

LEADING FACULTY GENTLY BY THE HAND

Mauri Collins

Old Dominion University, USA
mcollins@odu.org



Mauri Collins is an Instructional Designer with the Center for Learning Technologies at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. Her duties include mentoring and coaching faculty as they become familiar with the tools available in online learning environments. She assists faculty in Business and Professional Communication to web-stream their courses. Mauri is a doctoral candidate in Adult Education/Distance Education at The Pennsylvania State University in Adult/Distance Education and Instructional Systems Design. Her dissertation topic is the use of email distribution lists in out-of-school adults' informal and incidental learning. She maintains The Moderator's homepage at <http://www.emoderators.com>

Summary

Very little seems to be written about, or attention paid to, the socio-emotional transitions that faculty have to make as they attempt to accommodate their teaching styles to new and different delivery technologies. Training can usually raise faculty persons' technology fluency to acceptable levels. This article discusses ways that faculty development personal can help instructors through those transitions and to gain confidence in their ability to translate the best of their classroom teaching methods into mediated environments. Leading faculty gently by the hand involves listening carefully to their needs and making process suggestions will ease faculty workload and assist student learning

Introduction

Since the late 1980s I have focused on introducing faculty to new technologies and helping them to incorporate these technologies into their classroom and online courses. Much attention is paid to the transition of 'content' and course design from classroom to mediated delivery. The advent of 'Save as HTML' and course containers like BlackBoard or WebCT, has eased the content and technical transition. But what about the faculty person and their feelings in all this? You can't save *them* as HTML! There seems to be very little written about or attention paid to the socio-emotional transitions that faculty have to make as they attempt to accommodate their teaching styles to new and different delivery technologies.

Institutions worldwide seem to be caught up in a headlong rush to get courses 'online' with the hope of penetrating new markets and reaching larger numbers of students. In pursuit of this goal, a growing number of faculty are being asked to teach courses where a substantial part - or all - of the course transactions take place in some computer-mediated form. Most often the delivery vehicle of choice is the web-browser, an 'umbrella technology' that allows access to text, graphics, sound, and images regardless of location, computer platform or operating system.

The shock of transition doesn't seem to be as great when faculty are asked to teach on television. Many faculty are accomplished performance artists and their transition from classroom to televised teaching is, for them, just a case of thinking more visually and making the font size on their presentation materials a little larger. For many faculty it is close to *business as usual* and making themselves comfortable staying within camera.

Most who are now expected to make the transition from classroom to online course delivery are 'mainstream' faculty. They are not the enthusiastic technology pioneers. They are not the 'lone rangers' who adopt, learn and use the newest technologies long before the 'mainstream' have even heard their acronyms (WWW, DVD, JPG, HDTV . . .). The newest group being asked to teach online is akin to the 'settlers' who follow behind the 'pioneers.' Where 'technology pioneers' are willing to develop computer code and course development tools themselves, the faculty 'settler' needs the comforting structure of templates and HTML editors or whole course development systems either purchased by the institution or home-grown. They also need 'guides' who can lead them gently by the hand into these new and sometimes frightening vistas.

Most higher education institutions have personnel trained to assist in this technical translation of materials directly from classroom to online delivery. They offered software training: 'Building Web Pages 101' or 'Using Graphics on Web Pages' and, at many institutions, this appears to be assumed sufficient preparation. Either the faculty person - or their graduate/ teaching assistant - is taught to do the document and resource translation. There may be 'instructional developers' paid by the institution to build or use course development templates and do graphic design work beyond the competency of the faculty person. This often results in what has been derisively called 'shovel-ware' - course materials translated in their entirety, with little knowledge or consideration of necessary changes to accommodate materials to new delivery technologies.

Is this 'technical training and support' sufficient to complete the transition of classroom teachers to effective online facilitators of learning? I think not.

For two years I trained faculty in the use of the 'NAU Online Conference Center' at Northern Arizona University, which was based on 'stand-alone' threaded discussion group software called CAUCUS (<http://www.caucus.com>). Learning the layout of the software, what the 'buttons' are, and how to 'push' them in the right sequences takes about 30 minutes when done one-on-one and an hour or so in a lab setting with a group. Most people quickly become comfortable and confident in their use of the software. It doesn't usually take long to get a firm grasp on the structure of threaded discussions - the notion of conferences, items/topics and responses. Most threaded discussion group software can also carry images and sound files, animations and downloadable files.

But there are deep-seated fears that grip many faculty members when they are told they are to teach all or part of their courses online via synchronous or asynchronous computer conferencing. Many faculty feel a deep sense of discomfort and ill-ease, often without being able to articulate its source or determine its remedy. Their discomfort often stems from a fear that they cannot cope with the technical requirements, that they must learn to teach all over again and lose their role as the 'dispenser of knowledge' in the course. They express grave concerns for the quality of online courses - embedded in those concerns is a fear that they cannot maintain what they believe to be adequate quality of instruction, and that they will not be able to control the quality of the finished product.

When asked to teach online for the first time, most faculty are confronted with a whole new way of teaching and interacting with students. To teach by using one's fingertips on a keyboard is strange and different and especially intimidating for some faculty who are just getting used to using computers and to the notion of electronic mail - even more so for those who have never acquired keyboarding skills. As 'performance artists', faculty are used to keeping a close eye on their audience and making instant adjustments to their information delivery pace and style in response to visual and aural feedback. Suddenly they are confronted with a computer screen - that doesn't have eyes or 'body language'. I have discovered that many faculty believe that they are going to have to discard any and all craft knowledge they may have built up in classroom teaching and that they will have to learn to teach all over again. Most faculty teach as they were taught anyway and have comfortably developed their own teaching style that mirrors what they have seen demonstrated and have used with some success themselves. Because they are being asked to use a delivery technology other than the 'chalk-and-talk' they are used to, they fear that nothing that they know has any value any more.

Taking a person 'gently by the hand' means showing them *how* to adjust their personal teaching styles to accommodate the new delivery technologies. Faculty, particularly senior faculty, are loathe to admit their fear aloud - especially in front of their peers. Taking them gently by the hand is to help them to articulate and deal with that fear. Sometimes it means determining that teaching online is so antithetical to a faculty member's personal teaching style that they should not be asked - or coerced - into making the transition. It involves reassuring faculty that many of the teaching methods and techniques they use successfully in the classroom really can be translated into computer-mediated classes. It involves helping them see - one step at a time - that there is much that they will not have to relearn or re-develop.

Many have a personal teaching style predominantly as a 'knowledge dispenser' and they hold themselves responsible for their students' learning. They have a rocky time with the transition to a technology that strips a faculty member of all their badges of rank and positions of status. Students can no longer see the suit or the briefcase, nor the faculty member standing behind the podium at the front of the room, the focus of students' complete attention. Carefully prepared and masterfully delivered lectures become just so many screens of dense text, almost impossible to read on a screen. The comfortable distance they can maintain between students and themselves so they can tend to their research and service requirements dissipates as email messages pile up in their electronic mailboxes. These faculty are those whose demand for assistance with their teaching duties is the loudest.

The most important message these faculty members can receive is that the currency of online exchange and communication is that which is between one's ears. Authority in the group can be established by the faculty member' sharing their expertise and their holding the power to grant a grade. Faculty in no way lose their roles as content experts and guides through complex materials and the builders of learning environments for students. Those faculty who are, by choice and personal disposition, predominantly 'learning facilitators' in the classroom find that they can easily do more of what they like to do when online and they can accomplish course goals they could not set for their classroom teaching. By the end of their first course these learning facilitators have discovered that they can develop closer relationships with some of their students, building the trust

and open communication that removes many of the barriers to student learning. One faculty member confided to me that what he hadn't expect was how much he would miss the students, with whom he had been corresponding during the class, after the semester had ended.

One repercussion of the move from classroom and lecture hall to online course delivery is an unfortunate tendency for institutions to enrol students as if they were in a large lecture course. Faculty are being expected to cope with a hundred or more students in a single course online, without much help. It is the remarkable faculty person who has so designed their classroom courses that they translate seamlessly to an online environment without diminishing the quality of the interaction among students.

One of the most consistent fears that faculty who are being asked to teach high-enrolment online courses express is "How can I mark and grade all the student papers I assign? I want to give my students fast feedback but if I have a hundred papers turn up in my email box to grade every week... " I am always amused by the shock I see on faculty faces when I ask, "Why do *you* have to be the one to do that?" Because of the impossibility of implementing peer review in many classroom settings - especially with high enrolments, faculty assume they must do all the grading.

Taking faculty gently by the hand means asking them if they have criteria that they use when they grade papers. It sometimes takes a while to help them commit those implicit criteria to paper - a list of content that must be present - indications of a process that must be followed. Can those criteria be taught to students? Can discussion of how feedback should be constructively expressed be incorporated into the structure of the course? What would be the effect on the student's work if they could practice applying those criteria to the work of their peers, to their own work? Slowly the light dawns.

One faculty member complained about all the time it took to hunt down web pages that pertained to the course. "Why must *you* do that?" I asked. Why not start with a couple of examples as models then let your students find pertinent resources, correctly cite them and turn them in with a paragraph giving the rationale for other course members to visit that site.

As with most adult learners, when confronted by a new situation, faculty appreciate some structure in the form of process suggestions. Many faculty quickly develop the confidence to go on from there by themselves. Others need to be taken gently by the hand and 'fussed over and reassured' for a while. Time invested in giving individual faculty - the one's who need it a lot of individual attention up-front - in their own office - in their safe space - pays off bountifully. Credibility is built with faculty who, in turn, will encourage their peers to take those same first steps - and who often become the strongest advocates for teaching with new technologies.