

Using Professional Development to Facilitate Faculty Participation in Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Within any organization the one thing that remains constant is change and the need for change. Institutions and individuals must remain adaptable or their survival will never be guaranteed (Learning and Teaching Support Network, 2003). Educational institutions are a prime example of a new paradigm being implemented in the form

of distance education. It is becoming a go-to strategy with the sole purpose of creating greater student opportunities; thus educators have an inherent need to prepare for that change (Hoehn & Redline, 2005).

Hall and Hord (2006) describe change as, "a process through which people and organizations move as they gradually come to understand and become skilled and competent in the use of new ways" (p. 4). Professional development sessions can directly apply to everyday concerns of educators and prove to be extremely effective in the change process. Most importantly, these new skills and concepts resulting from targeted development sessions can then be taken directly to the online environment and result in improved student learning (Holland, 2005).



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FACILITATING CHANGE

It is important to realize that many faculty members tend to resist change and see a possible threat to existing values and practices (Learning and Teaching Support Network, 2003). Even when change is a recognized solution to a problem and is well documented, educators resist losing something they personally value (Hoehn & Redline, 2005). The need for faculty sup-

port is especially critical when implementing a distance education program. Jones and Moller (2002) observe that, "Distance education programs that lack the support of a critical mass of college faculty are likely to struggle to maintain viability in today's competitive academic marketplace. The success of an online program therefore is the direct result of the positive support of faculty who lend their energy, intellect and creative energies to the process" (Jones & Moller, 2002, p. 12).

An examination of the process of change and the successful management of change must be approached carefully and skillfully. The personal side of change must be addressed first and foremost in order to allow change and innovation to occur and be adopted successfully. Assessing individual concerns about change can lead to more successful workshops, one-on-one sessions, and even more effective strategic planning. The personal side of change is really where the process must begin (Hall & Hord, 2006).

The process that accompanies change has been explored in depth by Rogers (2003) in his book *Diffusion of Innovations*, in what has become the quintessential volume on change. He describes five stages in what he terms the innovation decision process. The beginning stage of that process can be entered when an individual becomes aware of an innovation. Entrance into the first stage can also be facilitated by a change agent who points out the, "existence of desirable new ideas" (p. 172). The change agent thus creates a case for needing change. The fact that an individual now has been made aware of this need for change creates a situation in which he or she realizes a need exists resulting in a state of dissatisfaction or frustration.

Rogers (2003) points out that this perceived need means the process of adoption can then begin to take place, "Thus knowledge of the existence of an innovation can create a motivation to learn more about it and ultimately adopt it (p. 172). What typi-

cally follows, he states, is an information seeking and processing sequence through which an individual seeks to reduce any uncertainty about the innovation by determining advantages and disadvantages. Thus the management of change must begin with the potential adopters being made aware of the innovation and the advantages which can come with making the change.

RECENT EXAMPLE

I recently conducted a short, 4-hour seminar for interested faculty at Arkansas Tech covering the basics of designing an online course. A total of 35 members attended two sessions covering both theory and practical application. As a matter of personal interest I decided to conduct a small, unofficial research project to verify Rogers' assertions. I used a 10-question survey which I administered before and after the sessions. The questions were categorized for purposes of analysis into what I determined were basically administrative and technical issues and were designed to allow the indication of concern in certain areas. The questions are listed below:

1. I have a very limited knowledge of distance education.
2. I am concerned about how distance education affects my students.
3. I would like to know what distance education resources are available at ATU.
4. I am concerned about my ability to develop and teach an online course.
5. I am concerned about non-academic issues associated with online courses.
6. I would like to try developing an online course with some assistance.
7. I would like to know how my current role would change if I teach an online course.
8. I would like some input as to how distance education is being done at ATU.

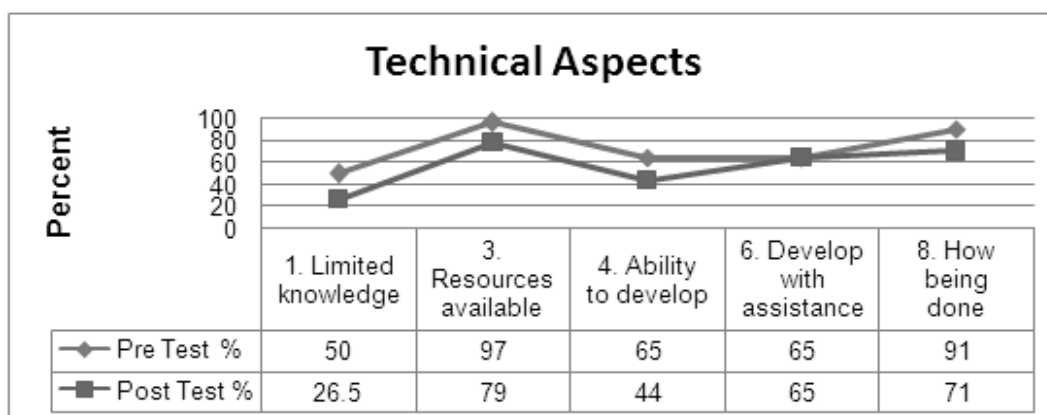


Figure 1. Comparison of pretest and posttest participant technically oriented concerns.

9. I am more concerned with my current teaching duties and responsibilities.
10. I am not very concerned about doing distance education at this time.

Participants were asked to rank the importance of each statement using a Likert-type scale with 1 indicating *total irrelevance*, 2 or 3 indicating *not true of me now*, 4 or 5 indicating *somewhat true of me now*, and 6 or 7 indicating *very true of me now*. Questions 1, 3, 4, 6, and 8 were given the technical designation while questions 2, 5, 7, 9, and 10 were designated as administrative in nature. As a matter of convenience, I used only the last two responses of somewhat true of me now and very true of me now to simplify the data. In looking over the responses, this seemed reasonable since the lower end of the scale seemed to mirror the upper end. That is, if a majority of very true responses were given then a small number of responses were indicated in the not true of me now or somewhat true of me now selections. They seemed to balance each other.

The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2. In the technical questions, as shown in Figure 1, it is clear that posttest results indicated a clear drop in the concern levels indicated in the pretest results. As an example, in the before scenario 50% indi-

cated a limited knowledge of distance education while the after scenario indicated a drop to 26.5%. The interesting question was number 6, in which no change was shown when asked if they would like to develop an online course with some assistance. Before and after the presentation, their resolve remained the same.

Looking at the questions categorized as administrative concerns, shows similar drops in their concern levels from pretest to posttest. Looking at question 2 for example, the concern about how the implementation of an online class would affect students indicated a clear drop after the session.

CONCLUSION

The path leading to a possible resolution of this type of concern, according to Hall and Hord (2006), is one in which the change process can begin with an intervention. Defining this term they state, "In the context of the change process, any action or event that influences the individuals involved or expected to be involved in the process is an intervention" (p. 186). The need for interventions, they state, revolves around a simple premise, "Successful implementation of new policies, programs, processes, practices and even new person-

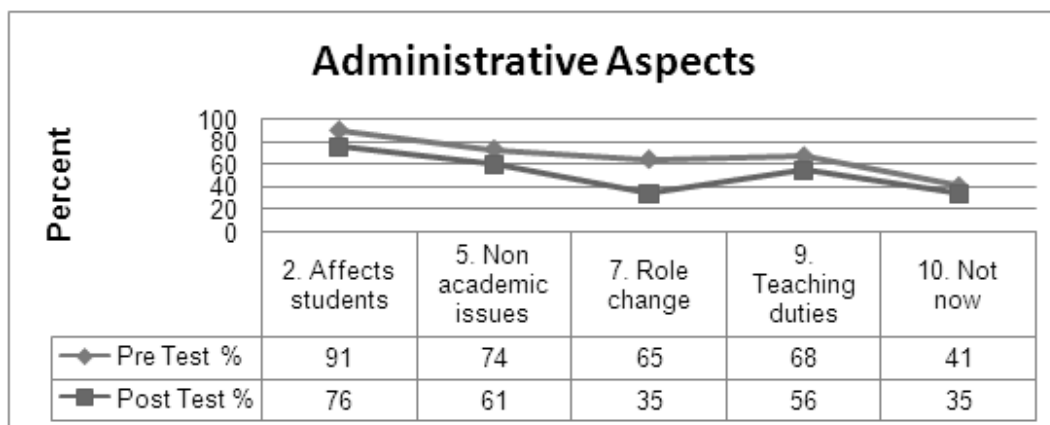


Figure 2. Comparison of pretest and posttest participant administratively oriented concerns.

nel does not just happen” (p. 186). The interventions selected, they state, should have as its guiding principle that learning about the innovation is the ultimate goal, “Since learning new information, skills, and behaviors is at the heart of any change project, facilitators would do well to keep this basic premise in mind as they consider, design and deliver the interventions necessary for change process success” (p. 186).

The use of something as simple as a 4-hour professional development seminar can yield results when attempting to facilitate change. Summing up this experience as simply as possible, I would say that helping potential online instructors develop new knowledge and skills is the best way to develop the buy-in needed to develop a successful distance education program.

Thus the management of change must begin with the potential adopters being made aware of the innovation and the advantages which can come with making the change. Facilitating change by demonstrating to faculty members the innovation will create better opportunities for students ultimately means that, according to

Hall and Hord (2006), faculty members must become students themselves, “learning is the basis of and the corollary to change” (p. 191).

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