Digital Storytelling—the missing key to online faculty development?

Abstract

This discussion will explore digital storytelling as a means to improve online faculty development. Institutions are beginning to place a greater emphasis on learner outcomes, leading to an interest in teaching quality and faculty development. Online faculty development is just one of many strategies institutions are using to develop faculty. However, online faculty development can isolate and depersonalize the experience. Digital storytelling may be an excellent way of engaging learners. Just as case studies are a successful tool to contextualize and situate learning, digital storytelling might be able to take case studies a step further by personalizing and humanizing both the instructional task and the online environment. This roundtable discussion will investigate these ideas further as well as share experiences using case studies, storytelling, and digital storytelling in online faculty development.

Introduction

Institutions of higher education assume that faculty can teach (Boyer, 1990). However, they "have recently shown a strong interest in faculty development because their faculty members now face more pressure than ever before to change their teaching styles" (Kolbo & Turnage, 2002, p. 1). Even with this increased interest, faculty developers still find it difficult to attract faculty to workshops in order to begin the daunting task of changing faculty's teaching styles.

Online faculty development

In an effort to address the issue of attracting faculty to attend faculty development, many institutions are beginning to use the Web as a medium for faculty development, in part because it allows faculty to attend any time, from any place. However, online faculty development has centered primarily around training faculty to teach online or to use technology in the classroom (Irani & Telg, 2002; Padgett & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000). This focus, unfortunately, falls short of supporting the teaching improvement needs of all faculty members, and loses site of two important issues:

1. Faculty development's goal is essentially to improve teaching and learning for all faculty—both classroom based and online; and
2. Pedagogy, not technology, has the greatest impact on student learning (Reeves, 1998).

Creating online faculty development that reflects an understanding of these issues and meets the needs of the faculty at large is easier said than done.

Improving teaching and learning

Some attempts at improving faculty's teaching practice have focused on isolating "best practices" or principles of teaching. The most prominent work on best practices come from the work of Chickering and Gamson (1987; 1999). According to Chickering and Gamson (1987), the following "Seven Principles" are guidelines for good practice in undergraduate education:

1. Encourages student-faculty contact
2. Encourages cooperation among students
3. Encourages active learning
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes time on task
6. Communicates high expectations
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning (p. 3)

Focusing on K12 research, Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) also identified some "best practices" that they believe most highly impact student achievement:

1. Identifying similarities and differences
2. Summarizing and note taking
3. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition
4. Homework and practice
5. Nonlinguistic representations
6. Cooperative learning
7. Setting objectives and providing feedback
8. Generating and testing hypotheses
9. Cues, questions, and advance organizers

It is unclear though whether these "best practices" actually help improve faculty teaching and student learning. Cross (1998) challenges the practice of making a list of best practices by stating that it both over-simplifies and over-complicates learning. Regarding oversimplification, Cross (1998) cautions our over reliance of "bulleted distillations" (p. 6). We need to begin to recognize the situated and specific nature of learning and begin to situate faculty development in specific cases or stories.

Storytelling

The strength of storytelling as an instructional strategy lies in its ability to build bridges of understanding between individuals. It does this through using concrete examples rather than vague abstractions. "Story provides the framework and context for individuals to better understand others by providing the key to their own experiences (Abrahamson, 1998, p. 441). Stories also have the ability to build connections with personal experience, which helps facilitate meaning making and retention. To be effective, stories must relate to student's own life experiences. Studies have shown that "learning can be enhanced when the instructor and student come together on a cognitive and emotional level, thus creating mutual interaction and understanding" (Abrahamson,

1998, p. 448); storytelling telling can do just this—that is, bring the instructor and student(s) together as well as the following:

- Storytelling can provide a sense of community, which fosters collaboration, which then fosters meaning making.
- Storytelling can provide a context and framework for content, which fosters retention and transfer of learning.
- Storytelling can be fun and interactive which is good for everyone.
- Storytelling can be emotional which helps get one's attention and build retention.

Digital Storytelling

The burning question though is can digital storytelling add another dimension to the power of storytelling by allowing the audience to hear stories directly from those that have experienced them and can digital storytelling help faculty developers personalize and humanize and breath new life to online faculty development? This roundtable discussion will investigate these ideas further as well as sharing experiences with case studies, storytelling, and digital storytelling in online faculty development.

References

Abrahamson, C. E. (1998). Storytelling as a pedagogical tool in higher education. *Education, 118*(3), 440-451.

Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. R. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin, 39*, 3-7.

Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. R. (1999). Development and adaptations of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 80*, 75-81.

Cross, K. P. (1998). What Do We Know about Students' Learning and How Do We Know It? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Higher Education, U.S. California.

Irani, T., & Telg, R. (2002). Building it so they will come: Assessing universities' distance education faculty training and development programs. *Journal of Distance Education, 17*(1). 36-46.

Kolbo, J. R., & Turnage, C. C. (2002). Technological applications in faculty development. *The Technology Source*. Retrieved 9/24/2004, from http://ts.mivu.org/default.asp?show=article&id=943

Padgett, D. L., & Conceicao-Runlee, S. (2000). Designing a faculty development program on technology: if you build it, will they come? *Journal of Social Work Education, 36*(2), 325-334.

Reeves, T. C. (1998). *The impact of media and technology in schools: A research report prepared for The Bertelsmann Foundation*. Retrieved 9/24/2004, from http://www.athensacademy.org/instruct/media_tech/reeves0.html

Wilcox, S. (1997). Becoming a faculty developer. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 74*, 23-31.