Best Practices: A Triangulated Support Approach in Transitioning Faculty to Online Teaching

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Abstract

The English department at North Carolina State University faced a rapid, large-scale transition of a number of its professional writing courses from traditional classes to online courses. Recognizing that numerous barriers, including unresolved administrative issues, faculty resistance, and lack of training could impede this process, administrators and faculty members collaborated to ensure that appropriate resources, peer support, and adequate professional development were available for the success of this endeavor. This transition became an opportunity for professional development activities and for carefully orchestrated administrative and peer support. As a result, twenty of forty-two professional writing classes were delivered online in the fall of 2004, and twenty of forty classes are being delivered in spring 2005.

Introduction

The growing interest in distance and distributed education means higher education faculty are increasingly using, and expected to use, a variety of technologies to support instruction (Baldwin, 1998; Cornell, 1999; Gandolfo, 1998) . For faculty, the pressure to use technology in instruction comes not only from the bottom-up expectations of students, but from top-down administrative pressures resulting from school restructuring (Wilson, 1998). This article contains a discussion of the way in which administrators at North Carolina State University, a Research I land grant institution in Raleigh, NC, have dealt with a large-scale transition of a professional writing program from traditional classrooms to an online environment.

Background

In the fall of 2003, the College of Humanities and Social Science (CHASS) at NC State University made the decision to move a number of the English Department's professional writing

courses online by the following fall (2004). The professional writing program involves approximately 800 students a semester in junior-level technical-, business-, and science-writing courses. As a result, approximately ten faculty members faced the prospect of quickly transporting their professional writing classes from traditional classrooms into an online environment. Although several of these teachers had taught online before and several more had at least some experience putting their syllabi online, some were entirely unacquainted with online teaching and most were apprehensive about acquiring the knowledge and time to make the transition work.

Turning reluctant professional writing faculty members into completely web-based instructors in a short time period presented a significant challenge to administrators. The integration of online courses into existing programs forces changes in existing teaching methods and disrupts faculty who are comfortable with traditional classes. A variety of support is needed to assist faculty in making the transition (Katz, 2003) . Indeed, numerous studies and contemporary higher education articles cite faculty resistance, lack of administrative support, and lack of training as significant obstacles to the growth of distance education programs and other distributed learning initiatives (Jones, Lindner, Murphy, & Dooley, 2002; Lee & Lawson, 2001; Miller, Martineau, & Clark, 2000; Pajo & Wallace, 2001) .

Planning for Faculty Support

In order to meet this challenge, professional writing faculty members at NC State needed three things: administrative support, peer reassurance, and professional development opportunities. A number of key administrative support units and individuals worked collaboratively to ensure that appropriate resources, peer support, and adequate professional development were available for the success of this endeavor. The result was the creation of a triangulated support approach (Figure 1) that recognizes the value of addressing all three of these areas when planning for faculty support.

Figure 1. A Triangulated Faculty Support Approach
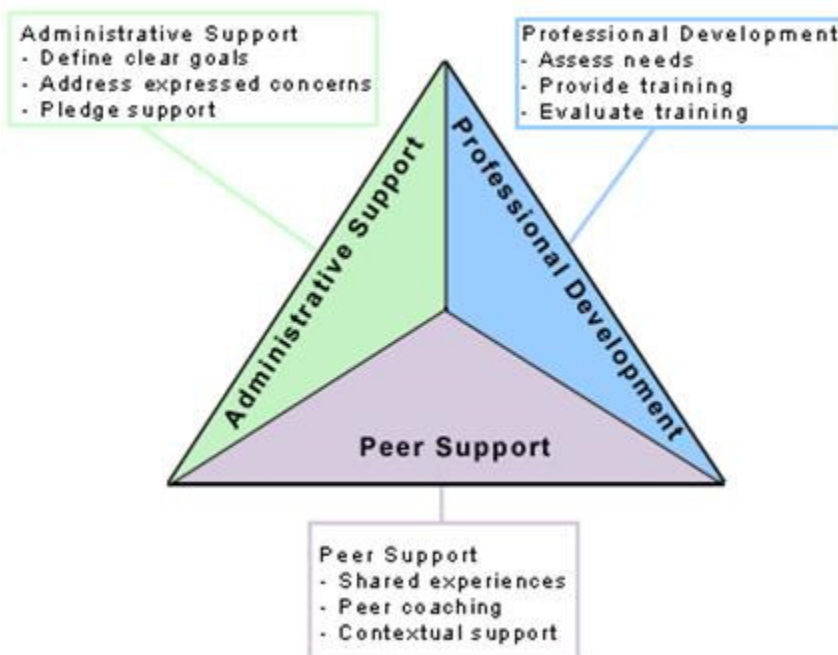
The rapid transition of the professional writing faculty from on campus to distance education

instructors, fraught with the possibilities of confusion and negativity, became an opportunity for professional development activities and for carefully orchestrated administrative and peer support. In the fall of 2004, twenty of forty-two professional writing classes moved online, and in the spring of 2005, twenty out of forty sections moved online.

Administrative Support

After the decision was made to move a number of the professional writing courses online, an array of units and programs worked together to establish a vision for the transition, deal with the budgetary concerns, and address pertinent faculty issues. At NC State, distance education is growing at a rapid pace. The Distance Education and Learning Technology Applications (DELTA) division coordinates the funding and production of all distance-based credit programs and courses for the university, and provides the integration and support of learning technologies, managing the university's online offerings and providing training in the application of learning technologies through various programs. DELTA has supported a number of University programs transitioning from face-to-face to online instruction, including Masters Degree programs in Engineering and Education. Currently, there are over 6000 students being served in 693 course sections through Distance Education and Flexible Access programs at NC State.

Defining the Goals of the Pilot Program

Working with DELTA, college and English Department leaders agreed to create a pilot program that would move a number of professional writing courses online. This pilot distance-education program would have two primary aims:

- to compare learning outcomes between campus-based and distance-education students and

- to assess the financial implications of removing an additional fee charged to full-time matriculated students who choose a distance-education course. Numerous meetings were held with NC State's Provost, Budget Office, Cashier's Office, and Registration and Records Office, and with the University of North Carolina system leadership to initiate this project and to work out the details of registration, billing, and funding.

The Professional Writing Director and Distance Education Director met to discuss assessment options. As a result of these meetings, the Professional Writing Program is currently engaged in an extensive formal assessment of the pilot program. Moreover, the Provost, the Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Head of the English Department, the Director of the Professional Writing program, DELTA, and other distance-education administrators provided funding for faculty stipends for online course development, that supported the development of common course materials in the virtual environment, and that provided general support for the program and assessment activities. This multi-year budget commitment provided stability and continuity for the program, its faculty, students, and support staff.

Addressing Concerns about Intellectual Property

Administrators also addressed some additional faculty concerns during the transition process. The issue of intellectual property and copyright was particularly pertinent to those professional writing faculty members who do not have permanent faculty appointments. To assure the portability of their intellectual property as invested in the creation of online courses, the Professional Writing Program Director, the Distance Education Director and the Scholarly

Communications Librarian met to discuss the issues, which resulted in a document presented to the university's Copyright Committee outlining the reasons why the professional writing faculty should retain ownership of their intellectual property. A favorable response to the request was subsequently received.

Pledging Support from the Beginning

The strong level of administrative support was clearly conveyed by representatives from CHASS and DELTA in the initial orientation meeting with professional writing departmental members, held in January 2004. This meeting was designed to garner professional writing faculty members' active participation in the transition. During this meeting, the Distance Education Director explained that training would be provided, and that while all of the campus-wide administrative support issues had not been addressed, they would be resolved during the process. Additionally, the Professional Writing Director provided an overview and purpose for the effort, addressing some of the initial concerns expressed by the professional writing faculty and indicating that there would be a high level of peer support available during this project. Since the lack of administrative support is often cited as a key barrier to adoption of technology by faculty members (Dooley, K.E. & Murphrey, T. P., 2000), the Professional Writing Director's presentation was critical in establishing the tone for the positive departmental support that could be expected by the participating faculty members.

Peer Support

Peer support has been noted as an important component in assisting faculty in developing and teaching online courses (Schauer, Rockwell, Fritz, & Marx, 1998). Peers can be powerful opinion leaders who sway their colleagues to see the benefits of and to utilize a classroom innovation (Rogers , 1995). In the English Department's Professional Writing Program, several key faculty members who were early adopters in teaching distance-education courses took the lead in providing individualized and structured support to their colleagues. These faculty members, who came to be known during professional development activities as the Professional Writing faculty mentors, were instrumental in providing support to colleagues who were beginning to move their traditional instructional practices to the online environment.

Sharing Experiences at Orientation

The level of peer support evident in this endeavor appeared during the initial orientation meeting with professional writing teachers. Following the overall introduction that pledged administrative support and professional development opportunities, two mentors gave a presentation describing a typical week in the life of an online instructor. This part of the presentation led to a comparison of traditional and online class elements, and a discussion of topics such as developing a syllabus for an online class, the major tasks of online teaching, time management, and the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching. Their presentation addressed some of the key issues in successful adoption of technology: relative advantage (how the innovation can be useful, or even better than current practice, for the potential adopter) and compatibility (the degree to which the potential adopter of the innovation perceives the innovation--in this case delivering a course online--to be compatible with their existing beliefs and values) (Rogers, 1995). The mentors effectively conveyed examples of successful technology use in online professional writing courses, an important first step in assisting their colleagues to envision the outcomes of moving from traditional to online instruction. At the same time, they did not "sugar coat" online teaching. Their balanced view was important in gaining the acceptance of the teachers.

Sharing Experiences through Peer-to-Peer Workshops

In the weeks after the orientation meeting, the mentors continued supporting their colleagues by sharing their relevant experiences at regularly scheduled departmental workshops, and began providing more directed peer coaching by answering questions and providing examples about both content delivery and tools available in an online environment. To prepare and present the most useful and successful workshops, the mentors

- Brainstormed general topics relevant to moving professional writing courses online

- Presented the list of topics and requested feedback from the professional writing instructors in an informal needs assessment

- Prepared four workshops (receiving, grading, and returning online student assignments; computing resources; online presentations; and online discussions)

- Delivered workshops which allowed ample time for "hands-on" experiences

- Followed up by requesting feedback

The responses to the workshops from the professional writing faculty were positive:

"I like the various approaches you present. It really makes this process less of a "canned" way to put a course online versus an individual teaching experience… This has really rejuvenated my feeling about teaching as a whole."

The mentors were able to apply suggestions for improvements to each workshop:

"I guess if I had to make one suggestion it is to make it a bit more interactive, or inviting to ask questions…I too felt that I was in some way imposing on time limits set if I asked a question - yet, the topics and information you present are intriguing and mind provoking so this is a Catch 22 for you."

Peer Coaching and Contextual Peer-to-Peer Support

The key mentors are adjunct faculty in the department, as are most of the professional writing instructors. Thus the mentors were truly viewed as peers in the process of developing the new professional writing distance education courses. Most importantly, the mentors treated the entire transition as a shared process, creating a sense that this was an evolving experience where administrative support and training would occur at needed points, allowing the process to unfold and not explode. The mentors continued supporting and coaching their colleagues through development of courses during the early to mid-part of 2004, with weekly support sessions during the summer of 2004, and into fall 2004, when the courses were offered. In addition, the mentors shared relevant articles about online teaching strategies to continue a scholarly discussion about online pedagogy through their listserv.

Additional peer support came in the form of a web site of shared materials. Working with a graduate student in the department and with a member of DELTA, the mentors created a variety of templates, shared course assignments, policies, samples of student work, and other materials for departmental use (see http://courses.ncsu.edu/eng331/common/index.html). This site became an invaluable resource for sharing examples and materials developed by the teachers. The site

continues to grow with additional assignments, new online modules, and links to relevant research articles.

Professional Development

In addition to administrative and peer support, another key element in successfully preparing faculty for online teaching is access to professional development (Ali, 2003, Bullock, 2000). The professional writing mentors and DELTA staff developed a training plan designed to build the professional writing faculty's skills and comfort levels in using technology for instruction. Working within the structure of existing campus programs and adding peer support from the department, DELTA staff and the mentors created a training plan that consisted of attendance at selected regularly scheduled workshops during the spring semester, participation in specially prepared departmental seminars, and participation by both the mentors and professional writing faculty in the Teaching and Learning with Technology Summer Institute.

Offering Training Opportunities

Every semester, DELTA offers a comprehensive workshop schedule that includes training on design, usability and accessibility, web page and graphics creation, Learning Management System administration, quizzing and testing, and effective instructional practices using technology. Professional writing faculty members were encouraged to take several workshops during the spring of 2004 to develop the skills they would need to teach an online course. Six of the ten faculty members involved took advantage of this early training on creating web pages and graphics and using Learning Management Systems. In addition, the professional writing program held regularly scheduled workshops where the professional writing mentors provided immediate assistance and feedback to their peers on both content and web development tools.

Providing an Intensive Week of Training: The Summer Institute

Then in May 2004, the professional writing faculty attended the sixth annual Teaching and Learning with Technology (TLT) Summer Institute as a cohort. The TLT Summer Institute is an immersive one-week training experience that provides instruction on both the tools and pedagogies needed to integrate technology into online and classroom instruction. Goals of the TLT Summer Institute include increasing comfort levels in using technology in instruction, addressing underlying negative attitudes toward technology in instruction, increasing specific skills, such as web-page creation and Learning Management System use, and increasing an awareness of university resources that support faculty in using technology for instruction.

To date, over 215 faculty and staff have attended. The current week-long institute accommodates up to 50 faculty members, who attend a morning or afternoon session of classes and then may attend a staffed, but elective, open lab the remainder of their day. All ten professional writing faculty members, along with the four mentors, were assigned to participate in training during the morning session, attending open labs during the afternoon to work collaboratively on their online courses with ample peer and technical support.

Assessing Participant Needs

Prior to the TLT Summer Institute, all faculty participants completed a questionnaire that assisted the training staff in understanding the skills, comfort levels, and attitudes of incoming participants. The responses from the professional writing faculty members indicated that initial apprehensions about moving courses online were high. Key faculty concerns for this group included how to handle student presentations (a traditional part of their coursework), concern

about the lack of face-to-face contact with students, concern about developing an effective course, fear of being incompetent with the technology, and concern about the integrity of student work. These concerns were in line with the other TLT Summer Institute participants who completed the questionnaire, and are typical for faculty attending the institute.

Providing a Variety of Training Options

Throughout the week as part of the TLT Summer Institute, faculty participants attended seminars about available instructional tools, principles of effective instruction, working with graphics and creating web pages, and using Learning Management Systems. During lunchtime sessions, faculty members from a variety of departments across campus discussed their use of technology to support their face-to-face classes or teach completely online, and representatives from various campus resources, such as the Library and the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, came to discuss how they could support faculty members. Participating with faculty from other departments in the morning sessions provided the professional writing faculty with a glimpse of the shared concerns and commitments of other colleagues across campus undergoing similar transitions, and helped alleviate the feeling that the professional writing faculty were "in this alone."

Each afternoon, after the formal instruction and lunchtime sessions, the professional writing faculty and the professional writing mentors worked together on their courses in a computer lab accompanied by several DELTA staff members, including their DELTA technical "buddy," who was a DELTA staff member assigned to work closely with this group during the TLT Summer Institute and provide support afterwards. This "buddy system" provided an important safety net for alleviating faculty concerns. As they participated in formal training sessions in the morning and collaborated with both mentors and DELTA staff in the afternoon, the professional writing faculty members had an opportunity to address their initial fears and concerns as the week progressed.

Evaluating the Summer Institute

Statements made during and after the TLT Summer Institute indicated that this event was the professional development experience that cemented the cohesiveness of the professional writing faculty transition experience, since attending this experience as a cohort gave them a concentrated time to work and learn together as a team. On the post-TLT Summer Institute evaluation, several comments revealed that the professional development activities culminated not only in an improvement in skills, but an increase in comfort levels and a shift in attitudes that were particularly important in preparing this particular group for online teaching. A sampling of comments include the following:

> *- Well, from a pedagogical perspective, I was convinced that distance education has merit. And from a technology perspective, I was convinced that I can eventually learn all that I need to.*

> *- I didn't see "Dragged dinosaur into 21st century" on the list! I now see myself as having flexibility and confidence to continue learning on my own.*

> *- It was a great week and an incredible opportunity for me. The ball is now in my court, as I need to spend time working with the different resources I was introduced to during the Summer Institute -- I look forward to this new adventure!*

> *- The socialization aspect was nice--learning from other educators what they do.*

- Even though some of my answers are only in the "somewhat" or "somewhat comfortable" categories, I was starting not only with little knowledge but a fairly poor attitude. So I made great strides and feel very proud of myself! It felt great to learn something new. I've been to see my buddy several times since the Institute and applied what I could to my classes. I'm really concerned about having so much to do to get ready for a completely online course. But I at least know more about what questions to ask.

- Overall, the experience was exhausting, overwhelming & absolutely essential.

Prior to the TLT Summer Institute, coordinated administrative support, peer support, and a variety of workshops had been ongoing throughout the early part of 2004. Much work had been done to address the issues confronting the professional writing faculty. The Summer Institute thus augmented the spring workshops by providing a week of intense, focused training and shared experiences that built a true sense of collaboration and community among the faculty that sustained them through developing their courses for the rest of the summer and teaching their courses in the fall.

Conclusion

After continued work during the summer of 2004 with both the professional writing mentors and DELTA staff, the professional writing faculty who were transitioning their courses from traditional face-to-face to online courses offered their first online courses beginning in fall 2004. Twenty sections and approximately 400 students were taught via distance education in the department during fall 2004, and twenty more sections and another 400 students are now being served during spring 2005. The mentors and DELTA staff have provided support with content and tool related issues during both the fall and spring semesters; however, the need for support has not been high and the transition for most of the instructors has been very smooth. Recent department meetings have revealed that the professional writing faculty members are discussing issues they would face during any given semester; e.g. student attrition, late assignments, student understanding of concepts, etc. They have discovered that the medium has not hampered the instructional process; after completing a full semester of teaching online, the faculty feel largely positive toward delivering the courses online. In fact, the professional writing faculty members are very proud of what they have accomplished and are excited about utilizing this new medium for instructors.

Extensive assessment of the pilot program is under way. Both teachers and students in online and classroom-based professional writing classes were surveyed at the beginning and end of the fall 2004 semester. Information about teaching and learning styles, computer use, prior experience with online education, expectations for the course, and the extent to which these expectations were realized, was gathered for analysis. This semester (spring 2005), a portfolio evaluation will assess comparative outcomes for student performance in online and classroom-based sections. As these results become available, we will be able to enrich our understanding of the effectiveness of our three-pronged approach to this transition to online teaching.

The professional writing faculty members, as a group, were not necessarily early adopters of online teaching, and at the beginning of the transition from face-to-face to online instruction, they were entrenched (as are many mainstream faculty) in traditional tools and pedagogies (Katz, 2003) . Preliminary indications are that most of this group, who were very concerned and even negative toward moving instruction online at the beginning of this process, are now accepting this new medium for teaching and are even enthusiastic about its possibilities.

Successfully moving faculty to a new instructional paradigm requires the support of the department, faculty peers, and university support staff. When all these elements are present, barriers to online instruction can be addressed and resolved collaboratively, paving the way for a successful transition for faculty new to teaching online.

Key Acronyms

CHASS - College of Humanities and Social Science

DELTA - Distance Education and Learning Technology Applications

TLT-Teaching and Learning with Technology

Acknowledgement of Contributions

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