10 Ways to Take the Fear Out of E-Learning

Motivating faculty to plunge into e-learning is a lot like motivating students to learn, because when it comes to e-learning, faculty are students.

by Laura J. Sederberg

Higher education has adopted the Internet, and many institutions have made e-learning central to their missions. A well-conceived e-learning mission comes crashing down, however, when too many professors shy away from integrating the Internet into their courses. As with anything new, a few will always resist. By the same token, a few early adopters will try a new technology to see what it can do. The trick is converting the majority — the slightly skeptical, the over-committed or the under-informed — to give it the proverbial college try.

The single biggest obstacle preventing faculty from going online is fear or ignorance of the enabling technology. We’ve identified 10 dos for helping them get past those fears.

1. Do make e-learning as easy as possible. One great way to do this is to Web-enable every single course for every student every semester. That’s a lot of configuration, unless you have linked your student information system with your course management system, as we’ve done. As a result, a course shell — including reference tools, content space and easy pointers to tools such as e-mail, chat and discussion groups — awaits every faculty member even before day one of the course.

2. Do let faculty learn at their own pace. We give them a wide range of options to learn about our WebCT Campus Edition course management system, including multiday, all-day “intensive” courses; three-hour sessions every other day for a month; and hour-long mini workshops that focus on one tool. They really enjoy our “Technology in Learning Lab,” where they can come and learn with and from other faculty members in a hands-on environment.

3. Do focus your faculty training efforts. We make sure we don’t overwhelm faculty members with too much training on too many course management system tools at once. We’ve found faculty want to start slow and focus on the capabilities that address their particular needs.

4. Do provide handy reference material. We have a Website dedicated to handouts, manuals, tutorials and other learning objects to help faculty troubleshoot their own performance on the fly. With these materials, faculty who have a question don’t have to drop their course development in midstream to wait for their next formal training opportunity. Instead, the answers are right there in front of them in digestible bites at <www.csuchico.edu/tlp/webct/reference>.

5. Do dearly state expectations. What makes a good online course? We have explored that question and have come up with guidelines to give our faculty strong direction. The Rubric for Online Instruction provides detailed research-based yardsticks by which we measure the effectiveness of online courses. The rubric covers five categories for evaluation:

   - online organization and design,
   - instructional design and delivery,
   - assessment and evaluation,
   - appropriate and effective use of technology, and
   - learner support and resources.

We rate courses and course components as baseline, effective or exemplary. To see how we apply the
rubric, along with some Chico courses we've defined as exemplary, go to this link <http://www.csuchico.edu/tlp/webct/instdesign/webct-exemplary-courses.html>.

6. Do provide mentors. We assign e-learning-sawy faculty members to a mentors committee that other faculty can call on for guidance. We also offer mentors the ability to judge courses nominated for exemplary course recognition.

7. Do empower faculty. “Give a man a fish, and you have fed him for today,” the proverb says. “Teach a man to fish, and you have fed him for a lifetime.”

And so it is with e-learning. We aim to teach faculty how to develop and implement e-learning rather than do it for them. To help them develop online content, we’ve devoted as many resources as possible, including student interns and paid staff, to “taking orders” for specific multimedia content, simulations, learning objects, etc.

We’re fortunate enough to have an instructional design program on campus to support the effort. Unfortunately, state budget rollbacks have forced us to cut back significantly on production for faculty, and we’re renewing our emphasis on teaching faculty “to fish” or develop content on their own.

8. Do enlist students. Having grown up immersed in electronica, today’s students make terrific technology assistants for the classroom. Each first-time faculty user at Chico is assigned an assistant who helps the instructor focus on course material versus managing the technology. These student assistants monitor chat discussions and prompt the instructor when a student poses a particularly timely or important question or comment.

9. Do evaluate training sessions. If we’re going to evaluate courses so intensely, it’s only fair that we put ourselves on the line for evaluation by the professors we’re trying to train. Consequently, we process formal evaluations for every session we provide. It has helped us fine tune our schedules and delivery styles.

10. Do let sleeping dogs lie. Unless you have an extraordinarily mature e-learning program, don’t cajole or coerce the most recalcitrant faculty members to go online. Sooner or later, the Internet will be such a critical piece of education that no faculty member interested in continuing his career will be able to ignore it. Today, it’s just as well to concentrate on helping the early adopters thrive and encourage the vast majority to at least sample this emerging piece of education’s future.

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