First Time Distance Learning Faculty Review (Round #2)

Online Learning
September 2004

In an effort to continue to explore the experiences of first-time distance faculty and to add to the information of the survey completed by Carole Sack in January 2004, a second survey was conducted during the Summer quarter 2004. It was hoped that we would reach the faculty new to distance teaching that had taught in Winter 032 and Spring 033 and again learn from them how to improve the preparation and support of faculty teaching online. The same survey instrument used in the original interviews was utilized for this second round of interviews (see Exhibit A).

The number of faculty new to distance teaching for the Winter/Spring quarters was 16. Contact to solicit their participation was initially made by email and then a follow-up paper letter was sent approximately 10 days later. We had seven faculty agree to be interviewed (43.8% participation). Three were interviewed face to face, three by phone and one remote faculty completed the survey online. Duration of interviews ranged from 20 to 75 minutes.

Faculty represented a cross section of departments/colleges including:
> Liberal Arts- Humanities
> CAST- Food Hotel- Croatia
> CMDS (2) (1 Kosovo)
> MicroElectronics
> Environmental Health & Safety
> Photography

Only the MicroElectronics course was a specific Graduate level course, but the EHS Project Management (2 sections) course was offered for either graduate or undergraduate credit (no graduate students enrolled) and the Photograpy course was a first-time Special Topics class (2 sections) that did enroll both Graduate and Undergraduate students.

For the seven instructors that were interviewed, 4 had NOT taught their course in a face to face classroom before while 3 had done so.

Teaching Techniques and Effectiveness: (Questions 2, 3, 4)

Respondents used a variety of teaching techniques that most agreed worked well for their respective courses. The use of discussion questions, small group assignments, business negotiations, and simulations were techniques cited as used effectively. Other tools and media included PowerPoint, vhs tapes, instant messenger, textbook associated software and streaming video. The only shortcoming was a freeze in streams for students using dial-up access.

The Best of Times: (Question #5)

Some of what the faculty saw as the "best" in online courses includes the ability to interact student to student or faculty to student 24 hours a day. The weekly discussions were seen as engaging more participation as opposed to the classroom type discussion where some students sit quietly in the back of the room. One instructor admitted that their own clarity of written communication improved during the course of the class.

The opinions of most faculty reflected satisfaction with their first time experience with comments like "very satisfying" and "I am still in touch with the students".

The Worst of Times: (Question #6)

That's not to say that the faculty interviewed didn't identify any shortcomings. Some indicated that they missed seeing the students face-to-face. Others found quizzing and testing a problem and would rethink assignments next time. Still others found the technology (myCourses) troublesome and even student behavior problematic (e.g. cheating, late registration, delivery of late course materials, technology inept). The most vocal respondent of negative feedback says that class size is a problem. He had 2 sections of 25 and 26 concurrently and found this unwieldy for handling students. He has opted to never do this again.

Good to Great … the next time out: (Question #7)

What would faculty do differently or preserve for their next online course? When asked that question, there were a variety of thoughtful responses. Increasing the visual aspects of the class to make it more interesting was one response. Another great idea was to do research to get in touch with business/industry and use "outreach" assignments there to integrate with course work. Modify quizzing and make more material available online with a quiz to back it up were stated by two faculty. Adding components like video, chat and discussion board usage were all stated as more desirable next time out for select faculty.

Partners in Online Learning: (Question #8)

I asked all faculty about their preparation for teaching in the online environment and got responses ranging from "I did not use" the services of Online Learning to "I received top notch training and support". Compliments were given for good response time and assistance, but some thought MORE faculty could benefit from a little more orientation.

Philosophy of "distance learning" … is it all possible?: (Question #11)

When asked more probing questions about department support and their colleagues' value of online learning, I was not surprised by the answers offered. Although one faculty admitted that they had no interaction with other faculty as an adjunct, others stated that colleagues value (DL) as long as it doesn't have a high time penalty like having to come in ahead of time to do. Some faculty are warm, some cautious, some are resistant to DL across departments. One expressed the notion that the department chair was not particularly enthralled with it. The most telling comment was from a converted faculty member who said "I had concern that I would not have the intimacy of the face-to-face classroom here and that the online environment would be somehow mechanical but it was NOT."

Teaching and Learning from a Distance: (Question #9, 10, 12)

When asked about the value of distance education compared to the traditional classroom setting, most faculty judged the online classroom experience positively. This is a great way to learn and teach. It is rewarding for all say faculty. There are fewer boundaries when approaching the teacher. Faculty have more flexibility and I see myself in retirement at the lakeside doing online teaching said one faculty.

There were some concerns with the online technology world as well. I feel more effective in face-to-face. My smile does not come out in PowerPoint. The spontaneous non-verbal is not there in DL but I like that comments and opinions can be shared with other sections of students. DL is certainly a challenge for the communication piece. You need to find the best way to communicate with students. Weekly chat sessions are difficult although some students can better communicate a foreign tongue in chat text. Writing the English is better than trying to understand the spoken word. Online the fluency doesn't happen to be an issue.

Another faculty explained very well some reservations, when he said "It certainly is the only answer for people in remote places. Kids miss a little in not connecting eyeball to eyeball. They may miss something but gain a world of information. Some curricula still need face-to-face components (i.e. labs). DL will not replace but supplement classroom style. A great deal of information you impart is through body language. I can't see a student wince (when I do not explain myself well)."

Another concern is the value of the interactions. In DL I do not have the rapid feedback. Some think our students don't have perseverance. They need to be good readers and self-motivated. Some students need more attention than others. It's easy for students to not read. There's no way to reinforce that they do. Lack of face-to-face interaction and immediate interaction (because of asynchronous) leads to a lot of gaps. Examples are more important in online and repetition is important.

Some will agree that online is an exciting medium, a tremendous step forward for education. DL just needs a bit of refinement. DL needs warmth, humanity, intimacy and

rapport. As one instructor put it, "I wished I had more sense of students being 'with me' along the way."

Dear 'DL' Abby: (Question #13)

Advice for those who come after was easily offered by those interviewed. Suggestions included an online training class so faculty know what they are getting into. Have lunch with a faculty who has done it. Students can be helpful too (who have already done DL). Log on at least 3 or 4 times a day and answer questions both for student and faculty success. Constant communication is needed.

One faculty recommended faculty use the OL department and tell the Instructional Designer that you know nothing except content and take their help. Keep it simple like only a couple of discussion questions; don't use chat. Use less content than in traditional classrooms. Cautions were abundant in sentiments like "it is more work". You need to be disciplined. Be explicit on expectations for content and delivery.

When asked if this group of faculty would recommend Distance Learning to others most were apt to do so. One stated, "Do it by all means… absolutely. It's an incredible experience. It will improve your in-class teaching experience forever." There were several caveats, however, including such remarks as, "You have to love it to do it! Ask them how badly do you want to "communicate". The important thing is communicating with students and not the technology you're using." Others made strong mention of time allotment needed to do distance courses, warning that you need to anticipate putting a lot of time into the platform and course materials, exams, guides, etc. Plan for the large numbers you may get.

In summation:

Although all faculty interviewed seemed pleased with their efforts on their first time distance course, one faculty in particular said that he would not teach again in this format if class size was not reduced. It is unreasonable to be expected to teach a class of 30 – 32 students in this totally online format. Others were thrilled with the opportunity to do DL. The general consensus was DL is here to stay and RIT is uniquely positioned for DL success if we find the technology and faculty to do it.

There was agreement among respondents that the Online Learning Office is very 'Good'. Thumbs up to you guys!!

Other recommendations:

Several concerns elicited from the faculty interviewed that OL may wish to follow-up on include a need for improvement in the course management system whereby faculty can

sort questions according to ABET criteria/objectives. We must continue to partner with other campus services like the Bookstore to address customer service issues instead of being totally unsupportive of students and difficulties with text /software and edition changes. These and other comments like them should continue to stay on our radar.

Exhibit A

Follow-up Interview: First –time DL Instructors
Summer 034

Name _____

Department _____
Course Name _____

1. Have you taught this course face-to-face in a classroom?

2. Tell me about your DL course – what kind of **teaching media** did you use?
What kind of **teaching techniques** did you use?

3. How well did the **teaching techniques** in your DL course work??
 Were they successful in helping you to accomplish your course goals?

4. Did the **teaching media** for your course work out well?? Are you satisfied with the quality of the media you use in your course?

5. What turned out to be the best parts of your DL teaching experience in the ___032/033___ quarter?

6. What turned out to be the most disappointing or troublesome aspects of teaching a DL course?

7. Now that you have some experience teaching this course in a DL format, what would you change if you were to teach it again?

8. How do you feel about the preparation to teach a DL course that you received from the Online Learning and media production departments?   What recommendations for

changing the preparation processes (instructional design, courseware training, and production experience) would you make?

9. How did you end up teaching a distance learning course?

10. How do you feel about teaching in the DL world?   Do you think it can be a successful and rewarding way for students to learn and teachers to teach?

11. How do you think your department chair feels about DL courses? Other instructors in your department?

12. What do you think the main differences between distance leaning and face-to-face teaching are – besides the obvious one of not having the students immediately in front of you?

13. What advice would you give to a fellow faculty member who is considering teaching a distance learning course for the first time?

FINAL WORDS: (an area for any other comments)

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