Certification in Distance Learning for Online Instructors: Exploration of the Creation of an Organic Model for a Research-Based State Institution

Lee Graham
University of Missouri
grahamlee@umkc.edu

Lisa Thomas
Graceland University
lthomas@graceland.edu

Abstract

The traditional and most highly utilized manner of instruction in the online Certification Course focuses on training instructors to teach a pre-designed course with common features. This model limits instructional options for faculty to those which are available in the course. Faculty who are accustomed to academic freedom and autonomy may not be willing to accept this production model or this model of instruction for online certification courses, because of the limitations that these models impose. This article explores the possibility of creating an online Certification Course which utilizes the expertise of the faculty and the techniques of brain-based learning and differentiated instruction. There is the possibility that this Organic approach to online Certification could authentically assist faculty in integrating technology into existing courses and/or new online courses at research-based institutions. Faculty members who have completed the courses to this point have made sweeping changes in their online programs and have gained confidence in online teaching and learning.

Models of existing Certification for Teaching and Learning for Faculty

As part of an analysis of current educational trends, many researchers have compared the state of higher education to the possible imminent death of the newspaper. Because software developers have afforded the higher education environment a plethora of online teaching and learning tools, with little vision as to the most effective manner in which to integrate those tools into existing online or blended courses, online educators run the risk of being viewed by knowledgeable consumers as novices in their craft (Carey, 2009). In a country where over 20% of higher education students are enrolled in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2008), it is of paramount importance to "get it right" in terms of professional development for higher education faculty (Schifter, 2006). Within the confines of higher education systems, the increasing consumer demand for online courses and the structures through which faculty are provided professional development to meet those needs seem to be at odds.

Certification Courses in online teaching and learning have been a dominant means for preparing faculty to teach online at private for-profit universities, as well as for state universities and private not for profits. In the past at the not for profit university this certification presented itself in a range of media and requirements. It could require 40 hours of face to face preparation or it might require the completion of several courses (Bond & Finney, 2000; Schifter, 2006).

The private for-profit institutions created scalable one-size-fits-all certifications (Mangan, 2010). This is a business model that makes a great deal of sense for the for-profit institution whose instructors are adjunct, and whose courses are created, approved, and not permitted to be customized thereafter. The Certification Courses offered by private for-profit universities are intended to train one in pedagogy, design and course tools and to at least minimally engage the potential online instructor in a discussion of best practices according to the prescripts of the for-profit's course delivery model. In view of the nature of courses that

were offered, this type of course provided excellent training for the model of instruction used in the program.

Some online training courses are offered asynchronously online without an instructor present. This model of presenting information about online teaching and learning pedagogy seems to be a perfect example of "do as I say not as I do." While asynchronous Computer Based Instruction (CBI) models are inexpensive to create and to use, the level of ineffectiveness in "transferring knowledge" to the learner has been highlighted in the literature and has led to a more collaborative and creative approach to content mastery (Tapscott & Williams, 2010; Becker, et. al, 2009). Therefore, not only does the model not match with best practices, it actually reinforces the idea that faculty may continue to "tell" people how to do things, and expect a that a quiz during intermittent units and/or at the end of the CBI will prove that this information has actually been integrated into the teacher's knowledge base, when cognitive science proves to us that this is without question, false. Cognitive science asserts, among other things, that the modeling we provide while teaching speaks far more loudly than the material itself (ODonnell; 2001; Jensen, 2005; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

The Industrial Paradigm Meets the Organic Truths

A non-profit research institution in the Midwest has launched an initiative whose goal is to attempt to gain faculty buy-in to online teaching and learning. Rather than creating the distance learning aspect of this institution as a centralized unit apart from the university, the administration prefers to integrate it into the current university system in order to change teaching pedagogy. In this way, administrators hope to integrate online teaching and learning with existing university programming to mesh with the needs of diverse, millennial learners who may require a different route to education which often includes nontraditional educational media (Amant, 2007). Therefore the instructional designer for this institution recognized a need for a different kind of certification course in order to serve the population of this campus. The industrial model that created the aligned perfection of the "class in a box" would not fit the institution's goal, and this created a dilemma for the institutional designer.

This self-study will focus on the development of an organic Certification Course which is created solely to develop the abilities of faculty interested in online teaching and learning. In addition, the study will reveal the qualitative reported success of faculty integration of new models of online teaching and learning into the university system, as well as attitudes toward use of technology in the face to face and online classroom as a result of completion of this certification course.

Facing the Problem in an Organic Manner

When confronted with the goals of the university pertaining to a change in faculty instruction in the face to face classroom through the understanding of online teaching and learning pedagogy, the instructional designer was presented with a dilemma: the Certification Course to be designed would have to be quite different from others that she had designed in the past. It soon became evident that incorporating a distance learning culture into a research-based university with few online programs and/or courses required a difficult mind shift from the model of the centralized distance learning unit. The centralized distance learning model to which the instructional designer was accustomed primarily used adjuncts, and could depend on a well-structured model targeted toward the program in which the course would be taught. In contrast with adjuncts whose scholarly work requirements rested elsewhere, faculty at the research-based institution were engaged in writing books, doing their own grant funded research, and some faculty viewed teaching as a peripheral task.

While the instructional designer wished to create a needs assessment, she was informed that numerous needs assessments had been completed; however, these assessments did not answer the questions of the instructional designer concerning the specific needs of faculty wishing to teach online. Therefore, because of the prior proliferation of needs assessments and SWOT analyses, an informal and unimposing needs assessment was required. A group was identified through a series of workshops on online teaching and learning delivered by the instructional designer during the spring semester of 2009. These faculty members were interested in improving their online teaching and learning techniques. The workshops enabled the instructional designer to gain an understanding of the culture of the university and the needs of the faculty who were interested in online teaching and learning.

In addition, as a part of the informal needs assessment, the instructional designer met with deans and division chairs as well as entire departments to discuss their questions and inclinations concerning online teaching and learning. Meetings with Law School faculty and administration, Medical School faculty, and Arts and Sciences administrators revealed that many faculty members depended on a teacher-centered model of education. Class sizes were sometimes very large – beyond one hundred students– and many faculty members in these courses depended on lecture as their primary method of teaching in their face to face classrooms. Finally, there was a rift in faculty in terms of the rigor and efficacy of online courses, in comparison with the rigor and efficacy of the learning experience to a face to face class. Some of this controversy revolved around the lack of rigor that had indeed existed when online courses had initially been created and delivered as somewhat glorified independent study courses with very little instructor interaction.

In addition, the instructional designer met with the School of Nursing faculty who had been involved in online teaching and learning for many years. These faculty members were extremely innovative and were designing state of the art online learning techniques through synchronous and asynchronous delivery. The instructional designer engaged with the School of Nursing faculty to identify (through data collection) the most common course structure used in their programs, and gained consensus to create a unified course structure that that would be presented to students throughout all nursing programs and courses. This modification enhanced the consistency of nursing courses, and insured a common course format for all nursing students. This structure was then approved by the curriculum committee, and the instructional designer spent the summer working with nursing faculty to adapt their classes to this unified course structure.

This may have been the most important aspect of the needs assessment. *Through this activity the instructional designer realized that she could not impose a distance learning model, complete with charts, advance organizers, and research to these faculty members who already possessed a different schema of unquestionably successful online teaching and learning.* This instructional designer must admit that this was her first approach to the problem. She undertook this approach during the needs assessment in a very gentle manner. This approach was unwelcome and flatly unsuccessful.Working with the faculty who were already well-versed in their individual model of successful distance learning reminded the instructional designer of the youth of the discipline, the lack of one successful prototype which worked across universities, and the ingenuity still required to allow online programs to develop and grow in enrollment. While humbling, it was a necessary experience that the instructional designer be reminded that in distance learning, we lack a perfect model.

The instructional designer realized that it would be most effective to design an organic approach to the mass training of faculty who were a part of this research-based institution. It was clear that with no policies currently in place – with no standards or guidelines which could be imposed upon the faculty (in great contrast to the centralized model of distance learning delivery encountered at other institutions), the solution to the problem lay with changing the belief system of the faculty who had little or no experience with online teaching and learning, and capitalizing upon the expertise that already existed at the university. Therefore, the designer decided on an *organic* approach to the Certification Course.

The Oxford English Dictionary includes a definition of *organic* as “producing or characterized by structural or other pathological change in an organ or organs (now esp. the brain)” (2010). The instructional designer was aware that the attempt to be made was an attempt to change the schema of the brain; to include instructional design as a way of thinking and being in terms of course design; and to add a sense of wonder, confidence, and fearlessness into the schema in order for faculty to design and/or improve upon online courses in an ongoing manner without the assistance of (or with minimal assistance from) an instructional designer.

Through the informal needs assessment, she realized that unlike the other institutions for which she had designed certification courses, this institution would require an approach that:

1. Harnessed enrollees’ current understanding of online learning and made it available to their colleagues
2. Manifested an overt level of respect and deference to the processes in use in the

university structure particularly in terms of faculty rights and freedom
3. Laid the structure for faculty exploration and innovation along the lines of current best practices in online teaching and learning without *requiring* adherence to these practices
4. Allowed the faculty member to explore and grow within an environment that created challenges in areas about which interest was expressed: assessment, copyright, intellectual property, and Web 2.0 tools that had been newly added to the CMS
5. Modeled best practice in online teaching and learning

The university model dictated that faculty could not be required to complete this Certification Course prior to online teaching, which caused another dilemma. In private for-profit universities, as well as in the centralized distance learning unit, successful completion of Certification Courses is required prior to online teaching. However, in taking an organic approach to the design of the course, the instructional designer recognized that the motivation which existed among the faculty should be mined, and that a grass-roots effort to spread that motivation and enthusiasm should be nurtured in order to encourage others – who were not required to take this course, but who would benefit from it – to choose to enroll.

Therefore, the instructional designer targeted two groups who represented leaders in online teaching and learning in the university, and who were most interested in increasing their understanding of online teaching and learning: the School of Nursing and the School of Education. The first certification course was advertised as a 3 week experience, during which faculty should plan to spend 5-8 hours per week working on course activities. In addition the course was advertised as a graded experience which would result in a certificate for completion.

Course participants could be experienced distance learning instructors or novices in online instruction. The course was advertised as an experience that would further pedagogical knowledge in best practices in teaching and learning online regardless of the participant's level of expertise. In addition, the goal of the course was advertised as Certification in Online Teaching and Learning and increased confidence in teaching and learning online. The ultimate creation of a course was not a goal, nor a requirement of the Certification Course.

The first course attracted 12 enrollees. One hundred percent of the enrollees were instructors in an online course. Of the 12 enrollees who started the course, only four completed the course. The instructional designer questioned the design of the course, and wondered whether this was the reason for the high attrition rate; however, upon being surveyed, those who dropped out simply stated that they could not schedule time to be in the course four days a week, or that other duties kept them from completion of the course.

Course Activities

The first week of the course consisted of the group introducing themselves to their classmates and welcoming each other to the class. To the surprise of the instructional designer, many in the course did not know their classmates, and this was an authentic and informative experience for faculty. In addition, course members used library resources available from off campus to locate peer reviewed articles concerning best practices in teaching and learning in their discipline, and organized these posts using a wiki. This was the one aspect of the course that the faculty in the course enjoyed most. In addition, faculty worked in groups to create a group-based unit of instruction that could be used in the online course. Focus on alignment of objectives and assessment was the primary purpose of this section of the course, and faculty received a great deal of assistance, reporting increased understanding as a result of this activity.

The second course had fifteen enrollees, of which five completed the course. Again, the reason given for lack of completion of the course was the time commitment, and the inability to schedule time to go into the course. Activities remained the same; however, the group activity was changed so that groups supported each other in creating individual units for their group activities. Faculty enjoyed this much more than the group created unit in the prior Certification Course.

One on one mentoring was available in both Certification Courses. The facilitator posted a well-formed welcome to the course, and provided opportunities for instructor-student, student-student, and student-

content feedback. The facilitator remained visible, and answered all questions posted within 24 hours. The facilitator provided formative feedback on assignments which included a well-designed welcome to the course, a discussion of the student introductions to each other within the course, the importance of group work to decrease attrition in the course, and a review of intellectual property, copyright issues, the Quality Matters rubric, as well as the United States Distance Learning Association criteria for awards in best practice for online teaching and learning and course programming.

Other than those resources, the faculty members located resources of interest, shared them via the wiki, and discussed these resources with each other. One page of the wiki which focused on the sharing of rubrics for participation in the online course that faculty found online, and other rubrics for the measurement of projects created online was reported to be a much used resource in the creation of courses, not only for the faculty member, but for the program in which the faculty member taught.

The instructional designer included a weekly reflection for the three-week course, and gained information concerning the course design, the desired changes faculty would like, and the activities that were deemed most successful through those reflections. A second round of certification courses was created according to the feedback from the faculty in the first and second courses.

These changes included “How do I” videos, orientation videos at the beginning of each week which included instructions concerning the tools used in the class. In addition, more opportunities were offered for self-exploration and synthesis of information through wikis. The creation of the unit was changed to a one-week experience. Each faculty member was also provided with a “sandbox” site in which to create a course, if they wished, during the Certification Course. Minimal requirements which had initially been a part of the course (the introduction to the course and the creation of a space for students to introduce themselves to each other) were made a part of the sandbox activities. The sandbox was emphasized as a place for faculty members to “play” and explore tools, or create activities.

Results

Those who finished the first Certification Course impacted their fellow faculty in a positive way. One faculty member and administrator noted at the end of this course that *she had been thinking of this course day and night for three weeks, and while prior to beginning the course she did not believe that that some undergraduate courses could be taught online because of the rigor required in the courses, she now believed that they could.* Immediately after this course, the School of Nursing faculty, who had been debating putting their BSN program online for years, turned in a request to the Higher Learning Commission for approval of a fully online BSN program. This action was taken in no small part because of the member of the Certification Course who made that comment, and her colleagues who had engaged in this course with her.

Those who finished the second Certification Course again impacted their fellow faculty in a positive manner. In the School of Education, a program adopted a common course design which was inspired by the presentation of material in the certification course. The director of the program, who had been through the Certification Course, worked with the instructional designer closely to create a consistent syllabus for online courses in the program, which was approved by faculty in the School of Education. Again, without the support of her colleagues and her experience in the course, this forward movement very likely would not have occurred.

The confidence and affirmation provided to these individuals through the course could not have been “taught” to them through CBI or a “Course in a Box” approach to Faculty Certification. The faculty members had been to conferences and had heard the rhetoric. They had seen what other universities had attempted. But the influence of a community of like-minded learners within their own departments and institution, and the modeling of a course which did what they would like to do, as well as their engagement in that course and the creation of the course materials (e.g. the course wiki) made a difference in their thinking. Their schema was altered. They now believed in their own ability to accomplish this task, and to make the arguments and persuasions necessary to defend their proposals. They gained confidence and expertise. Not only could they go into a course and teach it, they could use their newly acquired skills to show others how to teach in this manner.

Since the offering of the certification course, the university offered a grant for departments who wished to design online programs. Those grants were awarded, and individuals who were recruited to teach the online courses are working with the instructional designer to insure that the courses are of quality. However, in addition to the individuals who received grant monies, other individuals have asked for assistance in online design for high enrollment courses which can be used in the programs that were funded, but which were not included in the funding. While these individuals are not being awarded dollars or release time for the development of their programs, they are excited about the promise of online teaching and learning. They have heard of this promise for years, but are now encouraged to move forward with online teaching and learning because of the soft whispering in the halls that shares that we now have support, and while we are guided, we are not being told what to do.

The new offerings for the certification course were advertised in October. This advertisement was made to the entire university. To date, four certification courses have been offered, and there have been requests for ongoing certification courses throughout the summer.

For optimal one to one work with faculty, the instructional designer limits the class size to 19 faculty members. Overall, eighty faculty members have signed up for the Certification Course, and of those, fifty completed the course. While the course load requires five to eight hours of work per week, faculty members have demonstrated that they would like to participate and reap the benefits of the course. A heavier emphasis on group work in the first and second weeks seemed to positively impact persistence in the course.

The great majority of faculty who completed the certification course were already engaged in teaching online courses. While new course creation was not a goal of the certification course, thirteen new courses were created by faculty who completed the course. Certainly this new course creation cannot be solely attributed to the self-efficacy of faculty who completed the course; however, the interaction of the instructional designer in terms of course review indicates that faculty members creating new courses were influenced by the design of the certification course, and worked to emulate the aspects of the course that they found most effective in their new designs.

In addition, faculty revised courses as they went through the certification course. They drew on the expertise of the learners accompanying them in this virtual learning experience, as well as on the instructional designer. Without being solicited, faculty asked for suggestions, bounced ideas off of their colleagues, and created course artifacts which could be (and in many cases were) used in their existing courses.

Conclusion

It is possible that instructional designers as a group have underestimated faculty members during our formative experiences in forwarding the objectives of online teaching and learning. It is possible that if faculty members are given the opportunity to participate in Certification Courses which provide the proper modeling and course activities allowing engagement in differentiated and brain-based learning techniques, they will adopt these techniques as their own. This in turn will produce the desired effect for administration through a grass-roots change in the thought processes of faculty.

Administrators may wish to take the following steps to support the perpetuation of the organic Model of distance learning in their institutions:

1. Provide faculty with frequent low-risk and high-recognition professional development opportunities.
2. Insure that Department Chairs and Deans do not show pedagogical preference to classes offered in a face to face format, and that online faculty members are recognized or are at the very least not penalized for their professional development and risk-taking activities online.
3. Provide frequent opportunities for showcasing faculty pedagogical successes in the online environment.
4. Provide opportunities for faculty to lead informal and formal faculty development sessions to share what they have learned about their discipline in terms of online pedagogy.
5. Focus on data trends, as opposed to pre-and post-results. Data collection sources might include

student satisfaction surveys, faculty application of a quality course rubric to existing online courses, and the inclusion and acceptance of excellence in online pedagogy in promotion and tenure materials.

This organic approach to teaching online instructors in order to affect immediate change runs counter to everything that many instructional designers have been expected to do in the past. This instructional designer now believes that unless we begin to authentically teach faculty those things they do not know (rather than doing those things for them) and move away from a production model in terms of classes and instructors – we will have little success in reforming the attitudes of faculty in research-based institutions. These instructors are experts in their fields, and our position now shifts – as our position always shifts with the turn of each technological sway – to that of educator, role model, helper, and above all facilitator.

The Certification Courses that we have become accustomed to, and which have become a norm in our very young and ever changing discipline will likely need to change. Faculty will demand it. The Higher Learning Commission will likely demand it, and our roles will likely expand to the improvement of pedagogical skills not only in the online classroom, but in the face to face classroom as well. In the face of this challenge the university will confront the reality that instructional designers are dealing with accomplished faculty members in educational institutions, rather than products in a manufacturing facility. At this point, a focus on organic change will, through necessity, become a part of the instructional design skillset.

References

Allen, I., & Seaman, J. (2008). *Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States.* Needham: Sloan Consortium.

Amant, K. (2007). Online Education in an Age of Globalization: Foundational perspectives and practices for technical communication instruction and trainers. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 16*(1).

Becker, K. A., Krodel, K. M., Tucker, B. H., & Shenk, D. (2009). *Understanding and Engaging Under Resourced College Students.* Highland, TX: aha! Process, Inc.

Bond, S. L., & Finney, P. B. (2000, April). Certifying Teachers as Distance Learning Specialists. *T.H.E. Journal, 27*(9).

Carey, K. (2009). What Colleges Should Learn from Newspapers' Decline. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55-30.

Jensen, E. (2005). *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (Revised 2nd Edition ed.). Alexandia: ASCD.

Mangan, K. (2010). At the U. of Phoenix, Instructors Learn (Online) to Teach Online. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 57(11), B6-B7. Retrieved from EBSCO*host.*

O'Donnell, J. (2001). To Youth Camp, a Long Farewell. *Educause Review, 36*(6).

Oxford English Dictionary. (2010, November 11). Organic 2.a.

Schifter, C. C. (2006, Jan-June). Certification for Distance Education Faculty. *Information Technology Newsletter, 17*(1), 2-3.

Tapscott, D., & Williams, A. (2010). Innovating the 21st Century University: It's Time! *EDUCAUSE Review, 45*(1).

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design* (Expanded 2nd Edition ed.). Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.