

## Faculty Perceptions of “The Project”: An Advanced Faculty Professional Development for Online Course Building

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**Abstract**—This article reports on a research study that focused on faculty perceptions of an advanced professional development workshop (called “The Project”) in relation to designing and teaching online courses at the university level. The findings of the study, gleaned from an end-of-course survey, revealed that the faculty members perceived a focus on advanced technology users favorably and deemed it would contribute to developing future online courses.

**Keywords**—*e-learning; faculty perceptions; online course building; online learning; professional development*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Online education has grown considerably in the past 10 years as demonstrated by the fact that the proportion of students taking at least one online course has increased from fewer than one in ten in 2002 to almost one third in 2010 [1], [2]. Along with this growth in demand for online courses has come increasing pressure from administration in institutions of higher education for faculty to provide more and more online course offerings [3]. These factors have also generated a demand for more faculty training related to building and teaching online courses [4], [5], which is the focus of the study presented here. The distinguishing factor of this study is that it evaluates the implementation of an advanced faculty professional development program for online course building. Furthermore, *advanced* is used to refer to the faculty members who have been trained in online course development and teaching, are experienced online course builders, and who have taught online courses previously.

This paper documents the effectiveness of the program based on the perceptions of the faculty participants as determined by their responses to an end-of-program survey. The paper begins with a review of the literature associated with advanced professional development for online course building and its role in developing online courses and programs. Then, the design of the advanced faculty professional development program for online course building is detailed, along with the research method that was used for this study. Next, the results of the program evaluation and a discussion of the faculty perceptions are provided. Finally, the article concludes with broader implications of this research through a discussion of how the results from the program evaluation will enable course instructors to optimize instructional design to improve the professional development program in future iterations of “The Project.”

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies confirm a substantial increase in the availability of online courses and programs in recent years [1], [2] and research related to online course development continues to be consistent with the creation, implementation, and facilitation of training for faculty new to online teaching. The motivation behind this line of research is the increasing requests for online course offerings and programs from students and therefore the increasing pressure for institutions to provide more online course offerings. Consequently, research about the effectiveness of online training models is also more in line with the needs of students [1], [6], [7] and the concerns of faculty new to online teaching with little or no mention of advanced faculty who develop online courses [8], [9], [10], [11].

Furthermore, there is a considerable amount of research that examines the effectiveness of the transfer of learning (TAM) models and the ease of use among faculty when training for online teaching [9], [12]. For example, Agarwal and Prasad [12] describe how training affects the participants’ perceptions of usefulness for the technology, and that people more highly educated or trained with the use of technology are more likely to adopt technology for teaching. More directly related to this study, Gegenfurtner, Veermans, Festner, and Gruber [13] found that the way the person perceives training may impact the decision to apply knowledge gained from the training. In an analysis of current and effective training strategies for preparing faculty to teach online Lackey concluded that online “preparation strategies should include both technical and pedagogical training” [14].

Professional development for online instructors, in both online and face-to-face formats, can create effective informal learning whereby participants in the training collaborate, share, discuss and reflect on different technologies, pedagogies and practices [15]. In this way, participants construct knowledge and transfer learning with each other. It is anticipated that this experience would be heightened and even more beneficial in an advanced faculty online professional development program where the participants already have online training and online teaching experience. However, researchers have not yet investigated such perceptions of implementing an advanced faculty professional development program, as addressed by this study. The specific research questions addressed in this article are the following:

1. How do faculty perceive the effectiveness of an advanced professional development workshop designed for online course building?
2. What changes do faculty recommend making to the advanced professional development workshop designed for online course building?

### III. METHODS

This inquiry-based research focused directly on faculty perceptions of advanced online teacher training. To answer the research questions a 15-item questionnaire (see Appendix A) was administered electronically to the 10 faculty participants. The questionnaire was designed to determine whether the participants deemed the faculty development as valuable. Furthermore, the survey was designed with the Technology Acceptance Model in mind to ascertain whether the participants planned to use information and tools presented in the project. It was created and delivered via SurveyMonkey, a cloud-based application for surveys, which made the questionnaire more accessible. Subsequently, all participants completed the questionnaire, which was designed primarily to gauge the participants’ perceptions of having participated in and completing the professional development course. The analysis of the survey responses targeted the participants’ satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the course and its specific components. This focus was adopted to gather information in an effort to answer the research questions and to refine the course for future use.

It should be noted that the relatively small sample size of this research (N=10) limits the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the presentation of faculty perceptions regarding the advanced faculty workshop for online course building should be considered in context and only applied to other contexts of comparable nature. To bolster the generalizability of these findings, larger samples should be studied over longer periods of time. Self-reported data, like that gathered in this research, comes with a bias of judging your own work. “The Project”

To address the increasing demand for online and hybrid courses at the university under investigation and the need to provide faculty with the skills and incentive to develop these online and hybrid courses, the advanced professional development workshop, known as "The Project," was created to provide faculty within the college who are already teaching online with advanced tools and pedagogy to develop future online courses. For the first iteration of "The Project" online modules were created and run by online coordinators, designated faculty within each academic department in the college who act as a liaison between department faculty and the Office of Distance Education (ODE) in the college. The online coordinators also served as the first participants for the project. The group consists of five females and five males; one full professor, four associate professors, three assistant professors, and two lecturers. Collectively, the group had an average of 6.3 years of online teaching experience and 10 years of technology-enhanced teaching experience. Additionally, all members had at least one year as an online coordinator.

Online coordinators are given a small stipend for taking on the responsibility of supporting distance education in online, hybrid, and traditional classroom settings within their department. This support can include department level training for instructional technology and one-on-one sessions to brainstorm and trouble shoot distance learning issues with full-time and part-time faculty. With the guidelines that it should pertain to best practices and sharing knowledge and expertise relating to online learning, and that it should contain 30 minutes to one hour worth of content on their topic along with an interactive activity, the online coordinators were given freedom to select their own module topics. Additionally, each module designer was expected to monitor his or her own module during the week that it was active and to provide feedback to participants. The eleven modules created and presented are depicted in Table I.

TABLE I. OVERVIEW OF LEARNING MODULES INCLUDED IN “THE PROJECT”

Learning Modules
Module 1: Latest Research Into Successful Online Learning
Module 2: Best Practices in Mobile Learning
Module 3: Faculty Presence in Online Courses
Module 4: Get Your Students’ Heads INTO the Clouds: Cloud Computing
Module 5: Strong and Effective Types of Feedback
Module 6: Taking the Long View: How Online Learning Has Changed at the University
Module 7: Lessons Learned: Five Tips I Would Share with New Online Coordinators
Module 8: Creative Assignments in the Online Classroom: The Virtual Classroom
Module 9: Learner-Content Interaction in Online Courses
Module 10: Real Online Programs at the University
Module 11: Social Media in Online Teaching

“The Project”, being a completely online professional development workshop, was hosted on the learning management system Desire2Learn. Each participant was expected to log in each week to access the module contents and participate in the activities, completing the module in one week. There were no incentives for the online coordinators to participate in "The Project" other than it was expected as a part of their position. Most modules contained voiceover PowerPoint presentations for content delivery, although two modules used a PowerPoint presentation with more detailed notes. Modules dealt with contemporary pedagogy and technology related to online teaching, including cloud computing, the use of social media, the edupunk movement, teaching on mobile devices, and showing user-content interaction with simulations using ArcGIS. Every module started with module objectives and some modules had supplemental or required readings. All modules had a discussion board where participants were asked to reflect and interact through answering one or two directed questions relating to the material covered. Frequently, participants were asked to relate their own

experiences and methods of achieving a particular goal, such as establishing instructor presence in an online course. This participation sometimes involved asking participants to share samples from their own courses. Some modules used drag and drop exercises and self-assessment quizzes to verify content comprehension and retention.

#### IV. RESULTS

The following sections delineate the results from this study as they relate to the research questions. More specifically, the results are presented in order of the survey items. With regard to question one, a small majority (60%) of the participants who completed the questionnaire (N=10) expressed some apprehension about the purpose of and time commitment associated with “The Project” at the outset, and none expressed “excitement” about their participation.

Despite this initial trepidation, the participants reported a noticeable increase in enthusiasm for the training after completing the project. Only 50% responded that they were either “enthusiastic” or “somewhat enthusiastic” before training and 90% responded similarly after completion. The increase in interest was further reinforced by qualitative responses like, “Once I started seeing the very interesting contributions, I thought it was brilliant,” “I think there are some potential benefits of completing this course,” and “I see potential for this, but it needs refinement.”

Although all of the participants (100%) reported being satisfied with the online delivery of the training, consistent themes in the qualitative feedback provided across questions focused on the potential benefits of this training and the need for content revision. Most of the participants reported that this training with modifications would effectively serve our experienced faculty who desired additional professional development. Several participants commented on a need for additional technology modules. Another concern focused on the overall lack of consistency across the modules, which was likely a product of having individuals develop content without restrictive guidelines about what they should include prior to initial launch.

Recognizing, perhaps, that “The Project” is being developed for delivery to experienced faculty who have previously developed and delivered online and/or hybrid courses, participants identified the “Pedagogy/Online Teaching” modules as most helpful. Several also responded either quantitatively or qualitatively that the modules specific to the university and the role of online coordinators were the least helpful of those offered.

Across several open-ended questions, #5 and #8-12, additional feedback was collected about revising the existing modules to improving content in “The Project.” Qualitative comments centered on the duration of the training, a need for more consistency in both content and facilitation across modules, and the addition of more content focused on technology. Notably, a majority of participants reported a willingness to offer more than just constructive feedback about their experience; 80% of the respondent indicated that, if asked, they would create another module for the “The Project”.

#### V. DISCUSSION

Based on faculty responses to a 15-item questionnaire, three findings emerged from the study’s results. These findings include the following key points: First, participants generally reported enthusiasm concerning their professional development experience in “The Project.” Second, most participants identified pedagogy as the more important topic covered in “The Project.” And third, “The Project” functioned as a knowledge and skill benchmark for its participants. A more detailed explanation of each finding follows.

##### A. *Enthusiasm for Professional Development*

Whereas more than half of “The Project” participants did not understand the program’s purpose up front or feel they had time for it, most participants reported enthusiasm or some enthusiasm for “The Project” at its completion. Several of the open-ended responses, many of which are summarized previously, substantiate this conclusion. This observation fits with the findings of Baldwin and Magjuka [16] in that it confirms the importance of thoroughly explaining a training program to faculty members well before training commences. In short, participants are routinely more willing to participate in any type of training program if a program’s initiator has taken steps to clarify the purpose of the training. We attribute some of the enthusiasm for “The Project” upon its completion to the presence of what Bolt [15] refers to as “informal learning” which occurred when participants shared their preexisting knowledge and online teaching experiences with each other. By sharing their “very interesting contributions” (per a comment on the survey) relating to online teaching, participants created an online community of learning and practice. In effect, with this advanced professional development course the transfer of knowledge from participant to participant became equally, or even more, important than the transfer of knowledge from course facilitator to participants. In line with previous research [17], [18], [19], this finding demonstrates that structured learning programs – whether facilitated by a designated professional trainer or co-facilitated by participating trainees – are a constructive means to influence the development of one’s advanced online instructor abilities.

##### B. *Pedagogy and Professional Development*

A second finding of this research is that the participants of “The Project” distinguished pedagogy as the most important topic in the program for furthering one’s online teaching abilities. Indeed, 60% of participants noted that of the 11 modules in the program, covering four online education topic areas (i.e., Online Coordinator duties, technology today, trends in online education, and pedagogy for online teaching), the topic deemed most valuable to the program was pedagogy for online teaching. Ninety percent of participants believed they were improved online teachers based on their “The Project” experience, especially due to content that emphasized pedagogy. These comments substantiated this finding: (I liked) “hearing about pedagogy and theory related to teaching online!” and (I liked) “lots of details about online pedagogy.” This second finding fits with

Stephenson’s [20] perennial work on online education that emphasizes the importance of pedagogy to online instruction. This finding also supports the significance of the growing body of pedagogical theories being taught in training programs for online instruction and being referenced and tested in social scientific research (e.g., Technology Acceptance Model [12] and Theory of Action [17]). Specifically, the Technology Acceptance Model suggests that the perceived usefulness and ease of use of the technology will increase the users’ acceptance of the tool.

As a cautionary note concerning this finding, it is not clear whether participants distinguished pedagogy as most important in “The Project” because the topic is associated with a broader call for increased emphasis on pedagogy at the university-level or because the increased time demands for teaching online (e.g., mastering new and evolving technologies) takes away from time that might otherwise be spent incorporating pedagogical principles in teaching; either way, “The Project” results establish that instructors who already teach online recognize the need for pedagogy as they continue to develop as online instructors. These results lead us to concur with Lackey’s [14] previously stated view about the importance of including both techniques and pedagogy in online training strategies.

*C. Self-Assessment and Professional Development*

In addition to the first two findings, results of this research produced an unanticipated third finding. “The Project” functioned as an online teaching knowledge and skills benchmark for its participants. In terms of background, participants qualified for “The Project” because they already had experience teaching online and serving as online coordinators for their departments. In particular, the mean amount of online teaching experience for the online coordinators was six years. As inconsequential as this amount of experience may seem, knowledge of online teaching appeared to function as a mitigating factor influencing participants as they processed content during the program and evaluated content at its end (e.g., actively comparing and contrasting modules). Their feedback was evident in the program’s evaluation at its conclusion. As one participant noted, “(I) absolutely (find this information valuable), if the content is improved.” While another participant offered, “I thought some of the modules were good, while others were not especially applicable. There is definite need for improvement.” In brief, “The Project” seemed to tap into a collective knowledge of online learning that helped differentiate high-developmental modules from low-developmental ones. This emphasis on cognition is significant in that it acts as a predictor of learning transfer [9].

By the same token, participants also acknowledged the importance of continued skill development as part of their experience in “The Project.” As Burke and Hutchins [9] as well as Gegaenfurtner, Veermans, Festner, and Gruber [13] note, emphasis on skill development is an important component of any effective instructor development program, especially for one focused on online teaching. Several responses support attention to online skills training:

- (a) “There needs to be more consistency in the quality of modules.”
  - (b) (In the future) “build into this project various course assignments that relate to the required deliverable” (e.g., a new course)...(that) require(s) faculty to critique and provide feedback on the posts or work of their colleagues.”
  - (c) “Facilitator(s) must model what we should be doing in the classes.”
- In sum, “The Project” served as a meaningful knowledge and skills assessment for its participants as they worked to enhance their online teaching abilities.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The favorable results demonstrate that “The Project” yielded a basic structure from which an advanced faculty development program could be built. There are tangible benefits to be derived from the informal learning that comes with an advanced and experienced online faculty community of learning and practice. There are also several practical implications to consider. First, through participant feedback, the ODE learned that participants believed the pedagogical components of “The Project” to be the most valuable. Second, participants desired more technological teaching tools in the training, and third, participants believed that the online coordinator-specific modules were the least valuable.

TABLE II. OVERVIEW OF LEARNING MODULES INCLUDING PLANNED MODIFICATIONS FOR “THE PROJECT”

Category of Module	Name of module
Pedagogy/ Online Teaching	Latest Research Into Successful Online Learning; “Faculty Presence” in Online Courses; Strong and Effective Types of Feedback; Learner – Content Interaction in Online Courses; Work Smarter, Not Harder*; Improving Retention in Online Courses*
Trends	Best Practices in Mobile Learning; Get Your Students’ Heads INTO the Clouds: Cloud Computing; Creative Assignments in the Online Classroom: The Virtual Museum; The Use of Social Media in Online Teaching
Technology	Panopto*; SoftChalk*; VoiceThread*; Tiki Toki*; Doceri*

\*Content was added for a future iteration of “The Project”

As can be seen in Table II, coordinator-specific modules were removed for the advanced training version of “The Project”, and five additional modules were added for specific technologies. In addition, two modules on pedagogy were added: “Work Smarter, Not Harder” with timesaving tips for online teachers and “Improving Retention in Online, Hybrid, and F2F Courses” with research-based strategies and templates for improving course retention. Future iterations of “The Project” will be offered as a skills update workshop in which the participants choose and complete 9 of 12 available modules.

As noted in the introduction, this study provided a unique opportunity to examine faculty participants’ perceptions of an advanced faculty development for online course building.

Although the findings of this research yield positive results, several areas merit future research. First, similar research should include the perspectives of non-researcher participants and draw from a larger sample size. Second, researchers should evaluate the transference of technology skills as a result of completing the workshop. Last, future research should examine the impact such workshops may have on student learning. Such future research will provide a fuller picture of how the advanced faculty development workshops impacts faculty teaching and students' learning.

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## APPENDIX A: SURVEY ITEMS

Question 1: What were your thoughts when you were first introduced to the idea of “The Project”?

- I didn't really understand it
- I felt like I didn't have time for it
- I thought it was interesting
- I was excited

Question 2: Before "The Project" began, please rate your enthusiasm for it.

- Not enthusiastic
- Somewhat enthusiastic
- Neutral
- Enthusiastic
- Very enthusiastic

Question 3: After completing "The Project," how enthusiastic are you about the experience?

- Not enthusiastic
- Somewhat enthusiastic
- Neutral
- Enthusiastic
- Very enthusiastic

Question 4: Do you believe that this workshop, with a few modifications to make content more specific to online faculty, will effectively serve faculty who have completed the "Build a Web Course" Workshop and desire more professional development?

- No
- Somewhat
- Can't say/don't know
- Yes

Question 5: Do you like the fact that it was all online?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Other

Question 6: What category of modules was most helpful to you?

- None
- Pedagogy/Online Teaching
- Trends
- Technology
- KSU/Online Coordinator Specific
- Other

Question 7: What category of modules was least helpful to you?

- None
- Pedagogy/Online Teaching
- Trends
- Technology
- KSU/Online Coordinator Specific
- Other

Question 8: After completing "The Project," do you believe that you are a better online teacher?

- Yes
- No

Question 9: After completing "The Project," do you feel that you are a better online coordinator?

- Yes
- No

Question 10: What did you like least about “The Project”?

Question 11: What did you like most about “The Project”?

Question 12: What changes would you make to better serve your faculty who enroll in “The Project” pilot in fall?

Question 13: If asked, would you participate in creating another module for a similar endeavor such as "The Project"?

- Yes
- No

Question 14: How much should faculty be paid to complete “The Project” in a semester (not creating modules, just attending/participating)?

Question 15: What else would you like to share?