

Uniting Technology and Pedagogy:

The Evolution of an Online Teaching Certification Course

Going online with a certification course for online teaching solved training and delivery problems on and off campus

By **Bonnie Riedinger and Paul Rosenberg**

For two-and-a-half hours, our instructors-in-training had listened intently, scribbled notes, and asked intelligent questions. They had learned how to use Blackboard's course management tools to set up folders, learning units, and announcements. They had discussed best practices for online communication and e-mail management. They had even nodded knowingly as we explored the intricacies of the gradebook. At the end of class, they told us how much they had learned and how much they looked forward to becoming online instructors. We smiled and shook hands as they departed.

As the last workshop participant left the Smart Classroom, our smiles faded. The university's primary Blackboard support technician sighed. "You know by the time the next module starts, they won't remember even half of this."

Just two weeks later, our phones began to ring as frustrated instructors tried to post announcements and assignments and students tried to follow broken links

and access empty folders. Something had to be done.

The Early Years of Training

Like all learners, new online instructors need hands-on experience, feedback, and ongoing support to become comfortable and proficient in the virtual classroom. It is unrealistic to expect even the most self-motivated, creatively pedagogical, and technically inclined instructor to fly solo after just a few hours of training. With our online degree program growing steadily each year, our small staff could no longer keep pace with the follow-up training necessary to maintain the quality of our courses.

Since our small private university's entry into distance learning in 1997, faculty training and development had evolved from one-on-one technology training in an administrator's cubicle to our two-and-a-half-hour workshop. By 2004, our pool of instructors had grown from a handful of early adopters



to more than 100 adjuncts and full-time faculty teaching 200 annual sections with 3,000 enrollments. In addition, 30 percent of our online adjuncts lived well outside commuting distance for on-site training. Administrative staff and experienced faculty initially provided one-on-one support after each training workshop. As the number of instructors taking the workshops grew, however, the number of phone calls and drop-in visits from instructors seeking assistance threatened to overwhelm our faculty development staff and budget.

With nine bachelor's degrees, five associate's degrees, and seven certificate programs running online and more in development, we clearly needed a more intensive faculty development program that would provide not just technical proficiency but also a strong pedagogical foundation sustainable beyond the Smart Classroom.

We agree with Clay that
There is arguably no area more
important to distance learning

administrators than that of training and support for distance educators. Many educators have reached a level of understanding and experience in which they are highly confident in their ability to deliver quality instruction. When they are faced with adopting techniques that seem to curtail their abilities to immediately interact with students and require the utilization of new technologies, they are understandably fearful that their instruction and subsequent evaluations will suffer.¹

Only a few full-time faculty members embraced online education in the early years. These early adopters demonstrated all the best qualities of technology teaching pioneers: curiosity, flexibility, and dedication to innovative learning. They contributed greatly to the initial success of the program.

At the same time, about 90 percent of our online faculty members were adjuncts. The adjuncts were generally enthusiastic, hard working, and willing

to learn, but their levels of technological skill and teaching experience varied greatly. A few more full-time faculty members came along half-heartedly. As Bower wrote,

Faculty are not recalcitrant Luddites. Many have simply been disillusioned by previous technologies touted as innovations that would alter the course of education. Faculty are exhibiting healthy skepticism when they resist the call to jump on the latest educational bandwagon before assessing how this new technology will help students learn.²

Unlike many online faculty development programs, our university's training emphasized the connection between technology and pedagogy. With two experienced online instructors as well as a full-time faculty member on our four-person training team, we had avoided the pitfall of introducing technical course management skills in a vacuum. When we taught instructors the mechanics of setting up a discus-

sion forum, we always discussed the pedagogical reasons for using forums as well as ways to design good questions and prompt critical thinking and deep discussion. We emphasized the “why” of technology use as much as the “how.” To convert and sustain more online faculty, however, the training needed to be intensified and reinforced.

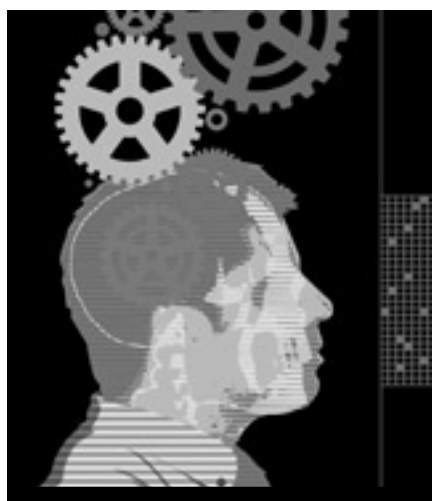
Training Challenges

Effective student learning was the ultimate goal of our instructor training. We were acutely aware of the need for a consistent, easily navigated course that welcomed students. A student confused or frustrated by design flaws or technology constraints will soon move to a more user-friendly online program. Only instructors with a clear vision of technology’s effects can design and teach online courses that make technology transparent for students. Even the most well-intentioned content experts often need to be restrained from promiscuous technology use and cluttered design. Our instructors needed to understand how good design supports the learning process.

Across the board, our training challenges fell roughly into these categories:

- *Bouncing bunnies*: well-meaning instructors intent on creating courses with bouncing bunnies and flying toasters—all technical flash and no substance
- *Teacher-centrics*: instructors who would be content to simply post class notes or videotape themselves endlessly lecturing as they might in their on-site classes
- *Technophobes*: those who must be dragged kicking and screaming into the online classroom
- *Teaching newbies*: inexperienced instructors who need help with course management and pedagogy

Of course some instructors fit into more than one category or faced lesser technical and pedagogical challenges, but we believed all could benefit from more intensive and structured training that continued to meld technology and pedagogy. Our workshop development challenge thus was less about philosophy than logistics. A simplistic (and no doubt



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less labor-intensive) solution would have been the development of course templates by “content experts” and instructional designers. But neither faculty nor staff was interested in creating cookie-cutter courses. We valued the individual expertise and styles of our instructors and wanted our training to enable them to incorporate their strengths into the online environment.

This acknowledgement and respect for faculty contributions is vital to the success of any faculty development program, whether on-site or online. It also would waste valuable resources and shortchange our students if we failed to fully incorporate faculty expertise in our online course development.

At our first training development meeting in early 2004, we considered the following questions:

- How can we provide the amount of information and hands-on training needed by an academically and geographically diverse faculty?
- How can we convince faculty to devote the time to master the skills necessary for effective online teaching?

- How can we provide after-workshop support without exhausting staff and financial resources?

The Solution: Move Online

We arrived at our conclusion rapidly: Instructor training had to move online. We anticipated the following advantages:

- We could train instructors from around the country or world.
- An asynchronous online course would provide sustained, detailed, hands-on technical training and practice that instructors could complete at their convenience.
- Staff time would be freed up because the training team could manage the online course incrementally throughout the week rather than setting aside blocks of time for workshops or one-to-one training.
- Each instructor would be assigned a practice shell and required to demonstrate the ability to build a basic course.
- Each feature of the course management system would be tied to pedagogical readings and assignments, ensuring that instructors understood the reasons for using the technology and how it might affect teaching and learning.
- Requiring instructors to demonstrate technical and pedagogical understanding and proficiency would ensure greater course quality and reduce retraining time.
- The discussion forums would provide an ideal way to explore pedagogical issues and create community among instructors who might never meet face-to-face.
- The more intensive training should result in more effective teaching and reduce staff support time as instructors approach online teaching with more confidence and skill.
- We would get to know instructors who lived too far away to come to campus for training, enhancing our ability to head off problems, assess performance, and make more informed hiring decisions about these instructors.
- Instructors who successfully completed the course would be awarded certifi-

cates that could enhance their marketability and provide an additional training incentive.

- Perhaps most important, the instructors would themselves become “students” in a course that mirrored our undergraduate courses in format and pedagogical approach. They would learn by experiencing.

An article by Yang and Cornelious³ that cites numerous researchers reinforced our belief in training instructors online. The authors point out that instructors should be trained not only in the use of software, the Web, and online communications but also in techniques to encourage active learning and online course management. They also recommend that this training be delivered online to mirror the experience of distance education students.

We also decided that the training must be reinforced with a mentoring program for new instructors and a formal course assessment program.

The planning proceeded quickly. At our initial meeting, we created a list of subjects and approaches for our ideal class. The course had to be basic enough for the technical newbies but sophisticated enough to keep the attention of the more experienced online or on-site faculty who needed to advance their online pedagogical skills. To accommodate instructors from around the country, often in different time zones, we had to ensure that all material would be available online and readily understood without real-time contact with the workshop leaders.

After selecting the technical and pedagogical information we considered essential, we divided the course into eight-week modules to mirror the eight-week format of our undergraduate online program. Like the courses we offered students, our training course would be completely asynchronous. Participants would never be required to come to campus or to be available at a particular time to participate in live chat sessions. In keeping with this asynchronous model, proctored exams were not included.

We then divided the course into two tracks: group work in the main course shell, and individual work in

private practice shells. Participants would learn the basic functions in the course management system. Pedagogical approaches and discussions would be linked to each technical feature. We would also cover Assessments and the Gradebook and make sure instructors knew about library resources, online tutoring services, and turnitin.com, a plagiarism-detection Web site used by the university.

We then developed learning outcomes for the online training. Upon successful completion of the course, participants would be able to:

- Understand and implement basic pedagogical principles of successful online courses
- Understand the best practices of online education, including quick turnaround time and developing an effective teaching personality
- Demonstrate the ability to implement and utilize all basic course management software functions
- Competently manage and facilitate an online course conference
- Set up and populate lecture folders using folders, learning units, and items to present lecture material
- Fully utilize the functionality of the Blackboard Gradebook, Digital Drop Box, Resources, and Groups
- Create tests and deploy them appropriately within a course

Once the framework for the course had been established, we divided the research and course design duties among the team members and began work on the course shell. We set up a discussion forum in the shell so that we could post messages about our progress and reach a consensus on the final design.

Course Structure

We were concerned about the time it would take instructors to complete the work we believed necessary to achieve proficiency. Most of our adjuncts held demanding full-time jobs in addition to teaching, and we knew full-time faculty would be reluctant to devote many hours or weeks to training, even given a reasonably flexible schedule. The asynchronous format was a key selling point for participants, just as it was

for undergraduates. The eight-week format proved comfortable for instructors already accustomed to our undergraduate program.

We also wanted the course to be as student-centered and self-directed as possible. On a practical level, this would avoid overextending the staff; on a pedagogical level, it would model the university's student-centered approach to learning. Careful design of the discussion forums and other assignments kept the focus on instructors helping each other work out teaching and technical questions while knowing that the workshop facilitators were available to help when necessary. We also kept the practice shell assignments brief and generic to prevent course participants from obsessing about posting pedagogically “perfect” course content that they would use in their discipline.

We estimated that participants would spend one and a half to two hours a week on practice shell assignments, at least two hours a week in the discussion forums, and another two to three hours a week reviewing assignments, lectures, and outside readings. Deadlines for assignments were staggered throughout the week to avoid a glut of postings at the end of each module. We expected that the group project would consume about an hour a week over three weeks.

Staff time to support the course was divided among four trainers at an estimated two hours per trainer per week. Although actual participant and staff time varied according to levels of expertise and interests of the participants, our estimates proved fairly accurate—with the notable exception of the group project, which we revised several times during the first year we taught the course. The group project is discussed in more detail later.

We viewed each week as a building block for a solid pedagogical foundation, marked by each instructor's completion of a practice shell design. Each week included lectures from the training staff, reading assignments, technological practice assignments, and asynchronous discussion forums linked to the week's readings and practice tasks.

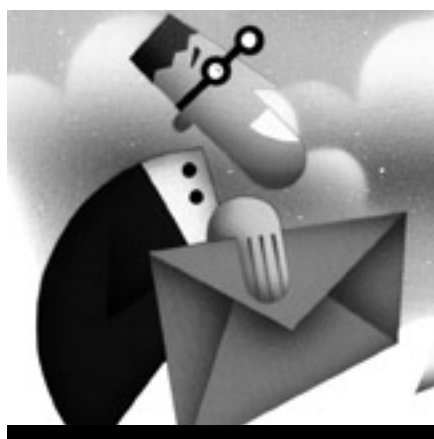
The discussion forums were divided into teaching and administrative. The teaching forums gave participants the opportunity to experience models of Socratic questioning and student-centered learning and to develop good online communication skills and presence. We made every effort to ensure that participants clearly understood the dynamics of an asynchronous discussion board. We agree with Beaudin that

keeping online asynchronous discussion on topic can be best done by carefully designing good questions, providing guidelines for learners to use when preparing their responses, rewording the question when discussions go off topic, and by providing discussion summaries.⁴

The administrative forums included an Introductions forum where participants posted brief autobiographies and began to develop rapport with their fellow instructors and the training staff; a Student 2 Student “water cooler” forum for students to use for off-topic discussions, networking, and socializing; a Questions About the Course forum where students could post general questions such as those that would be posed during an on-site class; and a Best Practices forum where participants could share teaching ideas.

In the practice shell assignments, participants had to meet the university’s online design standards, which included branding on the welcome page, a fixed layout of buttons, and layers of folders, learning units, and items. Although some faculty might object to design standardization, we decided ease of navigation and course accessibility outweighed questions of academic design freedom. Instructors were welcome to exercise their judgment and personal preferences in the course content, but the content had to be presented in a student-friendly format. We did not encounter objections from either our adjuncts or full-time faculty in this regard.

Links to relevant sections of the Blackboard training manual were provided each week, along with a technical Tip of the Week written by our technical support staff member.



Recommendations for changes and improvements were made in the written evaluations, which also influenced hiring and course assignments

Course Presentation

The first week of the course focused on the basics of online learning pedagogy. It included an overview of the university’s program and philosophy, an Introductions discussion forum, and discussion of “Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever” by Arthur W. Chickering and Stephen C. Ehrmann.⁵

During the second week, participants began building their practice shells. In that and the following weeks, each technical assignment was linked to a pedagogical reading and discussion forum. As participants opened their own discussion forums in the practice shells, they read about effective online facilitating and honed their online personae by composing and discussing responses to hypothetical students in the main course forum. As they learned how to post syllabi and assignments, they read about and discussed effective syllabi and assignment design. As they learned how to use the gradebook, they discussed online plagiarism and assessment techniques.

The final assignment was the group project, in which the participants learned the technical aspects of setting

up a group and experienced the advantages and constraints of group work. This assignment proved the most challenging but also the most useful and interesting ultimately, for the training team as well as the course participants.

Although not all faculty members were comfortable with technology, our sequencing approach helped build the confidence of new or technophobic online instructors. Confronted with the huge task of creating an entire course online, they understandably were reluctant to proceed. We tried to build their confidence by breaking down a course into its most elemental pieces, helping them master each task one at a time. Once an instructor could master the simple task of uploading a syllabus, for example, he or she would be more likely to feel comfortable moving on to a second task. We also found that building personal relationships with technophobes, or any other instructors for that matter, helped quite a bit in our quest to win them over.

Grading

A major question about the course was how to evaluate and grade performance. We decided that Bonnie Riedinger would handle the evaluation and grading for the discussion board assignments. We used a Grading Rubric for Discussion Postings designed by Paul Rosenberg, which was posted in the course. The rubric was important because it clearly spelled out the quality as well as the quantity of postings we expected. It also encouraged students to take the discussions seriously. Riedinger evaluated participation in the group project as well, guided by several rubrics developed at other universities.

Our technical support person, evaluated and graded the practice course assignments. We decided that a Complete/Incomplete was the best option. Participants in the course were asked to contact him each week to let him know when their assignments were ready for review. Participants were encouraged to finish incomplete assignments as soon as possible. One week was allotted for most assignments, but we often allowed more time if needed for successful com-

pletion of assignments. All assignment and discussion grades were posted in the gradebook.

We wanted all of our instructors to succeed, so we did all we could to ensure their success, including giving them extra time to complete the course when necessary. One-on-one phone tutoring also was provided on request. At the end of the course we awarded a certificate of completion, signed by the president of the university and the director of distance learning. Local instructors were invited to an informal graduation ceremony, which included congratulations from the university president and coverage on the university's Web site news.

Mentoring and Assessment

As follow-up to the training, we initiated the Online Faculty Mentor Program, which paired a new online instructor with an experienced, certified online instructor who had successfully taught a minimum of 15 credits in the online program. We paid each mentor a modest stipend.

The Online Faculty Mentor Program helped new instructors make the transition to online teaching program and provided them with a guide they could turn to with questions or problems. The mentor enrolled in the mentee's class as a student. Both the mentee and the mentor received specific instructions before the beginning of the course that made it clear the mentor was an adviser, not a supervisor.

Rosenberg introduced mentor and mentee by e-mail before the class began. Both received eight-question report forms to fill out at the end of the class. They were encouraged to share their reports with each other as well as submit them to the director. We also asked the mentor to submit an informal report to the director at mid-semester.

Throughout the year, the training team conducted formal assessments of its instructors, using benchmarks based on the certification course. Copies of the benchmarks and recommended practices were provided to each instructor before course assessment. The assessment was divided into two sections: Design and Course Content. Each sec-

tion of the course such as Announcements, Syllabus, Lectures, Assignments, Discussion Board, and Resources as well as the overall design of the course were assigned a list of best practices rated as exceeds standards, meets all standards, meets most standards, meets some standards, or does not meet standards. For example, the minimum design standards for the discussion boards included facilitating at least one forum per week; posting a grading rubric; and prohibiting anonymous posts. The content standards for instructor presence and participation included maintaining an encouraging and friendly tone; responding to forum questions within 24 to 48 hours; logging on to class daily; writing clear posts free of typos and grammatical errors; and using reflective, open-ended questions to encourage critical thinking and forum participation.

Courses were projected on a screen in a Smart Classroom, allowing for group discussion and commentary during the assessment. The entire online team filled out separate evaluations, which were aggregated and returned to each member for approval. All four team members signed the approved form, before it was mailed to the instructor.

After each evaluation, the instructors received the signed form, which included a chart with commentary that ranked each portion of the course. The chart was accompanied by a narrative letter that expanded on the chart commentary with more personal communication. Recommendations for changes and improvements were made in the written evaluations, which also influenced hiring and course assignments.

Soon after conducting several iterations of the course, when the assessment process was firmly in place, we noted the following:

- Greater knowledge of the instructors' strengths and weaknesses enabled administrators to make more informed hiring and course assignment decisions.
- The support and monitoring provided by the assessments and mentoring programs increased positive, proactive interaction between administrators and instructors. This enabled us to

manage small problems before they grew and encouraged a feeling of administrator/instructor partnership that nurtured ongoing dialogues about online learning.

- The certification course and follow-up mentoring and assessment resulted in a marked decrease in egregious course navigation problems such as empty folders, improving students' ability to access course information.
- Requests for routine follow-up technical support decreased.
- Follow-up questions moved from repeated queries about the basics to in-depth questions focused on more advanced technical procedures and ways to migrate in-class pedagogy to the online course, indicating a greater level of instructor interest and investment in their courses.

This willingness to enhance and continually look for ways to improve teaching methods as well as course design could only benefit student learning. Moreover, the combination of training, mentoring, and assessment proved so beneficial to our program that we resolved to continue these strategies in the future.

Lessons Learned

Our first lesson learned was a pleasant surprise. We had anticipated faculty resistance to the certification course, expecting the usual litany of complaints: "I don't have time." "What, no extra compensation?" "I've been teaching for 20 years; I don't need training." So when we sent out the e-mail announcing the first course, which adjuncts were required to take and full-time faculty could volunteer to take, we were overwhelmed by the positive response. The convenience of asynchronous online learning, the opportunity to interact with other instructors, and the formality of a certificate that adjuncts could include on a CV appealed to the majority of instructors. Nearly every adjunct and many full-time faculty members replied within the first few days, and the number who wanted to enroll in the first course far exceeded our cap of 15 participants.

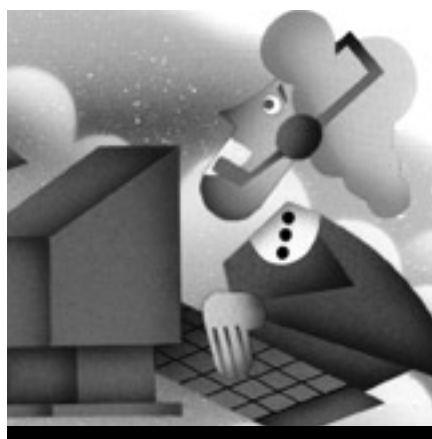
Once enrolled in the course, the instructors continued to surprise us in

positive and negative ways. Although a number of adjuncts demonstrated dedication and intellectual rigor far beyond what we anticipated, we quickly learned that many instructors, some of whom we had known for many years, could easily revert to student behavior. Instructors—yes, instructors—were late with assignments, whined about the workload, and in many other ways came to resemble the average college student. Instructors slipped into the role of student without any difficulty whatsoever. Although we had wanted our instructors to have a student experience that mirrored our undergraduate courses, we were surprised at how much of a “student experience” it became.

Another peculiar phenomenon also arose. We dubbed this the Werewolf Syndrome. During the course of the program, a handful of the more than 60 instructors we ultimately trained morphed into people we barely recognized. Although posts in the course were not anonymous, the transactional distance—like that in a chat room, which invites flaming, or that of an interstate highway, which enables road rage—seemed to inspire some of our instructors to let loose full-moon personality quirks that were disturbing as well as unexpected.

One instructor, challenging the concept of an online teaching persona, assumed multiple personalities (none pleasant) in his postings. A seemingly placid on-site instructor picked a fight with another instructor she believed was “ignoring” her posts. Another, when gently and privately prompted to clean up typos and grammatical errors in the practice shell and forums, had an emotional meltdown. One used the forums to rail against the “administration.” Still another refused to post more than superficial comments in the forums, then complained bitterly that he couldn’t figure out how to post animated cartoons.

Although this behavior was not widespread, it did necessitate more staff time monitoring and managing the forums than we had anticipated. It also provided us with valuable insights into individual instructors’ strengths and weaknesses.



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We also learned that many of our older instructors and instructors from particular disciplines, such as mathematics, were unfamiliar with or suspicious of student-centered learning. During week five of the course, we asked each participant to post a question about student-centered learning and lead a discussion on the topic. We had included a brief overview of student-centered learning but assumed that our instructors would be familiar with the approach. Instead, we found that some instructors equated student-centered learning with customer service. Others thought it meant being responsive to the demands of working adult students and finding ways to help them accommodate the pressures of family, work, and school. Still others had no idea that teaching was or could be more than lecturing. Convincing these instructors to engage in active teaching was essential to prevent them from merely posting lectures online. In response to this surprise, we introduced the concept earlier in the course and added several articles on student-centered learning. Modeling active teach-

ing also gave form to the theory.

We also quickly learned that we had to be even clearer in our directions, although we had thought we were already quite explicit. At least once a week, our technical support person reminded us that we live and breathe the stuff of online learning and can, on occasion, be less aware than we should of the frustrations experienced by the new online instructor. We also learned that we had to rewrite some of our instructions to eliminate any possible question about assignments.

This need for repetition and clarity was not confined to the technical aspects of the assignments. Our group project, in particular, seemed to need extra clarification. Group work was not an online activity with which many of our instructors were familiar—precisely the reason we included a group project in the course. The assignment itself seemed simple. The participants were divided into groups of five. Each participant was to present three Web sites related to his or her discipline, which the group then evaluated according to a rubric and decided on the five most useful sites. This assignment was based on one Riedinger used in her first-year, on-site English class. Her undergraduates had had no difficulty understanding or completing the project and had even seemed to enjoy it. We selected the assignment because we did not think it would be very time consuming but would give participants the chance to use all the group functions of Blackboard and experience the dynamics of online group work. We also hoped to use the recommended Web sites as the basis for a list of online teaching resources. In preparation for the project, we assigned several readings on effective group strategies and grading.

At least half our instructors found the project daunting and confusing. Nearly all posted comments in the discussion forums about how much they hated group work. Perhaps the negative outlook affected participants’ ability to deal with the assignment. Straightforward, step-by-step instructions and deadlines were ignored or misinterpreted. Some participants thought that they and their students would learn much better work-

ing individually. One full-time faculty member termed the project “busy work.” Another called group work an “educational fad.” Some tried to overcomplicate the project and ignored the directions. Rather than selecting Web sites, some instructors suggested finding scholarly research articles on the Web and evaluating the articles as one would in a peer-reviewed journal. Others complained in a near panic that they were not “experts” in any discipline but their own and could not be expected to evaluate Web sites outside of their field. On the other hand, some groups read and followed the directions, completed the assignment on time, and said they looked forward to using groups in their own courses.

In response, the training team rewrote the group assignment directions to address questions raised during the first two certification courses. We also began posting weekly announcements about the group work a week before the project was scheduled to start and sent out a voice e-mail reminder using Wimba. Clicking on a link in the e-mail took recipients to the Wimba Web site, where they heard an audio message from the instructors. During the week that focused on student-centered learning, we also made sure we included forum discussions of group work.

This did not eliminate questions and concerns about the project, but we came to the conclusion that that’s okay. Learning is a messy and not always enjoyable process. The emotional and logistical challenges of group work take many of us way out of our comfort zones. As educators, we need to be willing to go there—by ourselves and with our students. The challenges of group work helped open that discussion.

In more recent iterations of the certification course, we focused on the reflective process more and earlier. By emphasizing to the participants that the goal of the assignment was to experience the process and learn from it rather than produce a list of perfect Web site recommendations, we shifted the focus to the pedagogy instead of the product. While this did not put the assignment on participants’ top-ten list, it did result in



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more analytical and less emotional responses and reflections that began to examine instructors’ own teaching and learning styles and preferences. At the end of the group project, participants were asked to reflect on what they had learned and to analyze what worked well in the group and what could have been improved. They also were asked to examine how the Blackboard Group tools affected the group dynamics and to compare the online group work to their previous offline experience with group work.

One of the best side effects of learning to teach online is the opportunity for instructors to examine their pedagogical habits. The certification course forced many instructors to do this and also provided them with windows into other instructors’ teaching approaches.

We saw a marked, sometimes dramatic, improvement in the courses of many of the instructors who successfully completed the course, based on our team course evaluations, which identified better course design, course management, and communications with students. We believe we learned as much from conducting the course as our instructors learned from taking it. First, we can’t assume what our instructors learn and retain after a brief, in-person training

session. Much more time is required to impart the many pedagogical and technological concepts that we thought necessary. Second, although we learned more about some of our instructors than we really cared to know, such a state of affairs is better than knowing too little. Third, we were amazed at how easily our instructors started behaving like typical college students. Finally, we were pleasantly surprised at the camaraderie that developed in the class—a rapport that we hope will continue as the informal teaching community prompted by the certification course grows. *e*

Endnotes

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