3 Ways to Get Faculty Up to Speed With Technology

- By Dian Schaffhauser 06/04/14
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When it comes to teaching with technology, or even teaching in general, most faculty could use a little support. To provide the resources, ideas and inspiration faculty need to become better instructors, higher education institutions typically create some form of Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), devoted to fostering teaching excellence across the board.

But it's not enough for these organizations to help individual instructors learn how to deliver their courses, engage students and manage their classrooms. These days, much of a CTL's attention is directed to helping faculty evolve their instructional practices for a technology-laden learning environment -- whether for online or hybrid courses; as part of active learning programs; or to better exploit the benefits of technical resources such as learning management systems.

Here, three CTLs share best practices they're perfecting to help faculty get up to speed with technology.

1) Create a Self-Service Resource Library

The **University of South Carolina** has a main campus, four regional campuses, a medical school with two campuses and various professional schools. That's one of the reasons the Center for Teaching Excellence developed a major online presence for its operation, says Director Christy Friend. "It was impossible to effectively reach all the clientele that our CTE serves from one office on the main campus that's open basically from 8:30 to 5." Plus, as the university expands its use of online and blended courses, "We're seeing a much bigger demand from faculty interested in finding resources that will help them connect with best practices and trends," she added. "That's one area that has really exploded over the last year."

The CTE's online resources page includes syllabus templates; a video archive with recordings of workshops and seminars; and teaching guides packed with nuggets of advice to help people learn more about relevant subjects. For example, "5 Ways to Build Community with Technology" offers ideas for developing a class community with wikis, blogs, Blackboard, audio/video feedback and classroom response systems. One- and two-minute video clips feature instructors and instructional designers giving their own tips.

Another popular resource, created by Aisha Haynes, the university's program manager for distributed learning, pulls together some of the most successful templates and online course elements into a "model course," to help faculty members see what a compelling online course looks like. "Faculty can enroll in this mock course and sort of shop around and look at the various pedagogical strategies and graphic interfaces and elements that they might find useful or interesting as they start thinking about designing their own online courses," explained Friend.

The library also features a widely used set of accessible syllabus templates that embed all of the features that make them useable by screen readers (text-to-speech software programs that allow users to listen to words displayed on a screen). "By putting those features into the document, any faculty member on campus can pull the template, put their course information into it and know that that's going to be accessible to students with disabilities," said Friend. "It's kind of neat how a very pedestrian document like that posted on the Web site, in fact, yields all these courses embedding accessibility in a way that is quicker and easier on the faculty than everybody having to figure out how to do that on

their own."

2) Provide Training in Course Redesign

Purdue University's Office of the Provost was determined to see what it could do to improve student success rates in its large enrollment courses, of which the university has about 300. In 2010, it launched the cross-divisional "Instruction Matters/Purdue Academic Course Transformation" (IMPACT) program to help faculty to redesign their foundational courses through the use of research findings on student-centered teaching and learning. Faculty are guided through the redesign process in a semester-long program led by staff from IT's Teaching and Learning Technologies (TLT) group, Purdue Libraries and Purdue's Center for Instructional Excellence. The training includes weekly faculty learning community sessions as well as individual consultations.

Over the weeks of the semester, instructors learn about and develop three essential elements as part of their course redesign: an active learning environment, learning objectives and an assessment map that ties back to the learning objectives, said Donalee Attardo, TLT's director of instructional development.

They're placed in an active learning space that includes laptops, interactive whiteboards and scale-up tables. "We try to do a lot of active learning during those sessions so they get a lot more out of it and they get to experience what it's like for the students as well," she pointed out. During each session, faculty work as individuals or in small groups. While most of the action happens face-to-face, they also get onto Blackboard for various activities such as online discussions.

To kick off the first few cohorts and develop some early success stories, IMPACT went after tenured faculty who had worked with technology before. Each participant is paid $10,000. Their commitment is to redesign their course within the next two semesters and deliver it at least three times, "so we get some sustainability out of the work they've done," said Attardo.

Although the results of the faculty learning community are still in formulation, at least one instructor has seen uptake with her redesign efforts. Ellen Gundlach teaches a "Statistics and Society" course that traditionally drew 400 students in a large lecture hall with "passive" recitations and teacher assistants recapping lectures. She also ran a fully online version of the course with between 40 and 80 students. DFW rates (the percentage of failing grades and withdrawals) were consistently above 20 percent and student engagement was classified as "low."

Following IMPACT, Gundlach reworked the class structure with three forms: a 350-student lecture, an 80-student online version and a 60-student hybrid format. Each of the courses added active elements that helped the students to understand statistics through experimentation and stories instead of calculations alone. Each section included the same weekly 15-minute quiz, and everybody came together on campus for the midterm and final. Not only did the exam scores increase almost entirely across the board, but the class saw a big drop in the DFW rate, and students gave the course higher ratings.

Through faculty surveys, Purdue has seen two positive outcomes from IMPACT. First, participants have found it "very valuable to speak to other faculty on campus about their teaching." As Attardo explained, "It's an opportunity they don't seem to get very much. They find that really exciting."

Second, faculty have reported that IMPACT has made them more intentional about what and how they teach. It has also opened up more options to their students for learning and made the learning experience better. "What we're finding with the active learning environment," said Attardo, "is if there's active learning going on, then student competency and confidence rises, and so does student success."

3) Build a Community of Practice

Open SUNY, a systemwide initiative to deliver online learning services to all 64 **State University of New York** campuses, is working to take SUNY's online learning to the next level in terms of reach and scale. That requires scrutinizing policies from the student perspective, on everything from the mundane (do mandatory parking fees make sense when you're only taking online courses?) to the vital (how does a school deliver health services to students who never set foot on campus?). The shift also requires ramping up faculty professional development in online teaching and learning. To meet those needs, SUNY is in the midst of designing a new Center for Online Teaching Excellence (COTE) with four areas of focus: a community of practice, research and innovation, competency development and course support.

The community of practice team is developing a formalized peer-to-peer network that identifies where participants are on the continuum of expertise in online teaching and learning. Those who participate are known as "Open SUNY Fellows," and the role isn't limited just to faculty -- it also includes instructional designers, librarians and administrators.

"The scope of what Open SUNY aims to do in terms of the development of online programs is so huge, we can't hire enough people to support that," said Associate Director Alexandra Pickett. "If we can use our own community who have expertise, that will help us to be able to scale our efforts in a systematic, consistent way with attention to standards and elements of quality."

Since the new community of practice was launched in January, at least 800 people have applied to join the Fellows program -- many of them from somewhat unexpected positions, such as professor emeritus and multimedia technologist. "One of the things we're doing in version two is updating the benefits and the roles to be able to accommodate people who emerged as being interested in participating," noted Pickett. "We're figuring that out."

The various roles come with benefits and commitments. For example, somebody who signs up as an "exemplar online faculty" is expected to "give back to the whole community in some way by sharing effective practices." That might take the form of mentoring "at least two peers starting their online education journey" by coaching them through the design and delivery of their courses; it might involve participating in a webinar, white paper or resource on effective practice; or it might call for contributions in online and face-to-face forums, answering peer questions.

In return, an instructor could earn "release time" for faculty training development; be eligible for online learning or online educator of the year awards; or gain priority inclusion in campus online strategic advisory groups. COTE is also developing a certification and digital badging system to help people understand where they are in terms of their competency development. In the future, some of those credentials could also lead to master-level credit for those seeking professional advancement.

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