Keeping Learners Engaged - Certifying and Supporting Online Instructors (Feb 06)

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When looking for best practices in online instructor certification, for-profit universities are the first place to benchmark for their comprehensiveness in training and certifying online faculty. Just look at the growth in online faculty and you will see why for-profits have spent their time, money and resources on training. University of Phoenix Online was launched back in 1989 before the advent of the Web using a system of home-grown bulletin boards where students used a modem and dialed in directly to servers via a toll-free line. Today, it has grown to more than 14,000 online faculty and a staff of 200 charged with attracting, recruiting, developing and training online faculty.

Online universities recognize that the job of training and certifying online instructors has to address both the mechanics of facilitating an online course as well as how to develop "online charisma." Russ Paden, vice president of academic services at University of Phoenix, believes that online universities need to explore and then evaluate new ways of engaging learners.

Some online institutions are already experimenting. At Deakin University, one of Australia's largest universities, where 40 percent of students learn online, Professor John Carmichael teaches an online business law class and does weekly "fireside chats" delivered as a podcast. He records a 15-minute "chat" reviewing what happened in his online class during the week—summarizing issues discussed, questions that came up and relevant cases that may have appeared in the newspaper. Online students download these weekly review sessions to their MP3 players and listen over the weekend. These "fireside podcasts" are a vehicle that integrates learning into the students' daily lives.

Future online learning courses may incorporate successful techniques used in radio and broadcast news, such as gaming, simulations and innovative uses of technology like podcasts and vodcasts. The goal is to ensure frequent and engaging faculty-student interaction.

What exactly are for-profit universities doing to train online faculty, and how can CLOs learn from them? Essentially, training and certification programs for online faculty include:

- Basics of Teaching Online: A four-week program focusing on how to teach online, including how to use the technology platform, create content, set up the course, use streaming video and whiteboards and integrate innovative delivery vehicles like podcasting and gaming. This culminates in a certification test.

- Best Practices of Online Instruction: This can range from four to 12 weeks and profiles best practices in online facilitation, focusing on such topics as encouraging interaction, obtaining feedback from students, developing course materials and improving the level of learner engagement.

- Online Mentoring: This involves assigning a certified online faculty member who shares your subject-matter expertise as a mentor to the class for six weeks. Then the mentor is asked to complete an evaluation highlighting suggested ways for the newly trained online faculty member to improve the course.

Regardless of how well trained online faculty members are, they cannot do their job in a vacuum. They need online learner services to support them. Strayer University's Online Support Center is just one of many examples of how for-profit universities provide ongoing learner support. You can

engage in an online chat with a student adviser, and you will be amazed at the level of online learner support, including:

- 24x7 technical support.
- Online tutoring in your subject area.
- Online advising in your career area.
- Online retention—staffed with advisers who reach out to students who have lapsed in their enrollment.

Finally, if you participate in an online chat, you get the opportunity to "rate" the level of online support you received and send an instant message on how to make this interaction even better next time. This level of learner support is where we need to be going with corporate online learning programs.

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