Getting Educated about Online Education

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Distance learning is clearly the wave of the future. This fact is especially true for the majority of middle-class adults located around the world who have responsibilities, such as families and full time jobs, and often cannot attend regular college classes due to their already overwhelming schedules. Thus, more and more teachers, especially within the latest generation, are forcing themselves to be familiar with various technologies, including those centered around distance learning. Computers, the Internet, E-mail and even chat rooms have all become everyday occurrences for many people, and as we become more dependent on these technologies, we benefit from the new opportunities now available to us. These opportunities have allowed several people the ability to work, research, communicate, and even take college classes from home. As more and more colleges “go online” more teachers will have to familiarize themselves with the technology and software that are necessary to use in order to teach distance learning courses.

How do teachers prepare themselves for this ever-changing world of online education? What can they do to prepare themselves and prove they have the necessary skills to “get the job done?” My suggestion is for teachers to look into taking a few of these online classes themselves. However, their focus should not be in any topic of their choosing’ they should consider taking an actual online class that teaches teachers how to interact with the online environment. Obviously, this would be doubly beneficial for the teacher; not only could he or she experience what the students actually experience, the teacher would also be learning about various approaches to technology and distance learning.

While there are colleges that offer online degrees in distance learning, for most college instructors who already have Master’s degrees, taking another full degree program would not only be time-consuming for an already over-booked schedule, it would also be expensive. The federal government does not provide much aid for those who already have graduate degrees. However, most of us want some sort of proof, like a title or a degree, to show to employers as evidence of knowledge. Thus, what to do? Recently I came across a program for teachers who are
interested in online education and who want to not only take online classes to get a feel for what students experience in this environment, but who also want some kind of certification. Cerro Coso Community College offers a wonderful teacher certification program in distance learning. The program lasts about four months, and the courses are all online college credit courses and all are pass/fail. This leaves most teachers, who already have busy lives, some breathing room. Most of the classes last from between two to three weeks, and the program is free for those who already teach for a California Community College. Otherwise, the fee is $25 for the entire program. There are three books that need to be purchased, which cost about $140 total. Overall, the program is very inexpensive, and the purchased books are far from a waste of money (like the old books we used to sell back in college). They are definitely resource guides any online teacher would want to have at his or her side.

The Cerro Coso website does an excellent job of describing the program: Cerro Coso’s Certificate in Online Teaching offers a unique opportunity to learn about online teaching in a practical, hands-on environment. The entire certificate can be completed in a typical semester. Unique to this certificate is the generation of a portfolio of work. This portfolio is created in the first course and added to from course to course. At the end of the certificate each participant will have a portfolio of completed work. All courses are taught by experienced online instructors and presented in a consistent environment. Access to the internet and at least 100Mhz Windows or Macintosh computer with multimedia capabilities is required for participation in the program. This program is specifically designed to assist faculty in the development and delivery of online courses or course content. A total of 8 units are required for the Certificate Program.


The layout of the classes can also be found on the program website (http://cconline.cerrocoso.edu/faccert/description.htm):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Name</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Orientation to Online Learning</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Online Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Practical Guide to Online Course Management Strategies</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction The Development of Web-Based Course Content</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing and Managing An Online Course With Microsoft FrontPage</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-Or-

http://bcis.pacificu.edu/interface/?p=2775
My experiences with this college and this program have all been extremely positive. The counselors and instructors at the school are very helpful. They are understanding, responsive, and are overall very flexible when it comes to working with teachers. (Believe me, I have asked them my fair share of questions and have had several concerns and issues, and Cerro Coso has been responsive and sincere throughout). The school, I have since learned, has a very good reputation. A few of my online colleagues at Riverside Community College recommended it to me, suggesting that it was not only beneficial, but enjoyable because of the hard-working and supportive staff.

I asked Lori Olivera, who assists teachers interested in this program, to describe the history of the certificate. She said: “The online faculty training program has been in effect since January of 2000. We are currently offering our twenty-first section of the program and have had over 650 instructors from all over California participating.” As far as teacher satisfaction goes, Lori States: “I can tell you that I get several calls per month from instructors that just want to let us know that they really enjoy the program and are finding it very challenging and rewarding.”

As for the books, all three serve as valuable and helpful resources for distance learning instructors. The first book, titled *A Distance Learner’s Guide* is actually the same book used for the online student orientation class. Cerro Coso uses it as well for its online teacher training orientation class. This is an interesting concept, but it actually benefits the teacher taking the course in several ways. First, it allows the teacher to get a feel for what it is like to be in the student’s place. Second, the teacher orientation class encourages teachers to monitor the student orientation class, so the teachers can investigate the backgrounds and needs of online students. Last, the book itself is very informative, and provides a comprehensive guide of great websites and resources for distance learners, which any teacher could use and adapt to an online class.

The next book, titled *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide* gives the teacher a more in-depth focus regarding how one should approach teaching online and the different challenges one might face when instructing a distance learning course. The book provides valuable tips for course development, as well as teaching suggestions. It reviews the general idea behind most of the software and technology aspects a teacher needs to prepare for when teaching online. This
guide gives further suggestions regarding what teachers should do to consistently update their skills in order to remain knowledgeable of the most up-to-date technology and software used for distance learning.

The third book, titled Accessible Web Sites gives the teacher a general overview on how to create an effective website and use it as a teaching tool. This book is wonderful for those who teach online or want a website to support their traditional class. The book covers basic programs and technology, and provides pointers about various multimedia used when designing websites. I feel this book is especially helpful for those who work at schools that lack platforms and/or use Web CT or Web CT-like software that often requires the teacher to know a bit about html and web editing.

The set-up of the Cerro Coso teacher training course is similar to the set-up most students would undergo when taking an online class. Teachers are expected to participate in discussion postings, complete basic writing assignments (most of which are self-reflective journal exercises or applications of reading), and basic quizzes. The assignments are not intimidating; rather, they are educational and insightful without the strenuous work of most credential courses. In comparison, the Cerro Coso course is much more flexible, and also, very enjoyable.

On top of this program, Cerro Coso offers other beneficial online technology training for both teachers and students. Most of these programs can result in an A.A., an A.S., or a certificate. There are valuable C.I.S. and C.S.I. classes offered in Microsoft programs like Excel, Outlook, and Powerpoint. As most online teachers are required to get continual technology training, this is a great and inexpensive way to go about this process. Cerro Coso offers an online A.A. degree in Media Arts as well, which covers other valuable programs for instructors like Photoshop and Illustrator. I, myself, am taking a few of these classes on a continual basis—not only to achieve another degree, but to continue to expand my educational knowledge.

The truth is, these programs are so flexible, beneficial, affordable, and enjoyable that anybody can do them. This alone should be encouragement for most.

For more information, please visit the Cero Coso Community College Website at: http://cconline.cerrocoso.edu/faccert/default.htm

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