

## Best Professional Development for Online Faculty? Take an Online Course

By *Cheston Saunders*

*Numerous professional development programs exist to equip science faculty with the skills and knowledge to effectively teach online. An effective way to explore new content while gaining an understanding of the student perspective is to enroll in an online science course.*

As a result of issues such as COVID-19, many institutions find themselves offering online versions of traditionally seated courses. During the process of transitioning face-to-face courses online, faculty likely realized the labor-intensive nature of designing quality distance education courses (Herman, 2013). Furthermore, while similarities between the online and face-to-face classroom do exist, the many differences require instructors to develop a specialized skill set with specific emphasis on effective communication and organization (Rhode et al., 2017). Time for faculty to develop these skills may prove difficult as society adjusts to a new normal. According to Angulo and de la Rosa (2006), faculty development programs allow institutions and instructors to adapt to ever-changing situations. In addition to this increased flexibility, professional development programs often make faculty aware of standard distance education pitfalls, such as attempting to duplicate face-to-face instructional methodologies through their institution's learning management system (Adnan, 2017).

Active professional development for online faculty moves beyond

merely teaching new digital tools, but instead cultivates an appreciation for emerging technologies and novel pedagogical strategies to foster an inherent appreciation for e-learning (Adnan, 2017). Professional development for online instruction appears to work well in a distance format as it provides faculty with the opportunity to experience learning from the student's perspective (Cho & Rathbun, 2013).

As an instructor of chemistry, I enrolled in an online graduate-level course to catch-up on new developments in the field of environmental chemistry. Completing this course was, by far, one of the most eye-opening experiences of a lifetime and completely revolutionized my online teaching. As a result of the poor course design and frustrating navigation, I found myself wondering if the professor ever considered his/her course from the student's point of view. As I reflected on my frustration, I could not help but ask how often do I look at my online course from the perspective of a student? For that matter, how often do I look at my face-to-face courses from the student's view? As an educator, I am concerned with my students learning the skills and content of my classes, and I want

them to focus their cognitive efforts on those items rather than attempting to navigate my course website. As I worked to view my courses through the lens of a student, I found myself asking the following questions:

- Would students be able to easily find due dates (and were they correct)?
- Was I sufficiently present in the course to facilitate relationships with students?
- If a student were not tech savvy, were resources clearly and easily accessible?
- How did the announcements and course text make me feel? For example, would a student view me as their cheerleader? Did I ever come across as condescending?
- Was it easy to get into a rhythm of my course? Was there a similar design, feel, and pattern to each week?

As an online learner, I developed a great appreciation for the repetition of detailed information. For example, I quickly learned how easy it truly is for students to overlook a due date only posted at the bottom of a lengthy web page. Now, I provide checklists that describe each task for a given week so students can budget time effectively. My experience as a distance education student cultivated a deep appreciation of course organization. For example, in the course I completed, each weekly module looked

entirely different from the next. As the term progressed, links and documents became increasingly difficult to locate until I was spending more cognitive energy navigating the course site than on actual material. Now, I work to be as consistent in my online courses from week to week as possible, which allows for improved navigation and content engagement.

Peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor communication are crucial components for the success of online courses (Gao et al., 2013). Responding to discussion boards can feel like an arduous task; however, it is critical as instructor participation in discussion forums is positively correlated with student participation (Parks-Stamm et al., 2017). The refresher course I took left little room for student expression and creativity, which resulted in assignments feeling less relevant to practice. To minimize this robotic feel in my courses, I periodically integrate authentic assessments to allow students freedom to create. An example of this can be observed in my discussion boards where I alternate between traditional prompts and creative expression assignments such as designing infographics of a reaction mechanism.

Online instruction does have multiple benefits. For example, by integrating technology and subject-specific areas of the curriculum effectively, we, as faculty, can create online learning environments designed to enhance student learning (Riffell & Sibley, 2005). Technology-enhanced activities can support constructivist and exploratory learning, therefore allowing students to take ownership

of their educational experience (Fund, 2007). The potential contribution of information technology to the transformation of teaching and learning occurs by expediting and enhancing student work production, linking academic and popular science, encouraging independent and collaborative learning, and improved motivation and engagement (Fund, 2007).

Professional development is so much more than completing a workshop. For me, taking an online science course taught me more about how not to teach online than I feel a workshop ever could. If you complete an online science course, your professor may be stellar, and you may learn some great techniques for your online classroom. No matter how well (or poor) an online course is designed, you will surely gain insight into your instructional practice; I certainly did. ■

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**Cheston Saunders** (csaunders@cfcc.edu) is an instructor of chemistry in the Department of Science at Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington, North Carolina.

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