

A Case Study of Faculty Development Needs in Distance Education

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Introduction

Distance education eliminates barriers to education, whether the barrier is time, location, or situation, including economic and social barriers. Some of the trends influencing distance education environments include the rapid pace at which collaboration tools are developed, the use of personal broadcasting systems, and the impact of mobile computing technology (Dewey & DeBlois, 2006). However, distance education involves some unique challenges in relation to faculty development. Some faculty concerns relate to centralized service delivery, technology, course development time, lack of autonomy, isolation, and workload. Such issues, if not addressed or clarified in the context of course delivery, can further isolate and disillusion faculty. In light of these challenges, we were interested in assessing faculty development needs at Athabasca University.

We begin this paper with a brief overview of the tension between scholarship priorities. We then consider the scope of faculty development programs, related issues in distance education, and program critical success factors. Thereafter, we discuss our university's experience with faculty development. Following the study methodology and textual results, we discuss our findings and conclude with some recommendations and next steps.

The Tension between Scholarship Priorities

Boyer discusses four kinds of scholarship priorities for a professoriate: the *scholarship of discovery* (research), the *scholarship of teaching* (pedagogy), the *scholarship of practice* (application), and the *scholarship of integration* (critical analysis and interpretation). Most universities focus on the first three priorities — research, teaching, and service (i.e., scholarship of practice). It is an ongoing challenge for academics to balance their efforts in these three areas, particularly when there is pressure to “publish or perish.”

Teaching is a scholarly undertaking that is as important as research, so we need to have as high expectations of it (Watson & Grossman, 1994). However, teaching is severely undervalued (Harrison, 2002), particularly since institutional incentives and reward structures favor research and because research is easier to assess among faculty and in tenure reviews. Common issues pertinent to teaching include student/teacher ratios, teaching methods, workload, the role of teaching assistants, and the balance between research and teaching (Harrison, 2002). The scholarship of teaching is compounded by the dynamics of teaching in a distance education environment, and hence, the specific faculty development needs in distance education

(including blended approaches) warrant some unique approaches. Furthermore, if teaching is perceived to be undervalued, securing faculty buy-in for a faculty development program can be a struggle (Watson & Grossman, 1994).

Scope of Faculty Development Programs

Faculty development is a complex and important process (Kinuthia, 2005) and serves to enhance growth and development by promoting all forms of scholarship throughout one's career (DiLorenzo & Heppner, 1994). Faculty development programs are limited only by the university's scope, mission, and culture (Watson & Grossman, 1994). Individual differences, diversity, and seasons of the career need to be considered in faculty development programs (DiLorenzo & Heppner, 1994). Such programs should focus on faculty needs (Watson & Grossman, 1994).

In the most narrow definition, faculty development focuses on teaching (Watson & Grossman, 1994). A broader definition indicates that faculty development "promotes improvement in the academy in large part through helping individuals to evolve, unfold, mature, grow, cultivate, produce, and otherwise develop themselves as individuals and as contributors to the academy's mission" (Watson & Grossman, 1994, p. 465). Most universities use the term faculty development in the broader context, and they include academic professionals, many of whom have advanced degrees (Watson & Grossman, 1994). In this sense, faculty development could encompass the stakeholders involved in creating and delivering distance education courses, such as faculty, educational media development staff, and the IT department.

Some faculty development programs focus their efforts on new faculty, that is, newly minted PhDs and those new to a university (Sorcinelli, 1994). Work aspects that continue to be important to new faculty include the intellectual/collegial ethos of one's department, teaching and research funds, a reasonable workload, and the overall facilities (Sorcinelli, 1994). Elements that induce stress in new faculty include time constraints related to teaching and conducting research, the lack of collegial relationships, inadequate feedback or recognition, unrealistic expectations, insufficient resources, the lack of mentors, and imbalance between work and life (Sorcinelli, 1994). Assistant professors may need help transitioning from graduate school to the role of an academic, so activities relevant to them include mentoring and peer consultation, with an emphasis on course reduction and reduced service commitments in the first year or two as they develop a productive research program and teaching credibility (DiLorenzo & Heppner, 1994). Associate professors may benefit more from development services focused on effective mentoring and administrative support skills and on the service role (DiLorenzo & Heppner, 1994). Full professors may benefit from development services that address their broader service role and problems of burnout and stagnation (DiLorenzo & Heppner, 1994).

Most faculty development programs focus on specific skills and problem areas and rely on voluntary participation, but some universities have obligatory faculty programs. Some think that good teaching depends on early training, so they offer graduate courses and certificates in teaching higher education. Others argue that courses and certificates don't make better teachers, and that uniform teaching detracts from how different disciplines should to be taught (Harrison, 2002).

Faculty development requires resources to coordinate the program and to ensure that equipment is maintained and faculty support needs are met (Bryant, Kahle, & Schafer, 2005). Once a program is in place, "Expecting faculty to attend training on their time means that only

those who are truly motivated and have an interest will pursue the training” (Kinuthia, 2005, p. 198), so creating a culture to support teaching is vital (Harrison, 2002). Specific to distance education, the virtual environment, with its unique interpersonal and organizational cultural issues, needs to be considered for faculty development purposes (Folkers, 2005).

Faculty Development Issues in Distance Education

Some disadvantages of distance education relate to isolation and the time intensiveness of course preparation (Tham & Werner, 2005). There are indications that an online course can take as much as 2.5 times longer to develop than a face-to-face course does (Bryant et al., 2005; Folkers, 2005). There is an intensification of work as faculty respond to students in groups and on a one-to-one basis online, as well as interact with other departments involved in the course (Folkers, 2005; Wallace, 2002). These issues fuel the debate over what constitutes a “normal” course load or overload (Bryant et al., 2005; Wallace, 2002). Some of the literature indicates that not all faculty feel that they have the appropriate support needed to teach distance education courses. For example, Perreault, Waldman, Alexander, and Zhao (2002) found that half the study participants had participated in an in-house distance education workshop but less than a third had access to a mentor while preparing and delivering courses.

Some faculty may feel that they no longer have full control when others, such as educational media development staff, are involved in the process (Banas & Emory, 1998). This can be compounded when support services such as IT or educational media development are centralized and standardized (Kanuka & Conrad, 2005). For example, faculty may have to prepare courses according to an administrative schedule instead of at their own pace. Some faculty members perceive this as limiting their flexibility and autonomy. Still others may perceive that their academic freedom is in question if course production or editorial staff provide input on their courses; they may feel deprofessionalized (Kanuka & Conrad, 2005) and raise the issue of course commodification (Wallace, 2002).

Related in part to course control, there are also issues around managing intellectual property, digital rights, and digital assets (Dewey & DeBlois, 2006). Faculty experienced in face-to-face teaching environments are accustomed to owning their own course material, but in the distance education environment, courses are typically “owned” by the university. At some universities, this is addressed with the approach that ownership is shared — faculty own the courseware and the university owns the instructional design aspects (Folkers, 2005).

In distance education, keeping up to date with technology can also be a challenge (Perreault, Waldman, Alexander, & Zhao, 2002), let alone standardizing technology across a university. As faculty development continues to be a top strategic concern of chief information officers (CIO) in distance education (Dewey & DeBlois, 2006), it behooves universities to ensure that the CIO is engaged in the process. For example, in surveying the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, Perreault et al. found that academics trained themselves in course design and delivery, and they believed that technology was not sufficiently reliable (Perreault et al., 2002). Questions facing institutions include the use of Wikis and podcasts to deliver material, faculty’s willingness to use and share digital asset repositories, the role of IT organizations in integrating new technologies in teaching, and the university’s method of identifying academic programs most likely to benefit from new technologies (Dewey & DeBlois, 2006). Furthermore, Kinuthia (2005) notes that few new faculty have experience with software, multimedia, and other technologies related to distance education. For Web-based instruction, while training is important, so is the creation of a shared vision of the role of computers and the Internet in enhancing instruction (Kinuthia, 2005).

These issues, if not addressed or clarified in the context of the collaborative delivery of distance education courses, can further isolate and disillusion faculty, and make it more difficult to establish a faculty development program.

Critical Success Factors of Faculty Development Programs

Our review of the literature suggests that the following represent critical success factors of faculty development programs from an administrative, technological, and content/process perspective (Kinuthia, 2005). From an administrative perspective, it is vital to do a needs assessment first and follow up on progress being made (Kinuthia, 2005). Then, as the program is developed and launched, it must be based on a shared vision; it should be responsive to faculty needs, involve faculty in the planning, and ensure that there are clearly defined and communicated policies.

It is important to provide meaningful incentives and long-term goal achievement opportunities to faculty; that is, program content should be tied directly to content areas, and sessions should be practical and beneficial to immediate needs (Kinuthia, 2005). Studies show that faculty development services offered at times convenient to faculty and in different formats contribute to program success. It is important to have well-developed courses for faculty to attend. The most desirable mode of training is workshops and individual meetings with faculty development staff. The least desirable modes of training include self-teaching, books, audio/videotapes, and formal courses (Kinuthia, 2005). According to Kinuthia (2005), faculty indicated that they would attend training if they were given time off to do so. Peer pressure was least likely to be a factor to attend (Kinuthia, 2005). Finally, mentoring was positively associated with career satisfaction and job satisfaction (van Emmerik, 2004). With the above in mind, we were interested in assessing faculty development needs at Athabasca University.

Our University's Experience in Faculty Development

Established in 1970, Athabasca University is Canada's leading distance education and online university. It serves about 37,000 students a year. Including tutors (individualized subject matter experts), the faculty complement is just over 650. The study authors are all members of the Take Time for Good Instructional Fun (TGIF) committee. This committee was established in 2003 and reports to the vice president. The committee's aim is to assess the quality of the work environment and provide faculty development support. Given the history of low attendance for TGIF workshops and seminars in prior years, we held a two-day New Faculty Orientation in 2005; 45 participants attended. They represented well-established faculty, as well as new faculty hires at the assistant and associate professor levels, and professional staff.

The orientation covered university services and synchronous and asynchronous teaching effectiveness topics, and closed with roundtable discussions on teaching and researching in a distributed network environment. The overall sense was that the orientation was a resounding success. Participants welcomed the opportunity to meet face to face. Feedback indicated that the orientation should be held annually. Participants also indicated that we needed to enhance the sense of belonging in a distributed environment. The orientation confirmed that faculty who attended the sessions experienced some of the distance education barriers discussed above. In keeping with the recommendation from the literature that a needs assessment is an important first step, we followed the 2005 orientation with a survey on faculty development.

Study Methodology

The aim of this survey was to better understand how we could effectively provide continuous learning opportunities to faculty. Our objectives were twofold: to explore what structures and practices can encourage the improvement of teaching performances, and to do so in ways that would help overcome the unique barriers facing the university.

We developed our survey questions based on Harrison's work on what teaching centres should offer (2002). The survey consisted of 52 items and the Likert scale used the anchors Strongly Disagree (1) and Strongly Agree (5). The six sections in the survey spanned the primary measures of interest:

- Delivery methods (8 questions focused on preferred delivery models for teleworking);
- Teaching resources (16 questions on current and proposed services);
- Strategic planning (11 questions on directions for future planning);
- Teaching beliefs (3 questions);
- Workplace community (6 questions on perceptions teleworking); and
- Demographic data (7 questions).

The survey included six open-ended questions for participants to provide reflective feedback on each main topic. We secured university ethics approval for the study and then piloted it with a small number of colleagues. Following the revisions, we hosted the survey at Zoomerang[®], which is Internet-based software provided by Market Tools Inc[®]. On average, the survey took 10 minutes to complete. A copy of the instrument is available upon request to the lead author. The survey was sent to all staff members (n=609) involved in the design and delivery of course materials (i.e., tutors, academic staff, and professionals). We had 187 responses to the survey, with 182 responses that were useable, for a response rate of 31%.

From a qualitative perspective, this research can be considered a single case study (Yin, 1994). Two of the study team members each manually analyzed the textual data and identified a set of themes, which we then compared for commonalities and differences. The process led to a form of saturation whereby we were able to categorize the textual data into the themes as discussed in this paper. Discussions on the few areas of difference were readily resolved.

With respect to study limitations, since a survey was used, the data are based on self-reported information, with possible respondent bias. In addition, not all participants were familiar with some of the terms used in the survey (e.g., Wikis) and not all centres at the university participated.

Results

We conducted both quantitative and qualitative analyses on the data, and this paper focuses on the qualitative findings. Before turning to those results, we briefly summarize our quantitative findings. Further details are available in our publications on this topic (Kanuka, Heller, & Jugdev, 2008). The majority of respondents were aged 50-59 (n=80), followed by 40-49 (n=48), under the age of 40 (n=39), and 60 or older (n=17). The majority of respondents were female (male: n=65; female: n=117; missing: n=5). Most of the survey respondents were also tutors (n=110), followed by academic staff (n=61), with the fewest respondents being professional staff (n=15). Most respondents were relatively new hires, with five or less years of experience at Athabasca

University from the date of hire (n=103; 2000-1983 hires: n=63; pre-1983 hires: n=20). Finally, 85% of respondents reported a home office as their primary work environment.

The findings confirmed a four-factor model for faculty development concerned with e-learning courses: (1) *Technical* (Internet / Web resources); (2) *Social* (interpersonal); (3) *Moderating* (cognitive / pedagogical); and (4) *Management* (teaching). The constructs identified were associated with the unique characteristics of teaching distance courses using Internet and Web-based communication tools. We were able to identify structures and practices that can be managed skillfully to create an environment that provides continuous learning opportunities to improve teaching. The results of this study also identified continuous learning activities that are likely to inspire members of the instructional design team to integrate pedagogically effective use of e-learning.

Findings and Discussion

The open-text comments in this study raised concerns about the lack of a learning centre, the need for a mentoring program, concerns over the course development process, issues related to IT, and the role of tutors. Most of the comments revolved around feelings of isolation and the importance of collegial social interactions.

It was apparent that not everyone was familiar with the teaching support resources available to them at Athabasca University. Participants were interested in a breadth of teaching resources such as basic adult education principles, help with marking, improving their teaching practices, and using technology and software more effectively (e.g., Elluminate[®] and multimedia/visual presentations). Participants expressed a need for guidance to be able to improve teaching effectiveness. They suggested that resources should be made available face to face, online, and in text-based formats. Participants were especially interested in forums that enabled them to discuss best practices in teaching and research. Others indicated that we needed to improve the balance between student-focused teaching and faculty needs. Some thought that faculty development sessions should be mandatory and that faculty should report on what they were learning from sessions. Participants suggested we should collaborate with other centres in major cities in Alberta on learning services.

Participants also suggested that a *mentoring program* would be very helpful to help them improve course design and delivery. Comments indicated that participants were interested in faculty development services, and that some were concerned about the quality of learning offered. They wanted to ensure that the quality standards were maintained.

Participant feedback on *course development* reflected frustration with how long it took to design, deliver, and revise a course. Comments suggested that the Educational Media Development department was short-staffed and the processes used were cumbersome and inhibited spontaneity and innovation.

A number of comments related to *Information Technology*, including requests for dedicated IT services for tutors/faculty, especially since many faculty work on weekends, when IT services are not available. Other suggestions involved the desire to enter grades online, the ability to update course home pages in a timely manner, and enhanced Web design services. Participants also requested support for Web programming, graphic design, and library services, including open-source access to publications. Whereas the intent of our study was not to focus on IT services, the prevalence of this theme, particularly since we are assessing Moodle[®] and Elluminate[®] at Athabasca University, prompted us to share our findings with our CIO as part of

the vision for faculty development initiatives. If new technologies are to be adopted, they need to be introduced with consideration of their implications for improving teaching and learning.

A number of participants indicated that they were *overworked and not paid enough* to participate in teaching support services. Others added that they would have to give up paid time to attend such sessions (e.g., tutors). A variety of suggestions were offered to help address time constraints, such as establishing an online community, subsidizing travel and accommodation, and paying faculty to participate in faculty development sessions.

Another theme that emerged related to the *role of tutors*. Some participants indicated that tutors were marginalized and their contributions undervalued. A few suggested that tutors needed better orientation to their role and the resources available at the university. Some expressed concerns that tutors received little feedback from the department head and little encouragement or training and support. Still others felt that teaching was more valued than tutoring and the question was raised of whether tutoring was teaching or marking.

A theme that was of great concern to us related to *feeling isolated*. The following quotations reflect this theme:

“Tele-commuting has failed as an experiment because it has virtually killed collegiality, intellectual cross-fertilization, and the social dimension of the workplace.”

“It is hard to have collegial discussions without a mail room, coffee room.”

“Distance teaching as a tutor or academic expert is a very isolating experience. We need many more opportunities for collegial interaction.”

Study participants viewed social exchanges as invaluable and suggested that the cost of scheduled social interaction every two months was worth it.

The most striking and positive finding is that a majority of respondents believe their contributions to the teaching process to be important; there is a deep desire for good relationships with colleagues and the development of an effective teaching environment. The desire to develop teaching skills is an essential foundation for improving teaching practices. In regard to how the learning activities should be delivered, the results of the survey indicate that the preferred delivery methods include both digitally based Web-spaces and face-to-face workshops facilitated by invited experts (outside of the institution).

In the areas of teaching skill development, the survey data indicate that the following are high priorities:

- How to motivate self-paced learners
- How to use different instructional methods in an on-line classroom
- How to deal with difficult students
- How to use course management systems to improve learning

In regard to structures needed, the data indicate that support for training, mentorship, and development are desired:

- New teaching staff should be provided with an option for sustained early training in distance-delivered teaching.
- Funds should be made available for innovative teaching explorations.
- There should be support services for the scholarship of teaching and learning.
- There should be support services for teaching staff who are applying for university-wide, national, or international teaching awards (such as 3M[®] teaching awards).
- There is a perceived need for better advice and resources for overall professional growth.

Since conducting the survey in 2005, we submitted a report to the university administration on our findings, and we circulated the report to all faculty. Subsequently, we held a two-day faculty orientation/development session in 2007. University support enabled us to invite two experts in the area of distance education to the session: Dr. Elizabeth Murphy and Dr. Michael Moore. The evaluations indicated that the session was extremely well received. We now hold regular social mixers for faculty and professional staff in Athabasca, Edmonton, and Calgary. Orientations are also held on a regular basis for all new faculty.

Literature cited at the beginning of this paper indicated that continuing learning opportunities can reduce feelings of isolation and provide social interaction, and at the same time help improve teaching practices. New faculty that feel engaged, less isolated, and well supported in terms of teaching effectiveness and instructional support will increase our ability to achieve our strategic goals. With the growing body of literature on faculty development and even faster-growing number of institutions using distance education formats, we do not think our experience is unique. The commitment to faculty development services warrants more attention.

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