DISTANCE education

Evaluating Online Teachers for Veteran Administrators

By Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

We all know how faculty evaluations look and feel in the face-to-face classroom. The administrator will sit in the back of the classroom for an entire period or for a set period of time, assessing the instructor using whatever evaluation instrument the department uses or perhaps none at all. The administrator may talk to the person that is being assessed or gather information from other parties like students, and then they will use all of the information gathered to form an opinion of the instructor's ability.

This is the way that many of us learned to be the subject of or to conduct a faculty evaluation in graduate school, and it relies heavily on an "I'll know it when I see it" form of assessment. Further, "the assumption in face-to-face is that the person at the front of the [room] is the person who developed the content." This is according to Thomas J. Tobin, coordinator of learning technologies in the Center for Teaching and Learning at Northeastern Illinois University.

Design elements and teaching behaviors

One of the key differences between online instruction and the face-to-face classroom is that, online, one can separate the design of the course from the behavior of the instructor in ways that aren't commonly considered in the traditional classroom. "In [the] face-to-

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face [classroom], we conflate the two," says Tobin. Particularly in the case of a "chalk and talk" or PowerPoint-supported lecture, the assumption is that the instructor who is facilitating the class and delivering the material is also the person who developed the content. Even in the most vanilla scenario possible, in which an instructor will read his or her own slides with or without embellishment, the assumption is that the professor has created

the slides and is using them partially as lecture notes to cue the delivery of material. Therefore, the professor should by definition be an expert on the course content and flow.

The same assumptions do not hold true for the online courses. "There are still designer-teachers," says Tobin, pointing to those who participate in both the design and the delivery of the online course. However, increasingly, courses are designed by departmental teams, official institutional designers, or even designers at the state system level. These courses are then delivered by faculty members who may not have contributed materially to their design, including adjunct instructors.

Online teaching competencies

The first step in identifying and assessing online teaching competencies is to be sure that the teaching competencies measured are highly specific. "There are things we know on the general level but don't know in the specific," he says, saying that these types of questions get back into the problem of "knowing good teaching when one sees it." Examples of these general assessment categories include questions about whether students are learning in the class or whether they enjoy the experience. Part of the allure of these types of assessment items is that they are understandable to those whose experience as an instructor or an administrator is solely in the face-to-face classroom. "We're in a window of time that I hope will soon close,

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[where] those doing the evaluating may not have taught online" or received their training in a time in which online learning was not as available. The general nature of these types of assessment items makes it difficult to pinpoint the true abilities of the instructor.

Instead, Tobin suggests looking at lists of teaching competencies. His own list draws on the work of Virgil E. Varvel Jr. and Ann H. Taylor, both of who have done work in the area of teaching competencies. He provides a list of 10 such competencies that an administrator assessing online teaching "can look for and measure."

For example, one competency is that the online instructor must be able to "master course content, structure, and organization." This competency "was a given in face-to-face" instruction, Tobin says, when it was assumed that the person delivering the course was the same person who designed it. In an online course, however, an instructor may be delivering a course that he or she didn't design, and Tobin notes that it's incumbent on the instructor to have complete familiarity with the material and course organization. An assessor

can look for this in-depth familiarity as well as looking for how well the instructor encourages students to work their way up Bloom's taxonomy while learning the material.

Another example of a competency an administrator can assess is whether the instructor "responds to student inquiries." Again, the way this works in the online classroom is somewhat different from what administrators have come to expect from working in the face-to-face classroom.

Tobin cites work by Rena Palloff that suggests that an instructor in a face-to-face classroom typically is able to interact with 30 to 40 percent of the students in a class at any time. The remaining students may be disengaged or be only sporadically engaged in the ongoing discussion. Online, however, the expectations are quite different. "Online requires professors to interact with more students," Tobin says.

However, interacting with a greater percentage of the class doesn't imply responding to every student comment made in a discussion forum. Tobin suggests that the sweet spot of professor response frequency is probably about 10-15 percent. Professors should aim

Online Seminar: Evaluating Online Teaching for New or Veteran Administrators

On Tuesday, August 18, 2015 at 1 p.m. central time, Distance Education Report will present a live 40 minute online seminar, "Evaluating Online Teaching for New or Veteran Administrators," presented by Dr. Thomas J. Tobin, Coordinator of Learning Technologies at Northeastern Illinois University.

For more information or registration, go to:
http://www.magnapubs.com/online-seminars/evaluating-online-teaching-for-new-or-veteran-administrators-13530-1.html.

think that trying to incorporate more laughter and humor into our routines at work is important — and possible. It may be as simple as sharing a funny picture or video with a co-worker, or retelling a humorous story during a staff meeting. (Of course, it's always important to keep it appropriate and non-offensive.) It might also be something on a larger scale such as bringing in a humorist for an employee appreciation event. And let's not forget that a lot of us could probably stand to tone down our serious nature and laugh at ourselves a bit more.

Another idea to consider is keeping a humor file at work. This is something I've been doing for years and turn to pretty consistently to lift my spirits. When I come across something I find funny, I save it in a folder. When I'm having a tough day, I spend 5 to 10 minutes going through my humor file, which always improves my mood. The bottom line: However you do it, laugh a little bit more.

Recognize and take steps to control stress

Many university administrators have achieved success in academia because they are focused, hard working and driven. Most would consider these admirable qualities. Regretfully, sometimes administrators try to do too much, and their health suffers as a result. It is important to be able to recognize when stress is negatively impacting health. For example, is your work schedule so intense that you don't spend time exercising or take the time to eat nutritional meals and snacks? Are you having trouble sleeping because you can't stop thinking about work? Or maybe you have even had a panic or anxiety attack.

We all need to know our limitations. Many great administrators I've worked with over the years were good at delegating duties and responsibilities to those under them. That not only helps the individual who is doing the delegating; it also helps elevate the leadership potential of others on their staff. And if you are the type of person who loves to be involved with new initiatives, serves on numerous committees or boards, and generally says yes to most requests that come your way, saying no every so often can have a positive impact on reducing stress levels.

In conclusion

The topic of health is so big that I've just scratched the surface, and I'm already running out of column space. So here are some closing thoughts:

First, understand that you will always be able to find an excuse to not focus on your health. "I don't have time to exercise … I need to stay up late and finish this project … Cooking and eating healthy meals takes so much time and effort … My dog chewed up my running shoes." So, thought number one: No more excuses!

Second, attempt to change the culture in your work environment. Give walking meetings a try. Bring in fruits and vegetables for the break room or social gatherings instead of cookies and donuts. Try to introduce humor and share laughter with your co-workers.

Finally, I hope this column has given you the encouragement and motivation to attempt to make one small change in your health-related behaviors. One small success can lead to another, and another, and another.

Good luck with your efforts! ●

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to comment once in about every ten or so student comments on a discussion forum. More than that, and the professor risks "dousing the fire" of discussion, as students become accustomed to the idea that the professor will weigh in with the right answer and that no student input is needed. Less frequently, and "students start wondering if they have a professor."

Parting thoughts

"Evaluating online teaching can sound scary, but it builds on our core observation and assessment skills as administrators," Tobin says. "Think of what you take notes about when you sit in the back of a classroom session; keep those key teaching practices in mind when observing online teaching too." The difference in assessing online teaching comes from the ability to understand what makes the online environment unique and to use the tools that will help evaluate an online instructor fairly and in a way that encourages professional growth. ●