Using Teaching Circles to Share Best Practices Amongst Online Faculty

Jennifer Ashton

Grand Canyon University
Abstract

Adjunct faculty members often experience the feeling of solitude teaching at a distance. The proposed area of study is to analyze the impact of teaching circles and their effectiveness of creating a sense of community for online adjunct professors in the asynchronous learning environment, as well as what factors influence participation in the teaching circle. There are three main questions to keep in mind in regards to the purpose of this study: (1) How connected to the university do adjunct faculty feel prior to participating in a teaching circle? (2) Does the number of years working in education, as well as educational attainment impact a participant’s performance? (3) Do faculty members feel having access to their peers in order to share best practices will ultimately impact their teaching performance in the online classroom? This paper concludes there is a need to further study the benefits of implementing a commonplace, such as a teaching circle for adjunct faculty to go to.
Statement of the Problem

The Research Problem

Online professors have similar goals to achieve in regards to providing quality feedback, facilitating quality discussions, as well as implementing real world experiences. The problem is online adjunct professors are working virtually from home computers and are lacking a direct line of communication when questions in regards to curriculum and student issues arise, or when instructors are in need of additional materials. One method of encouraging interaction amongst online adjunct professors is by implementing a location, such as a teaching circle, in order to allow for participate in discussion forums, posting materials, and the opportunity for blogging by using a wiki.

Background and Justification

“With a growing number of courses offered online and degrees offered through the Internet, there is a considerable interest in online education, particularly as it relates to the quality of online instruction (Allen and Seaman, 2003)” (Yang and Cornelius, 2005). “Shea, Li, Swan, and Pickett (2005) found that instructor assistance with student discussions and conversations, as well as the quality of the course design, were important for establishing a clear teaching presence in the online environment and that this presence was positively related to students’ perceptions of support and inclusiveness” (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010, p. 769). “Holmberg (2003) stated that feelings of empathy and belonging promote the student’s motivation to learn and influence the learning favorably” (p. 80). Instructors can create empathy by active engagement and making a connection to their online students in order to further create the sense of community and belonging. In order to implement best practices for engaging with students, faculty members need to be aware of what strategies
At the university level, faculty typically come together to discuss administration issues, policies and procedures, as well as research opportunities. “It is a relatively rare that faculty come together to talk about teaching in the classroom” (Kelly, n.d.). With so many professors working at a distance, this statistic becomes even larger. Universities are faced with a challenge of how to ensure their students are receiving a quality education. There are four goals of an online teaching circle:

1. Provide faculty an opportunity to discuss with peers methods in regards to improving the student’s learning experience. (ex: specific and quality feedback, methods of instruction, technological/web 2.0 tools used)
2. Offer a forum for faculty to discuss life events and how these events have an impact on the classroom
3. Provide a place for faculty to go to when they are in need of assistance and new ideas
4. Create a stronger sense of community for those working at a distance

By participating in teaching circles, the university is “promoting dialogue and scholarship about teaching, enhancing teaching practices, and providing a forum for professional development” (Blackwell, Channel, & Williams, 2001), as well allowing adjunct faculty members to make connections.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

From reviewing the literature, there is a limited amount of research available in regards to the level of faculty interaction, how the level of faculty performance impacts student retention and performance, as well as the relationship between a faculty member’s
feeling of connectedness to the university and how this connection impacts the faculty member’s performance. In addition, further research needs to be conducted in order to provide existing online faculty members with the opportunity to participate in professional development and access to new strategies to better serve their student’s needs. Online education is continuing to grow as more K-12 entities become involved in this method of teaching. Although many instructors will possess the proper credentials to instruct particular subject matters, they may not possess the skills necessary to transition from the traditional to asynchronous online platform.

**Audience**

In this situation faculty, administration, and students are affected. The intended audiences of this study are the individuals involved in creating professional development for the universities faculty. Faculty needs to be aware of additional strategies they can implement into their online teaching practices, as well as feel connected with the institution in order to maximize daily performance. By creating a sense of community, students in turn will receive a higher level of attention and quality instruction that will enable them with opportunities to improve academic achievement.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the importance of having an asynchronous opportunity for online adjunct faculty to communicate and the impact of the teaching circle experience on the faculty member’s perception of connectedness to the university. The purpose of the teaching circle is to have the “go to” person or a group of individuals to turn to in times of need. During teaching circles faculty members can share ideas about incorporating multimedia, creating rubrics, course curriculum, sharing
resources, and much more. A sense of community and the feeling of belonging can help to minimize the feeling of solitude. By providing the data of this study, the professional development team can design additional teaching circles offering the opportunity for all online faculty members to participate in and connect with one another, thereby creating a stronger sense of community in the virtual world of education.

**Methodology - Quantitative**

**Participants**

In order to obtain the necessary data to complete the research, the target population of faculty members scheduled to instruct EDU230 Cultural Diversity were the individuals surveyed. The faculty members are a mixture of male and female participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, as well as educational experiences. Specific demographic data will be compiled during the study and an analysis of the population and their responses will be completed. Final analysis of the data will be based upon those faculty members who were willing to participate in the pilot study. Selection of the initial faculty will be based on those scheduled to instruct EDU230 Cultural Diversity beginning December 5, 2011.

**Defining the Variables**

**Research Questions**

(1) How connected to the university do adjunct faculty feel prior to participating in a teaching circle?
(2) Does the number of years working in education, as well as educational attainment impact a participant’s performance?

(3) Do faculty members feel having access to their peers in order to share best practices will ultimately impact their teaching performance in the online classroom?

**Procedures**

This particular study will entail a two-part procedure. The first part of the procedure will consist of emailing faculty members scheduled to instruct EDU230 Cultural Diversity in order to invite them as participants. Participants will be asked to join the teaching circle, as well as complete a brief demographic survey assessing the participant’s experiences and qualifications (See Appendix A). After collecting and analyzing the data, as a facilitator, the researcher along with the willing participants, will share “best practices” for the online classroom either through the discussion forum, wiki, or documents section of the teaching circle. At the conclusion of the study, the researcher will survey the other facilitators to assess (See Appendix B) and report how the “best practices” affected the overall classroom experience, as well as how they feel teaching circles can impact performance in the long run.

**Data Recording Procedures**

In order to tabulate the data, all data is recorded onto excel spreadsheets into predetermined categories.

**Data Analysis**

Based upon the number of course sections of EDU230 scheduled to begin on December 5, 2011, 16 faculty members were invited to participate in Grand Canyon University’s (GCU) pilot program of teaching circles. Of the 16 invited, 4 individuals were
male and 12 individuals were female. For the participants who decided to join, the teaching circle consisted of 2 males and 8 females, of which all of the participants worked 100% as online adjuncts for GCU. 8 of the participants indicated they had obtained Master’s degrees, while 1 participate held a Doctorate, and an additional participant was currently enrolled in a doctoral program. In regards to experience level in education, the majority of the population had experience at the elementary level ranging from 3-25 years. As far as experience in higher education and employment with GCU, this category ranged from brand new – 8 years. Further, 55.6% had participated in a teaching circle type format within their work experiences, while 44.4% had not.

In regards to overall participation in the teaching circle, interaction varied. Only 1 of the 10 participants who joined the teaching circle did not complete the first survey. However, only 2 participants posted items to share in the discussion forum and wiki area. 3 additional participants shared information when engaged through the email message format. From reviewing the number of views, the discussion forum site was viewed 33 times, the miscellaneous component was viewed 22 times, and the wiki page was viewed 16 times, thus showing although participation was lacking, participants are interested in viewing what their peers are willing to share.

As far as participation in the closing survey, participation was limited. Only 3 of the 10 original teaching circle members submitted responses. However, the responses collected were unanimous. All 3 participants indicated they would like to see an instant chat feature built into the teaching circle, new knowledge was gained by participating, as well as a navigation video introducing the teaching circle, where to locate information, and how to post would be extremely beneficial in improving the teaching circle experience.
Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Studies

With this strategy of implementing a teaching circle there are some disadvantages were discovered. Since teaching circles are typically set up to focus on one subject area, as well as are set to cover a specific time frame, faculty members may be limited to what needs to be accomplished. The teaching circles need to remain open, as well as invite participants who instruct other courses. Although this teaching circle is set up to focus on instructional strategies for EDU230 Cultural Diversity, other peers may have strategies, which can be modified and implemented into various courses.

After concluding round 1 of the teaching circle study, based upon the number of active participants, the researcher believes future studies should include a set of specific directions, which will guide the participants in how to use the site. In regards to the directions a combination of written directions, as well as a narrated video will ensure the teaching circle is catered towards multiple learning styles. Further, some type of chat feature needs to be available to allow participants to see who is present in order to receive instant responses to the their questions. In addition, a timeline for participation may help to promote more timely engagement of the participants.

In conclusion, the teaching circles at Grand Canyon University (GCU) will continue to be a subject of research. Teaching can be setup for different courses or on a broader scale to include a larger number of participants. The ultimate goal of this on going study is to determine the best methods for inviting participants, encouraging participation, improving faculty performance in the online classroom, as well as continuing to bridge the proximity gap and create a strong sense of community for GCU faculty members across the globe.
References


Appendix A

Initial Teaching Circle Participant Survey

1. What is the highest degree you have received?

   What is the highest degree you have received?
   Master's Degree
   Specialist Degree
   Doctoral Degree
   Doctoral Program in Progress
   ABD (All but dissertation)

2. How many years have you been with GCU?
3. What is the status of your employment with GCU?

Full time (GCU staff who also teaches online courses)
Adjunct (Online only)
Faculty member teaching full time (campus and online)

4. How many years have you spent working in elementary education? (If none, please enter 0)

5. How many years have you spent working at the middle school level? (If none, please enter 0)

6. How many years have you spent working at the high school level? (If none, please enter 0)

7. How many years have you spent working in higher education?

8. Have you ever participated in a teaching circle or collaborative discussion forum prior to this experience?

Yes
No

9. If you answered yes, what were the positive elements of your experience? What were the negative parts of your experience?

10. How would you rate your sense of community working with GCU?

Very Connected
Connected
Somewhat Connected
Not Connected at all
Appendix B

Participant Follow Up Survey

1. As a participant in the teaching circle, do you feel you have gained any knowledge of new strategies to implement in your online classroom?

   Yes
   No

2. Would you like to have a chat feature as part of the teaching circle?

   Yes
   No

3. Would a navigation video improve your ability to participate in the teaching circle?
4. If you did not post any material or correspond with your peers, can you please indicate a brief reason why?

5. How can we improve the teaching circle to encourage participation?