

Using Teaching Circles Amongst Online Adjunct Faculty

Jennifer Ashton

Adjunct faculty members teaching online often experience feelings of isolation and lack of connection to the larger academic community. The current study examines the impact of teaching circles and the effectiveness of teaching circles in creating a sense of community for online adjunct professors in the asynchronous learning environment. Factors contributing to participation in the teaching circle included: newness to online teaching, professors looking for new teaching strategies, and professors experiencing a lapse of time from previously facilitating the selected course. The teaching circles allowed the professors facilitating the same course content to share best practices, communicate with online faculty members to reduce the feeling of isolation, and create a stronger connection to the university.

Online professors have similar goals to achieve in regards to providing quality feedback, facilitating quality discussions, and implementing real world experiences. The challenge for online adjunct professors is they work virtually from home; this creates an isolated work environment in which online adjunct faculty lack a direct line of communication to address questions, share materials, or provide support. One method of encouraging interaction amongst online adjunct professors is by implementing virtual teaching circles. Virtual teaching circles are a remote location where participants of a common interest log on to engage in discussion forums and share instructional materials.

The purpose of the teaching circle is to have a stable point of contact for online adjuncts 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. Utilizing the results of this study, universities can implement virtual 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.

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 & Seaman, 2003, as cited by Yang & Cornelius, 2005, pg. 1). In order to implement best practices for engaging with students, faculty members need to be aware of what strategies their peers are utilizing. During the teaching circle, online adjunct professors can interact with online colleagues to discuss strategies for increasing the quality of online instruction and create a feeling of community for online adjuncts in the virtual environment.

At the university level, faculty typically come together to discuss administration issues, policies and procedures, as well as research opportunities, but noticeably missing in the discussion is an emphasis on instruction. “It is a relatively rare that faculty come together to talk about teaching in the classroom” (Kelly, n.d., pg. 10). With so many professors working at a distance, this issue becomes even greater. Not only are faculty accustomed to limited dialogue surrounding instructional issues, but the problem is compounded by the physical remoteness of the online adjunct faculty, the lack of knowledge or awareness of online adjunct

colleagues, and the inconsistent teaching schedules of adjunct faculty. Universities are faced with a challenge of how to ensure online faculty are equipped, and motivated, to provide quality educational experiences to distance learning students.

Online teaching circles provide a means for universities to serve online adjunct faculty in manner amenable to their unique position. Traditionally, teaching circles are used at college campuses as synchronous round table discussions. The challenge, therefore, lies in extending the benefits available through teaching circles to adjunct faculty working at a distance. 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 current events and how these events have an impact on the classroom*
3. *Provide a stable point of contact for faculty to seek assistance, guidance, or instructional material*
4. *Create a stronger sense of an integrated faculty 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, pg. 41), as well allowing adjunct faculty members to make connections. Geographical separation can cause online adjuncts to feel disconnected due to frequently changing course loads and inconsistent schedules. With the implementation of teaching circles for online adjuncts, faculty members reduce the feeling of a lack of connection and have an increased awareness to the greater university in terms of policy and procedures and curriculum necessities.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine the value of asynchronous teaching circles for online adjunct faculty in enhancing communication, satisfaction, con-

nection to the university, and self-perceptions of teaching effectiveness. 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?*

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Faculty members scheduled to instruct EDU230 Cultural Diversity during the targeted two-month period were invited to join in the online teaching circle pilot program.

Based upon the number of course sections of EDU230 scheduled in the target period, 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 two males and eight females, of which all of the participants worked 100% as online adjuncts for GCU. Eight of the participants indicated they had obtained Master's degrees, while one participant 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 teaching at the elementary level ranging from three to twenty-five years. As far as experience in higher education and employment with GCU, this category ranged from novice to eight 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 one of the ten participants who joined the teaching circle did not complete the first survey. Two participants posted items to share in the discussion forum and wiki area; three additional participants shared information when engaged through

the email message format. An analysis of the number of page views showed the discussion forum site was viewed 33 times, the miscellaneous component was viewed 22 times, and the wiki page was viewed 16 times. The comparison between those posting and those viewing indicates a preference in wanting to receive materials over comfort in sharing one's own teaching materials.

Procedures

This study utilized a two-part procedure. The first part of the procedure consisted of emailing faculty members scheduled to instruct EDU230 Cultural Diversity in order to invite them as participants. Participants were asked to join the teaching circle, as well as complete a brief demographic survey assessing the participant's experiences and qualifications. After collecting and analyzing the data, as a facilitator, the researcher along with the willing participants, shared "best practices" for the online classroom in the discussion forum, wiki, and documents section of the teaching circle. At the conclusion of the study, the researcher surveyed the other facilitators to examine how the "best practices" affected the overall classroom experience, as well as how participants felt teaching circles impacted performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although this was a pilot study with limited participants, the results provide promising information to guide the implementation of larger, wide spread teaching circles. Feedback indicated online adjuncts had an interest in sharing best practices in order to improve their facilitation skills and to become more connected with the university. One participant stated in an email communication, "I have taught this course several times and just love it. It's a topic about which I am particularly passionate. I'm always happy to share anything that you might find useful" With the strategy of implementing a teaching circle there were some disadvantages discovered. An additional participant stated, "Clearly we need to add additional members." Although the teaching circle was set up to focus on instructional strategies for EDU230 Cultural Diversity, additional online adjuncts have strategies, which can be modified and implemented into various course content areas.

As far as participation in the closing survey, participation was limited. Only four of the ten original teaching circle members submitted responses. Howev-

er, the responses collected were unanimous. Seventy-five percent of the final respondents agreed they gained knowledge of new teaching strategies by participating in the teaching circle. All four participants indicated they would like to see an instant chat feature built into the teaching circle and a need for a navigation video to introduce the teaching circle, where to locate information, and how to post information. Each of these discoveries are beneficial for designing future teaching circles for online adjuncts.

After completing the teaching circle pilot study, based upon the number of active participants, upcoming teaching circles will need to 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 designed to accommodate multiple learning styles. Further, an instant chat feature needs to be available to allow participants the opportunity for a synchronous discussion forum. In addition, a timeline for participation will help to promote timely engagement of the participants.

In conclusion, the teaching circles for online adjunct faculty will continue to be a subject of research. 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. Implementing teaching circles for online adjuncts will enable faculty members to become equipped with additional tools to provide a quality instructional experience for distance learning students and reduce the feeling of isolation. The pilot study helped to engage online adjunct faculty members to share best practices and bridged the geographical gap to create a stronger sense of community for faculty members at this institution across the globe.

Author Biography

Jennifer Ashton is an adjunct professor for the College of Education at Grand Canyon University, as well as a Site Supervisor for GCU's practicum students throughout Central Georgia. She has worked in education and business for more than 15 years. Jennifer has a Bachelor's degree in Marketing from the University of Central Florida, a Master's in Organizational Management and, a Master's in Elementary Education from University of Phoenix. In addition, she is pursuing a doctorate in Instructional Technology and Distance Education from Nova Southeastern University.

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