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Faculty have learned to embrace online courses

By SHEILA LIVADAS - 3/25/2016

When Jennie Schaff began teaching online courses 15 years ago, she felt like a fish swimming upstream. Few of her colleagues had warmed up to the idea, and some insisted that doing so would be an affront to pedagogy.

“Now it’s much more rare for me to come across someone who is completely opposed to it,” says Schaff, associate professor in Nazareth College’s language, literacy and technology education department.

Hybrid courses—meaning those blending online and face-to-face delivery of content—still have broader acceptance in higher education, but “I feel like (now) I’m surrounded by people who believe at least that with the right training, with the right education, with the right support in place, that (online learning) is doable and effective,” Schaff says.

Other Rochester-area professors feel equally passionate about online learning.

“If it’s done correctly, it can be in every way ... as effective—if not more effective—than face-to-face,” says Neil Hair, executive director of Rochester Institute of Technology’s Innovative Learning Institute and associate professor of marketing at RIT’s Saunders College of Business.

When students and faculty free themselves from the constraints of time and place, they create immersive learning experiences, Hair adds.

“All of your activities and interactions are logged, and so that provides faculty with a slew of learning-analytics data that we can really use to solve additional problems or to expand upon certain activities where we see that students are not getting it, or are failing the materials, or failing the assignments,” he says.

With roots stretching back to U.S. soldiers watching training films during World War II, online learning defies a single definition. Self-paced activities, discussion boards, reality-based scenarios, assessments, videos, blogs and wikis serve as a virtual backbone for online courses, though shared whiteboards, videoconferencing and other synchronous components also can play a role in course design.

From a teaching standpoint, online learning has advantages, says Cassy Kent, professor of paralegal studies and chair of the business department at Finger Lakes Community College.

“I get to know these students, generally, a lot better than I do with students sitting in a classroom,” says Kent, who teaches and develops online courses. “In an online environment, students are required to discuss topics. They can’t just sit back and take the material in. They have to be active participants.”

Schaff, who is developing a course to help her colleagues learn how to teach online, agrees.

“You really have the ability as a faculty member to ... monitor absolutely everything in terms of (students’) acquisition of knowledge, what they’re turning in, how they’re turning it in,” she says.

Local colleges and universities now offer stipends, access to instructional designers and other incentives to encourage faculty to hop on the online-learning train.

“I would say that teaching an online course—depending on how it’s laid out—could be a little less work when it’s actually happening,” says Ryan McCabe, director of online learning at FLCC. “But the work that you put in front of it far exceeds, generally, what you would put into a face-to-face course.”

He adds: “I’ve been here for eight years, and I would say that enthusiasm for online learning is growing. I think when we first started down this path—as with anything new—you (had) a lot of negativity, but that has changed significantly.”

Though he has not yet taught online courses, RIT mathematics professor Hossein Shahmohamad believes e-learning is

here to stay.

“I think the two main drivers of online courses are convenience and cost,” says Shahmohamad, chair of RIT’s Academic Senate. “It is a fact of life that some (students) like the convenience of staying at home, not driving through harsh winters, looking for parking space.”

Online instruction has made important strides in recent years, but delivering curricula traditionally still trumps the online model in some academic disciplines, Shahmohamad says.

“I believe that when you do drive to campus, and you go up the stairs and sit in a classroom—as uncomfortable as the chair is—the professor comes in, the smell of chalk, the people around you—that’s all a part of the learning process,” he says.

Still, colleges and universities that dismiss online learning “will lose a big part of the market,” he adds.

Hair concedes that some educators “prefer the podium and the live-lecture format to its digital cousin.” Wet-lab experiments, for instance, may never work well in an online setting.

Opting to stick with traditional content delivery does not affect a professor’s chances for tenure at RIT, says Therese Hannigan, director of RIT Online.

Professors who are skeptical about online learning may find value in its analytic feedback, she adds.

“If I’m going to record a lecture, I can see how many people have rewound a certain part or had to go back because they weren’t getting a certain message (or) if they dropped off,” says Hannigan, associate professor of new media design and imaging at RIT. “You learn a lot about your material.”

Next month, RIT will wade deeper into online learning as the result of a new partnership with edX, an online learning destination and massive open online course provider founded by MIT and Harvard in 2012.

“We’re going to make courses in the beginning, while we get our feet wet, that are self-paced, and they would be asynchronous,” Hannigan says.

According to a 2016 study by Babson Survey Research Group titled “Online Report Card—Tracking Online Education in the United States,” 11.3 percent of higher-ed institutions nationwide now offer MOOCs, up from 2.6 percent in 2012. Yet belief in the offerings’ sustainability fell from 28.3 percent in 2012 to 16.3 percent in 2014.

Nevertheless, many academics maintain that online learning will secure higher-ed’s relevance in the years to come.

“Increasingly, students are demanding a greater degree of flexibility in how they receive this education,” Hair says.

Sheila Livadas is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

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