Chapter 8

Structuring Personalized Faculty Development Programming With Autonomy–Support and Microcredentials

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the theoretical foundations and practical considerations necessary for instructional leaders to improve student retention in higher education online courses by improving training of online instructors using autonomy-supportive principles. To improve instructional practice, faculty development programming should focus on the specific needs of online instructors by providing personalized learning opportunities and reflection. Using self-determination theory as a framework, the psychological needs of instructors engaging in faculty development can be addressed through autonomy (personalization), competence (achievement), and relatedness (support). The authors recommend utilizing digital badges or microcredentials to scaffold programming, including a three-tiered system of badging that builds toward a culminating credential. Autonomy-supportive faculty development programming will empower instructors to improve teaching practice, and better engage online students.

INTRODUCTION

Greater attention is being paid to online courses in higher education as student enrollments continue to trend upward year after year, however, concern exists among higher education leaders who identify low retention rates as a significant barrier to the further expansion of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2015). The ability for instructors to engage their students, facilitate discussions with peers, and support students toward successful learning outcomes is paramount. Consistently, students identify the social
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presence aspects of online courses, or the interaction between instructor and student, and interactions among students, as the most important factors to scaffold student success in online courses (McIsaac, Blocher, Mahes, & Vrasidas, 1999; Cho & Kim, 2013). However, many online instructors lack formal training on how to teach or facilitate online courses. As a result, instructional leaders at both doctoral and research institutions recently identified teaching in online and distance environments as the top issue that will need to be addressed with faculty over the coming years (Beach, Sorcinelli, Austin, & Rivard, 2016). Fortunately, an increasing number of instructional leaders in faculty development are situated in positions at their institutions to directly impact the adoption and implementation of formal online instructor training.

To begin addressing teaching in online environments, faculty development offerings should be focused on training instructors in online pedagogical practice and how to interact with students in asynchronous and digital learning environments. This requires the instructors to consider delivery of lecture content, providing formative feedback on quizzes and assignments, and facilitating interactions in online discussion forums. Instructional leaders that have placed a focus on the training of online instructors through faculty development find that teaching improves and student satisfaction levels of the overall online course experience increase (Chaloux & Miller, 2014; Kane, Shaw, Pang, Salley, & Snider, 2016; McAvinia, Donnelly, McDonnell, Hanratty, & Harvey, 2015). In addition to the increase in student satisfaction, the improvement of course design and course facilitation also leads to increased rates of student retention overall (Mancini, Cipher, & Ganji, 2018; Rovai, 2007).

It can be difficult to get online instructors to commit to synchronous training and faculty development offerings at a specific time and place, however, an increasing number of institutions are utilizing asynchronous means to deliver these trainings in a more convenient format for working professionals. As instructors engage with digital content, similar to their online students, instructional leaders cannot measure their engagement by merely tracking “seat time” or hours of attendance, as is typically done in face-to-face workshops or trainings. If instructional leaders are to expect online instructors to improve their practice, a paradigm shift in faculty development is needed as well. A growing number of institutions are beginning to track teaching improvement through the reflection and evidence of implementation from the learners (in this case the learners would be online instructors). One way to track this type of asynchronous engagement in faculty development programming is through the use of microcredentials or digital badges. Digital badging can be used as the mechanism for collecting and recording learning artifacts, reflections on teaching improvement, and tracking teaching improvement over time (Fontichiaro & Elkordy, 2016), and can be particularly beneficial in faculty development programming (Chen, Lowenthal, Bauer, Heaps, & Nielsen, 2017). As instructional leaders provide teaching improvement activities for online instructors in asynchronous learning environments, digital badges or microcredentials can be leveraged as a means for online instructors to keep a record of what they are learning in the form of reflection.

Student retention in online higher education courses needs to be improved for institutions to successfully move forward in the 21st century. To address this issue, instructional leaders need to provide motivational learning environments for instructors to engage in improved faculty development programming specifically relevant for online instructors. Thus, instructional leaders must find ways to make training relevant for online instructors and implement more effective ways of tracking teaching improvement. This chapter explores how faculty development programming focused on supporting the intrinsic motivation of online instructors can improve teaching practice by providing a learning environment for professionals that encourages personalized learning and reflection. In addition, recommendations are
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