Supporting Faculty and Students in Online Learning Environments

by
Avril Christine Best

Abstract
Online learning environments are becoming more and more widespread in this global village we call our world. The use of online programs in the delivery of instruction makes education possible for persons who would have, otherwise, not had a chance to continue their education. Institutions which employ online learning environments need to look at the support issues related to this environment, if they would like these educational experiences to be considered successful by all parties involved. The author focused her investigation on support issues related to faculty and students, including training and technical support in the use of online programs, such as course management systems. A successful online experience will only be achieved if faculty members obtain the support they require to deliver the instruction; if students are able to achieve the goals of the instruction by using the technology seamlessly; and if the technology is transparent and is not, in itself, a hurdle to be conquered. These issues were examined and recommendations were made on the types of support that are seen as necessary for a positive online experience.

Keywords: online learning environment, online program, faculty support, student support, technical support.

Introduction
Online learning environments are becoming more and more widespread in this global village we call our world. The use of online programs in the delivery of instruction makes education possible for persons who would have, otherwise, not had a chance to continue their education. Persons with responsibilities that would not allow them to abandon job and family to pursue a career on a physical campus are getting the opportunity to further their education through distance education. Institutions which employ online learning environments need to look at the support issues related to this environment, if they would like these educational experiences to be considered successful by all parties involved. Although there are many areas of support to be considered, the author will focus her investigation on support issues related to faculty and students and also on training and technical support in the use of online programs, such as course management systems.

A successful online experience will only be achieved if faculty members obtain the support they require to deliver the instruction to the students; if students are able to achieve the goals of the instruction by using the technology seamlessly; and if the technology is transparent and exists to facilitate the delivery of instruction and is not, in itself, a hurdle to be conquered. These issues will be examined and recommendations will be made on the type of support that is seen as necessary for a positive online experience.

Support

Faculty Support
Faculty members have historically concerned themselves with the content of the subject to be taught, based on their particular expertise. They applied for and received jobs as instructors and were expected to impart knowledge to students with whatever method of instruction they thought best. No official training was mandated apart from the expertise gained in the subject they obtained their degree in (Abramson, 2003). As educational institutions began to implement online learning environments, these same professors and new ones were sometimes expected to deliver instruction with this new methodology, with little or no training and support. A successful implementation of an online learning environment, such as a course management system, begins with commitment from the administration of the institution (Milheim, 2001).

Administration must see implementation of an online course for what it is: an intense effort on the part of the faculty member to get his course online (Restauri, 2004; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, & Cooper, 2006). It takes a significantly greater
amount of time to deliver a course online than it takes to deliver face-to-face instruction for the same course. Once administration recognizes this fact, compensation should be arranged for the faculty involved. Compensation can be given in time, in the form of reduced workload, in monetary form, by adding a stipend based on the associated load of the online course, or laptops (and/or other computer equipment) used for the development of the course (Bongolas, Bulaon, Celedonio, Guzman, & Ogarte, 2006; Flowers, 2005).

Administration also needs to manage its human resources by making use of new, more technologically inclined faculty members, who are willing to assist in the online venture. These faculty members can add value to the experience since they can demonstrate the pedagogical benefits of such systems by their own use of the online program and can assist their colleagues, when necessary (Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002; Milheim, 2001). Less enthusiastic faculty members can be coached into adopting the system by eager peers willing to assist. Adult learners appreciate this collaborative method of learning (Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2004). Administration must be careful in its management of its human resources to ensure that willing members of faculty are not overburdened by the enormous task of getting their own course and that of others online. Junior faculty members at the institution in which the author works, have become burdened by an unmanaged arrangement of peer coaching and this has led to disgruntlement and the suggestion that a stipend should be attached to the associated workload.

This example takes us back to compensation. Would such faculty members who are called on to assist do so for the benefit of the institution or would they be compensated appropriately? Allowing faculty to assist each other is but one method of support that can be arranged and some are of the opinion that it is the better form of support since technology experts should not be instructing the professors (Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002). One may tend to agree with this point if the emphasis of the assistance is on pedagogical issues. However, just as one would visit a medical doctor when he is unwell, so too should a professor visit a technology expert if he has a technical problem. So, what are the types of training and technical support that should be available to the faculty member by this technical expert? There are a range of methods that can be employed to provide the faculty members with the training and technical support they need to perform adequately in the online environment. These include face-to-face workshops, online workshops, on-demand assistance, printed manuals, one-on-one technical assistance, to name a few, and will be addressed in the Training and Technical Support section of this document.

Administrators can demonstrate their commitment to the success of the online program by employing the necessary number of technicians and specialists to support the quantity of faculty needing assistance. Administration, beginning with the head of the Technology department and advancing through the chain of command to the provost of the institution, must also ensure that the persons hired are capable of the support required or see to it that the appropriate training is received by the technical staff. Recently, the author and her entire support team were sent to the ANGEL User Conference. ANGEL is the course management system used by her institution and it is the acronym for A New Global Environment for Learning. At that conference, the team was able to obtain answers to questions that arose while supporting the product, as well as learn more about supporting the product. This showed a commitment by administration to ensure the technical staff of the institution is adequately trained for supporting the course management system. In cases where the institution may not have the resources necessary to provide the training themselves, the administration may need to look into forming partnerships with other institutions so that they can exchange and/or combine resources (Sax, 2001).

Another issue that is of concern to faculty members is that of intellectual property. Administration needs to publish clear guidelines on what the institution holds as its property versus the property of the professor. This will eliminate some of the misgivings some faculty experience in placing their information online (Milheim, 2001).

Student Support

Students that enroll in online programs either attend universities that offer part of their curriculum online or they are distance education students receiving instruction solely through an online program. The very nature of an online program is to allow persons who are unable to come to a physical campus to have the opportunity of furthering their education. This means that within any one online course, students participating may be doing so from various academic backgrounds, technical skills, computer access, and Internet connectivity. It is the duty of the institution accepting the tuition of these students to provide all the support that is possible from the delivery end of the process to ensure a positive educational experience for the students. There is not much the institution can do about the resources that are available to the students in their home environment.

Students need to be introduced to the online program before requirements for their courses are upon
them. This introduction should take place as part of the orientation process (Bongolas, Bulaon, Celedonio, Guzman, & Ogarte, 2006). It should provide the students with basic access information, such as where they would find the link to the online program and the username and password they should use to gain access to the secure website. Other navigation and tool usage instructions should also be given to the students at orientation, so that when they finally access their courses, they would have acquired the knowledge on how to interact with the program to get the job done (Restauri, 2004).

Methods of delivering this training to the students may include quick start online guides with snapshots of the access screens and other basic functions within the online learning environment, online tutorials that take the students through basic skills they need to master to use the online program efficiently, and face-to-face training for students visiting a campus for the orientation. The author has found these methods to be successful in her experience with training and supporting students. Having this academic orientation to the online program at the beginning of a student’s academic journey, at an institution, would allow students to move past the obstacle that the technology can become and focus on the more essential part of the online experience – the content of the courses (Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002; Restauri, 2004).

In an online environment, various formats for support may have to be provided, depending on the types of students registered and the types of programs offered. If the students are on campus and are either in a blended format course or online courses, then they are physically present and should be able to attend face-to-face workshops that can include hands-on training at the start of the semester. These students also have the benefit of walking into the Technology Department with their problem and having a technician address the issue at that time. These students may bring with them hardware, as well as software issues that impact their online experience. The on-campus students also have the university’s computer labs as an alternative at times when their personal computers fail them.

The students that are solely online also need technical assistance. They must be provided with a toll-free number that is a 24/7 service since they may be geographically dispersed and/or work evenings and weekends, (Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002). A responsive help desk system can have a calming effect on students since students understand that technology fails at times, but they are less forgiving when humans fail to provide the support they expect (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, & Cooper, 2006). Students also need to be provided with additional support to assist them in making the transition to the online environment. Gaide (2001) outlines seven modules of online orientation, which include time-management skills, student hardware/software skills evaluation, e-mail skills, word processing skills, learning style activity, and Internet skills. Providing support for these skills will add to the overall skill set of the students and is necessary for a positive online experience. The department of Educational and Student Services can play a significant role in the life of the online student, by providing these services.

Focus has been placed, so far, on the duty of the institution and the Department of Technology to provide support to the student, but the faculty member providing the instruction has an integral part to play in the support that students receive. The faculty members are the first contact persons the students turn to for help and it is their approach to supporting the students that can define any given support situation. There are times when only the faculty member can answer the support question because it is related to the actual design of the courseware (Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002). For example, a student sending a help request for access to a drop box that is no longer available cannot receive any assistance from the Technology Department since the instructor manages it. However, there may be times when a student may request help of an instructor that indeed should have been directed to the help desk support personnel. In such cases, the faculty member may offer assistance if they are in possession of the answer to the query, otherwise, he needs to know the policies and guidelines that students need to follow to receive assistance, so that he can pass that information on to the student. Our final section on training and technical support was separated from the other faculty support issues that were already stated, to give attention to the administrative issues identified in the first section. In order for a faculty member to either attend to his own needs or that of a student, certain training and technical support must be made available to him. The final section of this document addresses these issues.

**Training and Technical Support**

Faculty members can lend support to students who request assistance and to other faculty members in the development of online courses, as mentioned in the previous sections. They may be in a position to lend the assistance that the support personnel cannot. It is acceptable and even advisable to encourage such assistance from faculty if, for instance, peer encouragement is the only way to get some faculty to use the online technology and also in cases where instructor intervention can assist a student. However, for most faculty mem-
bers to reach that level of comfort to be able to assist another person, training and support are needed (Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002).

Workshops, facilitated well before the time the faculty is expected to use the technology to deliver the instruction, are one concrete form of training that is suggested. Faculty members get the opportunity to work with the environment in a hands-on setting and get to use the instructions received to design their courses before they are expected to use it in real time. This gap in time takes the pressure off the faculty to have everything working at once while concentrating on the content to be taught. If the faculty member can become comfortable in the environment through training, then the only considerations while the course is being delivered are the content and the interaction with the students. The technology would take its rightful place and fade into the background as it facilitates the learning environment. Faculty on campus can make use of face-to-face workshops while online facilitators can use online versions of the workshop. Apart from the intense workshop that is offered before the semester begins, it can also be beneficial to have a series of smaller, more topic focused training sessions during the semester that faculty can attend as they need them. For example, a special session on the setup and use of the online gradebook around midterm may be appreciated by some faculty. This gives the faculty the opportunity for periodic refiners, when necessary (Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002; Restauri, 2004).

Printed manuals and short, topic-specific handouts should also be provided to the faculty members. Some persons prefer to browse through a printed manual rather than calling the help desk for assistance, and therefore, clear guidelines on how to accomplish tasks should be outlined for such persons (Restauri, 2004).

The help desk should also be available at all times if the course is online at all times and the faculty and students are dispersed and expected to work in their own time zones (Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002). An immediate response from the help desk adds to the positive experiences of faculty members and students. It is no use receiving help the day after it was needed, if a deadline was missed while waiting.

An almost hidden form of support is from the course management system itself. Embedded within these systems are usually extensive documentation and help topics. Faculty members and students have access to these help files and may use them in a just-in-time mode to receive training regardless of the time of day (Abramson, 2003). Additional support related to the course management system is the support that the technical staff receives from the vendor of the online program being used. If the technical staff is presented with an issue that cannot be solved internally, a crucial support lifeline is the support given by the makers of the program. Administration should place high importance on the support offered by a vendor before purchasing the software. Many times answers have to be sought, and waited for, from the vendors, and the quality of support that is received by the faculty members and students is directly related to the time it took to get that solution.

The issue of support is an important one since the future of the use of these online programs lies in the degree to which persons are willing to use them. If the online experience is a negative one, the faculty and students are less likely to subscribe to another online course. Professors who have positive technical experiences either at a present institution or from a previous educational environment will be eager to use the technology in the future and they would be motivated to use the program to transfer the benefits that they have experienced to their students (Abramson, 2003; Bongolas, Bulaon, Celedonio, Guzman, & Ogarte, 2006; Collins, Schuster, Ludlow, & Duff, 2002).

**Conclusion**

It is recognized that online learning environments provide opportunities for persons who are not able to attend regular classes in an on-campus setting, regardless of their geographic location. The wide range of technical abilities of faculty has caused us to identify some key support issues relevant to faculty teaching in an online environment. These include support from the administration for compensation for work done while developing and administering online courses, provision for peer coaching, training sessions that take the form of face-to-face or online workshops, technical support that is readily available, and clear guidelines for intellectual property.

Due to the dispersed nature of the student body, various support issues related to students’ access to support were raised, including hands-on orientation to the program, 24/7 access to toll-free support, online guides and other help resources, on-campus student services for persons who are able to go to the campus, and faculty members who are willing to assist in issues that are less technical.

A variety of technical support issues were identified. Workshops should be designed to provide training to faculty before the semester begins. Smaller, less intense training sessions may be given throughout the semester. Printed manuals should be provided for persons preferring this method of learning. The help desk should be available at all times, and support from the creator of the program should be available to assist the help desk personnel when solutions elude them.
The online learning environment is especially applicable to developing countries where there may be no local university. Persons may not be able to leave work and family to pursue their educational dreams, or they may not have the finances necessary for travel and accommodation to experience the on-campus form of advanced education. An online degree, using online programs such as course management systems, offers a solution for such persons. Those persons, however, may find themselves in a special category of persons needing different support to enhance their educational experience. This paper examined some of the similar support issues, but more is required in this field of research to document the necessary support needed to fully facilitate online learning in a developing country.

References

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About the Author

Avril Best is the Supervisor of the Educational Computing Team at St. George’s University in Grenada. She leads the team in the development and administration of training programs for faculty, staff, and students. The team’s main goal is to facilitate the use of technology to enhance the educational experience, with a major focus on the administration and support of the course management system used at the university. She is presented with faculty, student, and technical support issues on a daily basis. abest@nova.edu