Training Teachers to Teach Online

The Importance of Certification for Online Instructors

With the advent of online classes, learning no longer occurs exclusively inside conventional brick and mortar schools. Online learning has created exciting new opportunities for both students, whose life- or learning styles may not be compatible with traditional learning environments, and teachers, whose adoption of new education technologies allows them to expand the scope of their teaching and interact with more students in innovative ways on flexible schedules.

A DIFFICULT ADJUSTMENT

Teachers who begin online teaching believing they may simply transplant their face-to-face teaching strategies to the Internet soon discover the new learning environment presents unique challenges. And when they seek guidance from school or school district administrators, they often find a paucity of support or training opportunities. According to a study by the University of Central Florida, “If an institution asks educators to teach online, but does not provide adequate training and support, the quality of online course materials and delivery may be jeopardized” (Lee and Hirumi, 2004). In such situations, school leaders may conclude that online learning doesn’t work when, in fact, the issue is a lack of training.
MISCONCEPTIONS
The primary obstacles for traditional educators who attempt online teaching are fundamental misconceptions about this new education medium. Assumptions, for example, that online courses are easier to teach than traditional classes, or that effective classroom teaching automatically translates to effective online teaching are simply wrong. The North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) presents the issue this way: “Because the content can be loaded into a course management system, such as Blackboard, eCollege or Moodle, there is the misconception that... little teaching is required, and students can learn without supervision” (Davis, Rose and NACOL Research Committee Working Group, 2007).

Online courses are best for students who are highly self-motivated and have good writing skills. However, just because a student performs well in a face-to-face setting, there is no guarantee he/she will succeed online. Similarly, teachers and counselors should not assume that the online classroom will provide an easier alternative for a student who does not thrive in a traditional learning setting (Watson, 2007).

COMMUNICATION
Online courses require teachers to rethink their methods of communication. In online and distance-learning courses in which teacher-student communication is text-based, for example, teachers and students soon learn not only how much time such methods require, but also how difficult clear communication becomes without the benefit of facial expressions, body language, and voice inflections. Teachers must master new techniques, such as online forums, to foster class discussions. Even methods of communication that allow online interaction between students and
teachers (a.k.a. “synchronous” methods) require training and understanding to employ effectively. According to Davis, et al., “Synchronous technologies, including videoconferencing, change the nature of communication between the teacher and students more than if they were physically in the same classroom. Anyone who is working with virtual schooling needs to understand and experience these differences” (2007).

Online courses attract learners from a variety of backgrounds who possess a wide variety of learning styles and abilities. In face-to-face situations, instructors are able to make certain assumptions regarding their students’ learning abilities. In the online environment, no opportunities exist to make such eye-to-eye judgments (Davis, et al., 2007).

Today’s students have grown up with high-powered computers and instant access to information via the Internet. Many teachers, however, are either not familiar with these new technologies or have not been prepared to effectively integrate them into their teaching. The National Education Association states in its Guide to Teaching Online Courses, “...while young people going into teaching today are themselves members of the millennial generation, their teacher preparation programs rarely include courses either about online teaching, or conducted through distance learning...Without modeling of effective online teaching, most of the 86,000 new teachers who enter the profession each year begin without online teaching skills in their professional repertoire” (2006).
With its Virtual Public School, North Carolina joins states like Florida and Idaho in sponsoring a state-led online learning program. Factor in that free, open-source learning management systems like Moodle or Sakai make professional-level online course delivery available to every school, and the demand for online teachers has never been higher. If teachers, however, lack the requisite training to effectively teach online, schools run the risk of conducting poor-quality courses, or providing evidence to naysayers who maintain that online learning is merely an educational fad. Training leads to success in the classroom and success translates into teacher engagement.

**ONLINE TEACHING CERTIFICATION**

Online teaching requires a different skill-set than face-to-face teaching and school leaders must ensure teachers receive standards-based professional development before being allowed to teach an online course. With proper training, teachers become sensitive to a student learning styles and comfortable with the communication techniques necessary to successfully engage students (Davis, et al., 2007).

Instructors who have earned a certificate in online instruction will enjoy career advantages over those who have not. Encouraging teachers to earn online certification gives administrators and parents confidence that instructors are ready for the challenges particular to teaching online. The National Education Association’s...
“Guide to Teaching Online Courses” states, “It is essential that educators who instruct online are not only proficient in their subject area, but also specifically prepared for the unique challenges of online instruction, and adequately supported in their online pedagogy. For that reason, online teachers should maintain licenses, credentials and other documentation that arm school leaders with necessary evidence of their qualifications (2006, emphasis added).

WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Many programs claim to instruct teachers in effective online pedagogy. A good program should:

- be based on a proven model of effective online teaching;
- focus on online communication between teachers and students;
- emphasize the students’ perspective;
- stress the importance of collaboration;
- emphasize diversified learning styles—for example those of English language learners or students with disabilities;
- emphasize the cutting-edge educational technology today’s students expect and enjoy;
- encourage teachers to explore their interests and tailor their instruction to their students’ needs; and
- include an active mentoring component.
CAROLINA ONLINE TEACHER PROGRAM (COLT)

LEARN NC has been a leading provider of online professional development for North Carolina teachers since 2001. LEARN NC’s Carolina Online Teacher (COLT) program engages a network of experienced online instructors and employs research-based online pedagogical techniques and strategies to help teachers gain the skills necessary to succeed in this new learning environment.

The COLT program comprises four required courses, two electives and a practicum in online teaching in which participants are guided through their first online teaching experience by a veteran online mentor. All COLT program courses are completely online. Program participants:

- experience online learning from a student’s perspective;
- complete coursework on a schedule most convenient for them;
- learn effective collaboration techniques for the online environment; and
- learn strategies for differentiating instruction to accommodate the different learning styles of their students.

To discover how your teachers may earn a certificate in online instruction through the COLT program, contact Ross White at ross@learnnc.org or go to www.learnnc.org.
WORKS CITED


