Reflection in Online Education

From the Trainer's Desk: Favorable Qualities of an Online Instructor

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Abstract: Strong instructors are key to the online student's success. Many factors determine who will be an effective online instructor and who will not. This brief outline describes desirable qualities and offers ways to recognize whether instructor candidates will likely be successful in the online classroom.

Keywords: online training, instructor training, training, online classroom management

Introduction

Hiring, training, and teaching online have become commonplace in upper academia in recent years, but as convenient as it is, there are risks and challenges that come with it. Specific qualities make for a good online instructor and these can be assessed before a new faculty member enters the classroom, or even before the start of training. Guidelines, suggestions, and subject-matter insight can be used in the interviewing and hiring processes to better select future candidates who perform well in the classroom and offer students what they need to succeed.

Qualities of an Instructor in Training

For the past nine years, I have functioned as faculty trainer for an online university. Our population has grown tremendously; according to our online registrar's records, in 2009 we had 134 students, but in 2019 our numbers have risen to just over 9,000—an increase by more than a factor of 65. To address this rapidly growing student population, instructor numbers have more than doubled, with a current roster of over 350 adjunct and full-time faculty members teaching nearly 600 course sections. These numbers require ongoing new instructor training in an organized and time-conscious fashion. As our courses are just four weeks long, time is limited for an instructor to assimilate into the online classroom atmosphere. The climate is fast-paced, and an instructor must be geared for success from Day 1 of the course.

Additionally, my conversations with many new instructors who trained and taught elsewhere indicate our university is focused on student success more so than most other academic institutions. While all upper academia generally desires for their students to do well, we provide resources and support incomparable to most institutions, from our learning coaches who are available to work with students six days a week, to our writing center that lets student meet one-on-one with a tutor or submit papers for review. Our expectations for our faculty are likewise very high, since they are critical to attaining the university's overall goal to have our students "achieve success in career-oriented online programs…culminating in satisfactory career placement or advancement in current employment" (Independence University, n.d.).

Our faculty training timeline follows the 4-week course model, with a cohort of new instructors beginning training every four weeks. Over the past nine years, I have worked with about 600 new hires in approximately 100 cohorts, ranging from groups of just 1 or 2 to as many as 16. With faculty numbers at over 350, it is clear that these 600 new hires are not all currently teaching for us—not all faculty adequately complete the training process, nor are they all successful during the early stages of teaching online. However, while online instructors have come and gone over the years, about 16% of our current faculty have been on staff for nine years or more, hired prior to my employment at the university. Overall, we have a strong faculty who not only care about students, but demonstrate through regular audits they are meeting or exceeding university expectations.

What qualities do these successful and dedicated faculty members possess? During the training process, I see good qualities and great qualities (and occasionally not-so-great qualities). In my position, I find it more enjoyable to work with faculty who have certain characteristics. That sounds self-serving; however, I believe that these same traits I find to be admirable when working with new faculty are also reflected in their interactions with students. When our faculty exhibit these traits, their students will typically enjoy class more, be more engaged with their instructor and the course material, and ultimately be more successful in school.

Qualities that Make a Difference

An instructor in training should…

1. **Be friendly.** The instructor makes an effort to be personable. In our first meeting (which takes place in video conferencing software), the instructor turns on their

web camera, offers a pleasant greeting, and sounds excited and motivated to be in training.

2. **Respond to email in a timely fashion.** The instructor accesses email regularly and responds with frequency and regularity.

3. **Communicate clearly and effectively in writing.** The instructor expresses ideas effectively. When problems occur in training, he or she describes what steps have been taken, explains what is not working correctly, and includes examples or links to aid the trainer in troubleshooting.

4. **Communicate clearly and effectively via video conferencing.** The instructor presents ideas and concepts in an understandable fashion and is personable in the live classroom setting.

5. **Read and follow instructions.** While we often hear that "teachers make the worst students," training is the time to prove this unbecoming saying wrong. The instructor reads all training material offered and reviews the content and instructions to gain a clear understanding of the expectations while completing training assignments.

6. **Be aware of deadlines.** The instructor meets or works ahead of stated deadlines in the training and pre-training process. This includes (but is not limited to) account setup and access of systems and completion of tasks and assignments.

7. **Be able to "be the student."** The instructor offers helpful feedback, career-relevant examples, and real-world applications of the lesson. This is demonstrated via video conferencing sessions, assignment feedback, and in classroom online discussions.

These qualities affect training success and the transition into the online classroom. An instructor's performance in training is directly transferrable to what can be expected in the classroom. For example, related to the quality "be friendly," if an instructor writes terse emails and comes across as bored, all-knowing, or unfriendly during training, we can expect similar behavior in the classroom with students. Conversely, the instructor who makes an extra effort to be friendly and personable to the trainer will likely do the same with their students. Because a

student who enjoys the instructor is likely to be more engaged in the classroom, this is an important aspect of online teaching.

Due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, being able to convey a good-natured attitude online is key to teaching success. As an example of the second quality described above, an instructor who "responds to email in a timely fashion" during training can be expected to do the same with future students. This instructor will address questions about assignments, expectations, and other classroom-related matters without too much of a delay that could potentially hinder students from being timely and effective in completing assignments. Without providing additional details on each quality listed, it is sufficient to reiterate that the instructor's performance in training is indicative of how they will perform in the classroom with students.

Due to this correlation, when an instructor does not possess or demonstrate these qualities, the trainer should alert his or her supervisor. It is not necessarily a call for dismissal, but the supervisor should be aware of the situation and should contact the instructor to discuss expectations. The instructor may not be aware their behavior is of concern and deserves the opportunity to improve. This contact shows interest and displays a united front, indicating that the trainer and supervisor are supportive of the training process and are working together to ensure its success. This communication between the trainer and supervisor also serves as a matter of record, should the instructor need to be terminated at some point in the future.

How to Assess the Qualities and Choose the Best Candidates

When reaching out to candidates during the hiring process, it is important to engage with them in multiple formats. Via email, one can assess the first three qualities presented: does the instructor sound friendly in writing, have an appropriate response time, and communicate clearly and effectively? An instructor who does not use greetings and closings, writes in incomplete or confusing sentences, overuses punctuation, types in ALL CAPS, uses trendy acronyms, and/or does not respond within 24–48 hours may not represent the desired qualities of a future online instructor. Role-playing could also be used in an email interaction by offering open-ended questions for instructors to respond to in a hypothetical student-teacher scenario to assess their friendliness, timeliness, and communication skills.

If video conferencing is an expectation of the online teaching format, then it should also be a part of the interviewing process. As in the email example offered above, the interviewer

might role-play the part of a student who has questions about the assignment while the candidate demonstrates his or her ability to think quickly, be flexible, and offer clear explanations in a hypothetical situation. The instructor might also be asked to present a few content slides on their chosen subject matter. This is not to assess their ability to use the software—as it may be their first time in a specific platform—but instead is an opportunity to consider their personality, passion, and ability to convey information to their future students. A video conference lesson demonstration is also a chance to assess the last quality on the list, that of being able to "be the student." Look for an instructor who offers the tools and knowledge students need and displays a clear interest in the success of their students.

Finally, the qualities of being able to read and follow instructions and to be aware of deadlines can be analyzed from the human resources/hiring standpoint. Paperwork, whether digital or physical, is always a part of the interviewing and/or hiring process. Does the instructor read the instructions that are offered and complete the paperwork correctly the first time? Do they meet submission deadlines as requested? These first steps of the process are early indicators that the instructor takes the position seriously and can likely be counted on in the future to address deadlines and meet goals. Attention to detail and concern for accuracy at this stage should definitely be appreciated and noted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, hiring and training online instructors presents challenges in vetting quality candidates who are equipped to offer what students need to succeed in higher education. By following the examples offered in this paper, valuable time can be saved by screening candidates during the onboarding process and during training, thereby ensuring that all efforts have been made to select and prepare instructors sufficiently for the online classroom.

References

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