

# Faculty as Authors of Online Courses: Support and Mentoring

Gail Matthews-DeNatale, Ph.D.  
Senior Instructional Designer  
Academic Technology, Simmons College

Deborah Cotler, Ed.M.  
Instructional Designer  
Academic Technology, Simmons College

[PPT w. presentation title and credits]

## Presentation Overview

[PPT w. "overview"]

1. Introduction
2. Preliminary concerns of faculty (video)
3. What first timers need to know
  - a. Faculty perspective (video)
  - b. Support Framework (categories developed by us out of patterns of need)
4. Two case studies
5. What's helpful?
  - a. Faculty perspective (video)
  - b. Support Strategies (building on what faculty say is helpful)
6. Larger Institutional framework, including roles and guiding questions

## Introduction: Our Present Context

[PPT w. "our present context"]

Institutions of higher education are becoming involved with e-learning at an unprecedented rate. It's not just the pioneering faculty who are involved with e-learning – "second wave" are asked/expected to develop hybrid and fully-online courses. Be cautious about labeling – people aren't *either* pioneers *or* second wave – Faculty who are "second wave" in relationship to technology may be pedagogical "pioneers."

Good professors excel at engaging groups of students face-to-face, but few are prepared to develop courses that involve online learning. In addition, their pedagogy is often implicit – developed over years through trial and error. Paul Hagner writes

It is a basic fact that many of the best teachers possess natural communication and information management abilities that, for many of them, are simply assumed rather than the product of intensive self-examination. Since one requirement for transformation is coming to grips with how the new technologies can enhance learning objectives, a problem results in that many successful teachers have never engaged in this form of articulation and self-examination<sup>1</sup>.

"First wave" faculty – pioneers in online course development – tolerated and even embraced the steep learning curve that confronted them. Because pioneers usually take challenges in stride, observers may underestimate the considerable thought and attention to detail that is required to make a successful transition to teaching online. Mainstream faculty members and their academic administrators are likely to overlook or even eschew details that their predecessors thought through, grappled with, and resolved.

Given this context, it is vitally important for academic technologists to be proactive – to help mainstream faculty and administrators develop capabilities they may not realize that they need. In the same way that a good teacher knows how to tailor a class to address the learners' needs, academic technologists need to know how to provide a framework of support that is customized to meet the needs of mainstream faculty.

But we have much more experience working with "pioneers" than with mainstream faculty. So we need to take the time to listen to what mainstream faculty have to say – to thoughtfully assess the perspectives and needs of those who are in the "second wave." Toward this end, at Simmons College we conducted interviews with three faculty members who are considered to be in the second wave. Their voices are woven into this presentation. Today you will hear from the following three people:

[PPT w. picture of Mary Jane]

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Hanger, "Faculty Engagement and Support in the New Learning Environment," *Educause Review* (September/October 2000): 31.

- **Mary Jane Treacy** directs the Honors College program in the College of Arts and Sciences at Simmons College. We are currently working with Mary Jane to help her develop her first hybrid course. She has applied for a fellowship to integrate ePortfolios into the work of Honors College students.

[PPT w. picture of Vicki]

- **Vicki Bacon** chairs the Counselor Education program at Bridgewater State College. She is working with the School of Health Studies at Simmons College to develop a fully-online course in Sports Psychology. As an adjunct member of the Nutrition Department faculty, Vicki also teaches the course online. Of the three faculty members we interviewed, Vicki has had the greatest difficulty making the transition to teaching online. Because Vicki works in an adjunct relationship with the College, it has been particularly challenging to provide her with the support she needs. In fact, the problems Vicki encountered prompted us to develop the framework and strategies for mentoring that we present to you today. Sports Psychology is the first case study that we will present today.

[PPT w. picture of Bob]

- **Robert (Bob) Goldman** is a Mathematics Professor at Simmons College. He has developed two online courses, the most recent of which is "WebStat," a fully-online statistics prerequisite course. Last year Bob received one of our technology fellowships – which provided him with support and resources for the development of WebStat. WebStat is the second case study we will present today.

## What Are The Concerns of Mainstream Faculty?

When asked about their preliminary concerns about developing an online course, here's what the faculty we interviewed had to say:

[PPT w. "Preliminary Concerns" video -- length = 2:18]

[PPT w. "preliminary concerns"]

Bob and Mary Jane were apprehensive about loss of control and quality in their teaching. They also expressed fear of failure.

Vicki's comments are particularly interesting – she said that she wasn't concerned at first. Because her ability as a classroom teacher is her "greatest strength," it didn't occur to her that she might have difficulty teaching online. Like Bob, she doubted *the medium* – whether a course like hers could succeed online. But she didn't anticipate that distance learning would challenge *her* to rethink how she teaches her subject. Her comments remind us of Paul Hagner's quote – the difficulty she has experienced in developing a course that "works" online is prompting her to reflect on her philosophy of teaching and learning.

## Online Authoring: What's Different?

[show "Online Authoring: What's Different?" PPT slide]

Online course development challenges faculty to become explicit about their teaching because e-courses force them to "put it in writing" (or into multimedia). Yet few first-time online professors – and even fewer academic administrators – recognize the course development process as an act of multimedia authorship.

When courses are offered over the Web, the posting of a session is a distinct act of authorship that precedes student interaction with the material. The course reads as a musical score to be followed (and hopefully improvised upon) by course participants and facilitators.

This score must be carefully composed in advance with attention to:

- *tone* (the desired attitude and types of interactions),
- *part* (expectations for how students will interact with the material and with each other),

- *timing* (a realistic assessment of how long each task will probably take), and
- *structural flow* (how each session component connects, furthers goals, and contributes to the learning experience as a whole).

When asked what they think first timers need to know, our three interviewees gave the following advice:

[show "What First Timers Need To Know" video -- length = 4:26]

[show "Faculty: What Peers Need to Know" PPT slide]

## Online Course Authorship Requires Faculty to Develop a New Set of Skills

Online course authorship involves a completely new set of skills, including knowing how to:

[show "Online Courses Require New Skills" PPT slide]

- be explicit in written assignment descriptions,
- write with a familiar tone that conveys both meaning and personality,
- sequence online learning activities,
- phrase and sequence questions that prompt meaningful discussion,
- integrate formative assessment into pilot offerings, and
- to use that assessment to make constructive revisions.

In working with first-time online course developers, we have identified the following recurring patterns of need. These "patterns of need" are the framework that informs our consultation work with faculty:

[show "Support Framework (patterns of need)" PPT slide]

*Understand How To Author A Coherent, Integrated Learning Experience:* Most faculty members are unaware of the explanations they provide "in the moment" when they teach

face-to-face. Their first stab at writing up sessions for delivery online reads like lesson notes. For many, this is a necessary first step – putting the broad strokes in writing. When asked to flesh out the session, the second draft will often read like cookbook directions: "First, you do this. Then, you do that. Finally, do this." This is also a normal phase in the course authoring process – clarifying details and the desired sequence of activity. But for the course to be a gratifying learning experience, sessions need to be revised and polished in a manner usually reserved for print publications.

*Understand What Needs To Be Composed in Advance and What Can Be Improvised:* In a face-to-face setting, the teacher goes to class with a repertoire of strategies, discussion questions, and other resources jotted down in her lesson notes (or in her head). If students do not connect with one approach, she can improvise. In developing an online course, first timers have difficulty distinguishing between materials that need to be written down and incorporated into the formal module and things that can be communicated in impromptu announcements and discussion posts.

*Understand the Emotional Needs of Online Learners:* In the face-to-face classroom, good teachers know how to use subtle gestures and tone of voice to set an emotional tone that is conducive to learning. In preparing a course for delivery online, faculty members are often inattentive to issues of tone. Donald Norman notes that, in the world of design, the dimension of emotion is often overlooked:

New scientific advances in our understanding of the brain and how important emotion is to everyday life, how valuable ... when people are anxious they tend to narrow their thought processes, concentrating upon aspects directly relevant to a problem. ... when people are relaxed and happy, their thought processes expand, becoming more creative, more imaginative.<sup>2</sup>

Faculty need to learn how to use words, color, and images to communicate that their course welcomes intellectual risk-taking and deep thought.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Norman, *Emotional Design*, NY Basic Books, 2004, pp. 8-19.

*Understand How To Keep Students Engaged and Oriented:* Perhaps the most difficult challenge for faculty is to develop online sessions that are both explicit and engaging. Well-crafted sessions address the metacognitive dimension of learning. For example, callout boxes can be used to help learners see how activities connect up with the big picture – course goals for understanding, models for learning, assignment rubrics, diagrams, etc.

Faculty members who are new to teaching online often focus on the limitations of the medium – overlooking types of learning that can *only* take place "at a distance." For example, instead of doing all coursework online, students can get up from their computers to do activities around their homes and communities in geographically diverse settings. They can then report back – within a relatively short time frame class members can benefit from information or stories that peers have gathered from across the country or even the world. Groups can compare, contrast, analyze, debate, and synthesize their experiences into a multi-dimensional understanding of the topic.

*Understand How The Course Looks and Feels From The Students' Perspective:* In the face-to-face setting, there are numerous cues about how a session is going -- students' body language and questions indicate when the learning is off course. But in an online course, serious problems can go unnoticed and compromise student learning. For this reason, we ask first-time course developers to solicit feedback through frequent formative assessment surveys.

[show "Formative Assessment Questions" PPT slide]

While the problems with a given session are still fresh in students' minds, we use the following three questions at the end of each learning module:

- How many hours did you spend working on this module?
- What are your suggestions for improving this module? Please also fill us in on any problems you encountered with the technology, directions, or organization of materials.
- Considering the objectives for this module, what do you think is the most important thing you learned? What questions remain?

The three-question format helps us disentangle technical and pedagogical glitches. Some things can be fixed in the moment. Student engagement intensifies when they realize that their input results in on-the-fly course revisions. Other issues are duly noted and "fixed" in the next "edition" of the course.

These categories serve as the framework we use in consultation with faculty. But what does it look like in action? The following two case studies serve as examples.

[show "The Framework in Action" PPT slide]

## **Sports Psychology and WebStat: Two Case Study Examples**

During this segment we will present Sports Psychology and WebStat, two case studies that highlight the needs of first-time online course authors.

As noted earlier in this presentation, it was in part in response to the challenges Vicki faced that we developed the framework we are presenting today. We are particularly grateful to Vicki for allowing us to write up the problems that she encountered as a case study through which others can learn. We would also like to thank Bob Goldman for his candor in sharing his perspective as a relative newcomer to online course development.

[show "Sports Psychology" PPT slide]

### **Sports Psychology (Vicki Bacon, Course Developer)**

*Background:* In 2003, Simmons' Sports Nutrition Department launched a fully-online certificate program. Sports Psychology, taught by Professor Vicki Bacon, is one course in the program.

Well-regarded by her students and by others in her field, Vicki prides herself in her ability to "walk into a classroom, quickly size up the dynamic and mold the classroom experience accordingly." Her courses are pedagogically progressive, making extensive use of case studies and discussion.

Vicki's class was first taught live on Simmons' campus and then piloted online. Modifications, based on the results of formative assessment, are currently underway. The course will be taught again online in the spring of 2005.

*Challenges:* The Sports Psychology course faced a number of barriers to success in its online debut. The online certification program was the Nutrition department's first foray into distance learning. The School of Health Studies offers other fully-online programs, most notably a degree program in Physical Therapy. But, absent an institutional mechanism for intentional information-sharing on this topic, communication between the two programs took place on an ad hoc basis.

Other challenges involved gaps in support at the institutional level. Academic Technology was in the process of hiring two fulltime instructional designers to work with faculty, but at the time that Vicki was authoring a first draft for her course there was insufficient support in place. In retrospect, all involved acknowledged the need for more training, modeling, and guidance prior to the course development phase.

Another set of challenges involved assumptions that proved to be unfounded. For example, when Vicki taught the face-to-face course, her students were all from the College's Sports Nutrition program. But, as Vicki noted in her interview, the profile of the "virtual" student population may differ from that of a face-to-face course. The potential pool of students for online courses is often more diverse than that of face-to-face classes. To Vicki's surprise, her online class roster included many students from other fields, including Physical Therapy and Athletic Training. This shift in student population affected both the dynamic of the online class and how students responded to the material.

In addition, both the Nutrition department and Vicki assumed that the project entailed "putting the course online." In reality, as Vicki noted during her interview, online course development involves rethinking fundamental aspects of oneself as a teacher and how to best engage students in learning course concepts.

Finally, as someone who had never taken or facilitated an online course before, it was difficult for Vicki to know what was required of her. Perhaps her biggest challenge was learning how to teach in a context in which she was unable to "read" the expressions and

reactions of her students. While her skill at reading a room served her quite well in the classroom environment, it hindered her ability to author course materials that anticipated the needs of virtual students.

The text she produced for the pilot version was skeletal. The outline was explicit, but the narrative that helps students connect the dots was noticeably absent. This is not unusual for a first time online course author. All three faculty members interviewed for this presentation, Bob, Mary Jane, and Vicki, mentioned that translating "lecture notes" into a coherent online learning experience for students was one of their biggest hurdles.

Predictably, the course debuted with a bumpy start. Course modules pointed students to articles, case studies and lecture notes, but failed to set the context for learning. Student engagement lagged – students submitted the required work, but the learning and level of engagement stagnated. Vicki expressed frustration that the students were failing to "take it to the next level" and was concerned that the students never seemed to build on a foundation of knowledge from one module to the next.

[show "Formative Feedback" PPT slide]

Weekly formative assessment, gathered through WebCT surveys, confirmed what was already evident; students were not engaged, didn't come away from the modules having grasped the key concepts, and were often confused as to what they should be doing.

*Intervention and Revisions:* Fortunately, as these challenges unfolded, Simmons College was in the process of increasing its infrastructure for faculty support. As the newly hired instructional designers, one of our first tasks was to provide Vicki with the guidance and support she needed to succeed. In addition to face-to-face consultation and coaching, we also introduced her to the literature about best practices in online teaching. Braddlee, Director of Academic Technology, suggested that we purchase multiple copies of our favorite books and give them away to faculty who we thought would benefit from that type of resource.

*The Evolution of an Activity:* We've noted that online course development is an iterative process – to achieve success, assignments need to be piloted and then revised according

to formative feedback. The following example highlights the evolution of one assignment in Vicki's course.

[show "The Evolution of an Activity" PPT slide]

In the first module of the course one of the goals is for students to identify factors that might compromise their ability to work with clients on certain "hot button" issues. This goal is achieved by having students examine their own family histories and construct a genogram using the software application Inspiration.

Let's take a look at how we have worked with Vicki to recast an assignment for the online setting:

- 1) Face-to-face: In the face-to-face class, an entire session was dedicated to learning how to use the software. Students then created their genograms and brought printouts to class, where a discussion about the process and findings ensued.
- 2) Online pilot: In the first iteration of the online course, students were provided with a link to install Inspiration and a downloadable tutorial. Instructions for the assignment read as follows:

You should complete construction on your family genogram this week. In the discussion forum, first post about your experience developing your own genogram. Given your experience, what do you think is the genogram's value for client assessment? Then, review your classmates' posts and post at least one reply to another thread.

The formative assessment and implementation of that plan quickly revealed that students were struggling. Because there was no on-site demonstration, it was taking students longer to learn how to use the software. Because students weren't explicitly directed to attach their genogram files to their discussion posts, students couldn't comment on each other's work. Finally, because the discussion guidelines were vague, the discussions quickly fell flat.

[show "Sample Genogram" PPT slide]

As an example of an "on the fly" change, in response to the formative assessment, Vicki decided to extend the discussion into a second week – this time encouraging students to post their genograms.

- 3) **Plans for Revision:** After analyzing students' formative feedback, we realized that the goals for the assignment were unclear – both for the students and for Vicki. The stated goal is for students to identify prior life experiences that might affect students' ability to work with clients on certain issues. But the assignment's discussion prompt also asks students to consider the value of using client genograms as a tool for assessment.

In the context of a face-to-face class, Vicki would probably begin the discussion by focusing on what students learned by doing their own genograms, and then ask follow-up questions to extend the conversation to cover the value of genograms in a sports psychology context. But in the online context, presenting both discussion topics at once resulted in confusion about the assignment. We are working with her to craft her writing so that the assignment's rationale, process for implementation, and expectations are explicit for the students.

[show "WebStat" PPT slide]

### **WebStat (Robert Goldman, Course Developer)**

*Background:* Simmons' School of Health Studies (SHS) requires all entering students to satisfy a pre-matriculation statistics requirement. Since students can satisfy this course at any accredited educational institution, the majority of them choose the most cost-effective option of enrolling in a course at their local community college. Eager to tap into this market by offering a cost-competitive and convenient alternative at Simmons, SHS decided to offer a fully online statistics course. They asked Mathematics professor Robert Goldman to take the lead.

*Challenges:* The group of stakeholders who drove this effort (self-titled the "Stats Mavens") put a lot of planning into the effort and benefited from exposure to a number

of models for online learning. This helped them anticipate many of the infrastructure needs that a fully-online course requires. As such, there were no major systemic hurdles to work through.

*Advantages:* In addition to minimal challenges, Bob had a significant advantage. The Technology Fellowship he received for the project provided him with funds and resources that were not available to Vicki Bacon.

Still, Bob Goldman was anxious that the quality of learning might be compromised by an online medium of content delivery. As he stated in his interview, he wondered if student would be able to learn the material without his presence and guidance. He was willing to act on suggestions that he provide scaffolding and to make assignments more explicit, but for the pilot version of the course he was reluctant to take risks and experiment with creative use of multimedia – first he wanted to see for himself that students *could* learn statistics online.

[show "Formative Feedback" PPT slide]

For example, while he hoped that students would feel free to work together, he wasn't comfortable creating structured opportunities for them to do so. As a result, students were largely unaware of each other's "classroom presence" and had a mostly isolated experience. Furthermore, while the instructor encouraged students to contact him, he listed the telephone as his preferred method of contact, as he wasn't keen on the idea of using email, chat or the discussion board for this type of contact. He reported very little contact from students. Because students were dispersed throughout the United States and working through the course material at varying times of day, it is likely that his preferred method of communication actually provided a barrier to discourse.

*Revisions:* The weekly formative assessment data informed a number of small changes (mostly around timing of module and quiz releases) which were made during the run of the course. Overall, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and the pilot version of the course has been considered a success.

[show "Revised Version" PPT slide]

Bolstered by this positive pilot experience, Robert is now ready to take the course a step further with regard to interactivity. In retrospect, this is a lesson about working with "second wave" faculty. In the long run it may be better to help these faculty have a successful first experience than to talk them into adventurous online teaching strategies that may take them too far outside their comfort zone. Now that he is persuaded that distance learning is a viable strategy for teaching his subject, Bob is both willing and eager to take his course to the next level.

[show "Version Two Improvements" PPT slide]

For the fall 2004 version, his focus is on transforming the isolated course experience into a community of learning for students. He has created discussion groups and is requiring a number of group assignments. In addition, a chat utility and a public "whiteboard" feature are being incorporated. Furthermore, as he has grown more comfortable with the potential of the technology, he has become more imaginative with its use. Students are now welcomed to the course with a video of the instructor. Two of the concepts previously covered in the "lecture note" format have been redesigned as Flash animations, a format which is better suited for demonstrating the concepts. Weekly formative assessment is again being administered to solicit feedback on these enhancements.

[show "Faculty: What Helped?" PPT slide]

## **Support for Developers of Online Learning: What's Helpful?**

In our videotaped interviews, we also asked Bob, Mary Jane, and Vicki to tell us about the things we did that they felt were particularly helpful.

Here's what they had to say in their own words:

[show "What helped?" video -- length = 3:19]

## **Support Strategies**

Strategies for addressing faculty needs must be systemic and go beyond superficial tips. Building on what these faculty members have to say, we developed the following support strategies for our work with faculty:

[show "Support Strategies" PPT slide]

- *Establish optimal conditions for dialogue.* Faculty need to be made aware of the body of literature that is available. Chances are, your instructional design principles are informed by the work of another. Before you begin working in too much depth with a faculty member, point them to a copy of the literature that informs you. We find that when faculty members come to the table with a foundational understanding of the principles which are guiding you and your advice, the dialogue starts at a much more productive level. In addition, seeing others say it "in print" increases the credibility of the advice you are giving them.

For example, our conversation with Mary Jane Treacy really took off after we gave her a copy of Collison et al's *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators*. Before she left for an international trip, we gave Vicki Bacon several of Palloff and Pratt's books. The next time we met with her, there was a notable difference in our interactions.

- Work with faculty to reexamine and *clarify goals for student understanding/skill development* (Stone Wiske "Teaching for Understanding"). Creating course material without clearly defined learning goals is analogous to building a house without a blueprint. Often, faculty become so focused on the "dissemination of knowledge" aspect of teaching that they can lose sight of what it is that they want students to learn from the lesson or activity. As a result, the activity they end up creating loses meaning or effectiveness. Identifying learning goals at the outset of the project—and revisiting them prior to producing material for each activity—helps to ensure that the material created will be relevant and properly support the desired learning.
- *Brainstorm* ideas about what the students will experience. For each goal for student understanding, describe what students will do and what artifacts of learning will allow the faculty member to interpret student accomplishments and student needs--

and when. Once you have identified the activities you can describe what students will need, in terms of materials, assignments, discussion questions, instructions and rubrics to carry out the plan for learning. Help the faculty to be cognizant of the fact that in the online environment, you can never be too explicit.

- *Work with faculty as writers.* The single most critical turning point for many faculty members is the moment when they recognize this effort as an act of authorship. As such, you should first help them think through what kind of community of learners they want to create, and what will be needed in order to achieve that community. Then, suggest a process for authorship:

[show "Suggested Authorship Process" PPT slide]

1. Work with them to articulate a template
  2. Model a sequence for authorship that begins with analysis of students' ideas – instead of beginning with "what I want to say," begin with "what are common student misconceptions, where do the students tend to struggle?" then write session with these patterns of need in mind
  3. Encourage them to have someone else read material and point out areas that need clarification.
  4. Help them to recognize their voice, and find that voice in writing.
- *Work with faculty as revisers.* Just as an author would never write an academic paper without multiple rounds of revisions, a course author must be prepared to revise the course based on feedback from others. Offer to be a reviewer. Encourage the faculty member to solicit peers as additional reviewers.

[show "Avenues for Support" PPT slide]

In the final analysis, our goal is to create a community of practice at Simmons in which faculty, staff, and students who are involved in online learning feel connected, energized, and supported. Our multi-prong strategy for achieving this goal includes an annual tech fair that includes a faculty poster session, a faculty institute, and a theme-based series of faculty lunches.

## Final Words: Support for Online Learning is An Institutional, Systemic Issue

[show "Final Words" PPT slide]

In the same way that Vicki Bacon assumed that her success as a classroom teacher would translate into success as an online educator, it can be difficult for Deans and Program Chairs to assess their preparedness for administering an online program. Once again, academic technologists need to help academic administrators consider strategic planning questions they may not think to ask.

According to the recommendations of a recent study by ECAR (Educause Center for Applied Research), institutions of higher education "need to create a cohesive institutional vision and a set of policies for e-learning that foster adoption and cultural change."<sup>3</sup> Absent a supportive infrastructure that acknowledges the significant demands of online course authorship, even a well-prepared faculty member will struggle. To address this need, we developed a set of guiding questions for use in developing online programs (distributed to you as a handout today).

Because the world of online learning involves teaming and new roles, it can be difficult for academic technologists, academic administrators, and faculty members to keep track of who is responsible for implementing each aspect of the program. To address this need, we developed an Institutional Framework for Distance Learning at Simmons College (distributed to you as a handout today).

[NOTE: "Guiding Questions" and "Framework" is distributed as a handout]

[show "Visit us on the web" PPT slide]

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Pirani, "Supporting E-Learning in Higher Education," July 2004, <http://www.educause.edu/ers0303>