How Community College Faculty Learn How to Teach Online Instruction

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Abstract:
This study examined the learning strategies of faculty and how they learned to use online course delivery as an instructional delivery strategy. The purpose of this study was to examine the learning strategies used by faculty in learning to use online course delivery. Research for this study reviewed the process of self-directed learning, the resources used by learners, the quality of both the process and the end product of learning, and the competencies of learners. Data was collected by conducting interviews with various North Carolina community college faculty who were currently teaching online courses delivery. The comments gathered were analyzed by means of applying the individual instructor's comments about learning to forms of learning as studied by Tough, Knowles, Mezirow, Marsick and Watkins, and Kolb. Emphasis for identifying learning processes looked at demographic characteristics, as well as reasons for participation. Data collected from the interviews also explored major ideas and concepts that influenced how the educators learned. Findings of the study identified incidental, informal, and experiential learning as prevalent means of learning for faculty. This study also identified faculty learning to use online course delivery as being unique to their learning with emphasis placed upon collaboration and cooperative learning among the participants. Participants in this study agreed that online course delivery as an instructional strategy was a means of reaching more nontraditional students, and they were proud to be considered pioneers in this field of learning and change.

In recent years the interest in online courses through the Internet for the delivery of higher education has increased considerably. This expanded interest is related to the challenges facing today's higher education institutions such as increased operating costs, reduced traditional student enrollments, reduced yearly course offerings to cut costs, reduced financial support for upgrades of computer equipment and software, and the reduced numbers of faculty in an effort to restrain rising costs. To overcome these hurdles, particularly at the community college level administrators are faced with the challenge of being able to identify the changing needs of the students and to meet these needs effectively and efficiently by including the increased use of technology.

With the Information Age upon us, research has shown that computer-based instruction has proven effective in post-secondary courses, addressing the student-centered learning and the self-paced, and individualizing study for adult learners. Adult educators have researched instructional strategies and how various classroom procedures help students to learn and understand information. The computer and the Internet have provided a means of a new vehicle for instruction and learning. Little is known yet about how instructors employ learning to adopt this new technology in the classroom.

The study reflected upon instructors who have been innovative and experimental in choosing to learn a new instructional strategy -- online course delivery. In conclusion of the findings of this study, faculty reflected a feeling of fulfillment through their teaching profession and the students. These faculty members were open to new ideas and experiences through their learning, and they examined their inner feelings and concerns about change and adapting to the technology associated with this change. The faculty in this study commented that the more they began to learn, the more they realized they did not know; therefore, they became self-directed in locating organized learning activities and opportunities to help them meet their learning needs. With new technology available, education is now more than just learning content and technical skills, faculty are learning how to learn and how to adapt and change.