

Running head: JUSTIFICATION FOR CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

Justification For Certification Program for Teaching Online

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Introduction

Distance education has become an integral part of the services and long term goals of higher education institutions (Kim & Bonk, 2006; Wolf, 2006). As such, institutions need to

provide quality online programs, to serve a larger and more demanding clientele. A critical component of an online program is faculty training and support (Kim & Bonk, 2006). A recent survey of 13 Texas based Universities has shown that four offer mandatory training for faculty who want to teach on line, two of them mentioned they were gearing towards making it mandatory. Of the remaining 7 Universities, the majority indicated that although the training was not mandatory it was highly recommended to all faculty wanting to teach online (Perez, 2012).

Furthermore, the information collected in the surveys and an analysis of the available literature (Kim & Bonk, 2006; Wolf, 2006) make visible several motivations to make the training mandatory. The first motivation is to meet the standards of quality requested by an university through their accrediting program. The second motivation is in response to the faculty's request and the need to become better online instructors. The third motivation is to improve the retention rates in online classes.

The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB), is now offering over 600 online course sections to almost 9,000 students. There are currently 19 online Master's, Bachelor's, and Graduate Degree programs. To meet the growing popularity of online courses, the University has 598 full-time or part-time instructors. The online environment poses several challenges for the faculty since it requires mastering technology, and sometimes, even changing the pedagogy used to teach the course. Most of today's professors were educated in a more classical manner through the use of lectures, papers, and assignments, which could imply that instructors' online pedagogy is deficient in meeting current demands (Barczyk, Buckenmeyer and Feldman 2010). In response to the need to provide a mechanism to assist faculty in delivering high quality online instruction, UTB needs to develop a mandatory training for online faculty.

Course Description

The certification program will teach, expose, and mentor faculty toward the ‘best practices’ for online instruction. The purpose of the certification program is to standardize the quality of online instruction delivered by UTB faculty. The program will consist of two phases, a mandatory ‘Beginners’ phase and a ‘Practicum’ phase. Each phase will target developing the faculty’s technological abilities with online tools, will provide contact hours with more experienced faculty, and will teach effective online pedagogical practices. The goal of the mandatory online teaching certification program is to introduce the faculty to the same experiences the students will have, to compare and contrast face-to-face and online teaching and learning, including teacher and student expectations, roles, and course structure. The training will prepare faculty to design, deliver and assess online materials. The training will be guided by the application of the principles of effective participation through the use of synchronous and asynchronous technologies.

The ‘Beginners’ phase.

This phase will be fully online and it will consist of seven modules. A cohort model is recommended for this phase. A cohort can be formed by 3 or more faculty. A new cohort will begin every 3 months. The duration of the trainings is seven weeks. Each module will consist of a combination of online meetings, on-demand videos, hands-on activities, asynchronous discussions and/or online support. The topics that will be covered in the workshops are:

Week 1: Introductions, starting online courses (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010), and Blackboard basics.

Week 2: Best practices in online teaching

Week 3: Creating the syllabus and the course schedule

Week 4: The power of discussion in an online community: best practices for building communication in an online community; promoting critical self-reflection among students.

Week 5: How to assess and evaluate in an online environment

Week 6: Adapting coursework, class, and assistance to ADA and copyright awareness

Week 7: Faculty time management and workload management. Review and closure.

The ‘Practicum’ phase.

Following the 7 week ‘Beginner’s’ Phase, instructors will work with a mentor while they teach an online course. The mentor will observe, critique, and work with the instructor for at least one online course for a semester.

Course Objectives: The purpose of the certification program is to standardize the quality of online instruction delivered by UTB. The following list contains the main objectives of the certification program.

- a. Learn various user-oriented online learning experiences.
- b. Compare and contrast face-to-face and online teaching and learning, including teacher and student expectations, roles, and course structure.
- c. Expose the learners to online teaching and learning pedagogy.
- d. Create a syllabus and a course schedule following the best practices for online teaching.

- e. Create the course learning objectives and the content of the course for at least the first 4 weeks, including assessment tools to evaluate student material.
- f. Provide opportunities for professors to network and build a support system with novice and experienced online professors.
- g. Expose the learners to the various tools available that are utilized in creating and engaging students in the online environment.

Learning Outcomes: Online instructors will be able to (Course goals):

1. Offer varied instructional activities to evaluate student engagement for course content.
2. Assess learning to measure content knowledge.
3. Respond to student learning through timely and efficient feedback.
4. Ensure group learning is a viable option that is relevant and purposefully focused on the learning standards for the course.

Target Audience

The target audience are faculty professors who elect or are assigned to teach an online or hybrid course. According to Wlodkowski (2008) faculty professors are adult learners with special demands to feel motivated to learn. First, they need to feel included, respected and connected to others in the learning experience. Second, the adult learner develops a positive attitude towards learning when he sees a personal relevance. Third, the adult learner comes with experiences, values and knowledge into the learning environment, all these must be acknowledged and included in the learning experience. Fourth, the adult learner will effectively learn something when they value and perceive it as authentic to their real world. For this project

we will consider all these characteristics of the adult learner in the design and the delivery of the course content.

Furthermore, it is expected from the adult learner to have basic computing skills before entering the training program. These skills include but are not limited to the use of Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, converting a document to Portable Document Format (PDF), navigating using an Internet browser, checking and responding using email, and the comfortable use of online communication tools (microphone, speakers, digital camera and webcam).

Projected Length of Course

The program will consist of two phases, a mandatory ‘Beginners’ phase and, a ‘Practicum’ phase. The ‘Beginners’ Phase will be fully online and it will consist of seven modules. A cohort model is recommended for this phase. A cohort can be formed by 3 or more faculty. A new cohort will begin every 3 months. The duration of the trainings is seven weeks. The ‘Practicum’ phase will be the actual class that the online instructor will facilitate for one semester with guidance from the assigned mentor. This means that the instructor will be able to teach online courses after the 7 week ‘Beginners’ Phase.

Table 1: Length of time

<u>Name of Training Component</u>	<u>Length of time</u>
Beginner’s Phase	7 weeks
Hands-on practicum with mentorship (The learner is already teaching at this time)	1 semester

Delivery Format

This entire certification program will be offered online.

- a. The 'Beginners' phase will include a moderator for the duration of the course. The moderator will provide feedback on the activities, moderate the discussion forum, and moderate the weekly face-to-face online meetings. The moderator will be a Certified Online Instructor and has taught at least 8 online classes or more .
- b. The 'Practicum' phase will offer the instructor a chance to teach their content with the guidance of an experienced Certified Online Instructor who will guide and critique the online teaching of the instructor.

Pedagogical Approach

Based on the theories of Connectivism and Constructivism, online instructors will go through modules that demand participation and interaction. Connectivism is the belief that learning may reside in non-human instruments. In connectivism, learning is viewed as a process of connecting information sources. In addition, connectivism explains that learners' capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known (Siemens, 2004). In other words, instructors should not be expected to only learn tools and pedagogy of online learning but to actively seek out new theories and technologies. Connectivism represents a new learning model in which learning is not limited to being a centralized idiosyncratic activity. Through the certification program, users will expand their learning through the use of different forums (blogs, wikis, video, etc.) and will be expected to learn about new technologies. Since online content is

varied across websites and platforms, instructors will be expected to diversify their learning experiences by utilizing many sources.

The principal tenants of constructivism call for social interaction, apprentice-mentor relationship, hands-on activities, and targeting the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) for each student (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). The cohort design fosters social interaction. The inclusion of a moderator during the ‘Beginners’ phase and a mentor during the ‘Practicum’ phase foster the mentor-apprentice relationship. The goal of the mentor, the moderator, and the content material will be to discover the ZPD for each student to then help them reach the learning goals. The course content will be delivered through the use of hands-on activities that will allow the student to interact with the content in various ways to develop mastery. The ‘Beginners’ phase will use discussion boards, live meeting sessions, blogs, wikis to deliver the course content. Each of these tools will serve as mediators to build the mentor-apprentice relationship and to support peer interaction which is crucial to resolve conflicts of interpretation when learning new material (Borthick, Jones, & Wakai, 2003).

Interactivity

A moderator will be responsible for facilitating student discussions, interactions, and collaborations in the ‘Beginners’ phase. A mentor will guide and critique the online teaching of the faculty during the ‘Practicum’ phase. Both the moderator and the mentor will be ‘Master’ Certified Online Instructors. The ‘Master’ Certified Online Instructor is a faculty member who has satisfactorily completed the 2 phases of the certification program, has taught more than 8 online classes, and is appointed by the Dean, Chair, or any other supervisor of the instructors’ respective college.

Evaluation

During the 'Beginners' phase, student assessment will be conducted through a series of formats that include class participation, demonstration of basic online course requirements that include adequate use of blackboard, the demonstration of online teaching strategies and the development of the course syllabus and the course content. During the practicum, feedback will be completed by the mentor in the form of observation and critique. Finally, at the end of each phase, students will be asked to complete an evaluation of the course that will serve as feedback to continually improve the certification program.

Summary

A critical component of an online program is faculty training and support (Kim & Bonk, 2006). The certification program will teach, expose, and mentor faculty toward the 'best practices' for online instruction. The purpose of the certification program is to standardize the quality of online instruction delivered by UTB faculty. The certification program will consist of two phases a 'Beginners' phase and a 'Practicum' phase. The certification process will encourage, build confidence and provide tools for instructors who teach online courses. It will also provide the faculty with the same experiences their students will be having. Overall, online UTB students will be the greatest beneficiaries of effective online instruction, in turn increasing the retention rates and improving the overall education experience.

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