemented, surveys addressing technological proficiency and online pedagogy were administered to the faculty at a private university in the American Southeast. This university offers multiple degree programs, primarily graduate degrees, through asynchronous online learning. The majority of online classes are taught by the same full-time faculty who teach on campus. Over 90% of the full-time faculty responded to surveys about technological proficiency and the pedagogical uses of technology.

There were three technologies with which the majority of faculty respondents indicated that they were comfortable: finding information on the World Wide Web, using Blackboard, and creating and using PowerPoint presentations. Faculty identified a number of
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