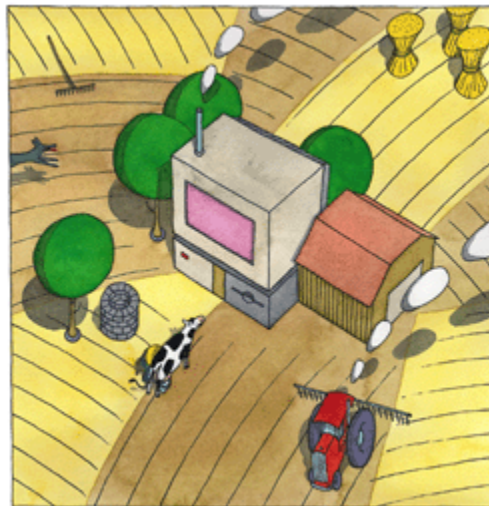


## When the Cows Come Home: A Proven Path of Professional Development for Faculty Pursuing E-Learning

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University faculty who have braved the transition from the traditional classroom to an e-learning instructor role report many changes. Most describe the knowledge gained from the e-learning world as making them better teachers in all delivery venues. Some describe how their educational philosophy changed from being the dispenser of knowledge to becoming learner-centered. Many others, however, swap horror stories of e-mail boxes full of 300 urgent messages from students or servers that went down right in the middle of a midterm.

As higher education continues the rush to embrace technology-delivered learning opportunities, one imperative is to find ways to prepare faculty for what life will be like on the other side of the transformation. Independent of how great a teacher, scholar or researcher an individual may be, he or she needs to have accurate expectations of how roles change, a modicum of technological mastery, and a set of instructional strategies appropriate for the new domain. Some institutions push faculty over the precipice with little help or support, while a few have teams of support staff that guide and coach faculty. However, most have turned to professional development as a way to train faculty in the values and uses of instructional technology.

This article examines the professional development approach followed by the University of Houston System in preparing faculty for the e-learning transformation. The University of Houston System is composed of four unique and distinct universities: the University of Houston, its largest campus; the University of Houston-Clear Lake, a suburban upper-level and graduate campus; the University of Houston-Downtown, an open access university; and the University of Houston-Victoria, an upper-level and graduate campus. The four universities collaborate to operate two system centers that deliver instruction in specific geographic areas of Houston. They also partner in our distance education effort which is known as CampusNet

([www.uhsa.uh.edu/campusnet](http://www.uhsa.uh.edu/campusnet)).

## Here Come the Cows

Among its numerous functions, CampusNet provides professional development opportunities to faculty who are planning or just beginning their forays into developing and delivering online courses. Each May, a multiday workshop series called the CampusNet Online Workshop, more commonly known as COW, introduces 30 or so faculty members to the prospects and expectations of planning and delivering an online course. Of course, bovine jokes abound that provide a light and fun atmosphere to the serious task of acquainting faculty with technology, instructional design, Web development, graphic arts, multimedia and new instructional techniques.

## The History of COW

COW came about as a 1998 initiative among the four University of Houston System provosts. Wanting to explore the venue of Web-based instruction, the provosts commissioned the instructional technology faculty within the schools and colleges of education at the UH and UH-Clear Lake campuses to design, develop and deliver a series of online graduate courses within a year. The faculty would then have to deliver a workshop series that would prepare other faculty to travel the same path. That workshop was the first COW event. Hosted by UH-Clear Lake's Instructional Technology Center in May of 1999, the four-day workshop mixed theory with practical examples, described a cornucopia of ideas that worked in online instruction and many that failed, as well as started the faculty attendees on the path to the hands-on process of designing and developing their own courses.

Following the workshop, the staff from the four universities who were responsible for supporting distance education, faculty development and academic computing formed a collaborative under the direction of Dr. Sandy Frieden, University of Houston System's executive director of distance education and CampusNet. The collaborative took the schedule, materials and participant feedback from the first workshop and began planning an annual event.

The "Moo-IIennium COW" was hosted at UH-Downtown in May 2000. Shortened to a three-day workshop - with one day focusing on instructional design, one on technology and tools, and one on policy - the event introduced another cohort of faculty to an e-learning environment. Since then, a freshened version of the workshop has become an annual feature. See below for a current COW topic list.

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## COW Topic Outline

### Day One

- What does a Web course look like?
- Course tools to make you successful
- Fostering online collaboration
- Encouraging group work
- Measuring skills and abilities
- Gradebook manipulation and student tracking

### Day Two

- The value of media in a course
- Media track: Graphics, scanners and digital photography; sound; and video.
- Copyright issues in the online world
- Building your course track: Building an HTML-less course; building your course in HTML; and beyond HTML - Flash and other interactivities.

### Day Three

- Online teaching as digital storytelling
- Problem-based learning through WebQuests
- Grazing: Have you "herd" - A look at half-dozen add-in tools for course building
- Student perspectives panel
- Faculty perspectives - Show and tell
- Campus breakout to meet your team

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## COW Participants

Resources dictate how many participants each COW cohort can sustain. These seats are divided among the campuses as the provosts see fit. Faculty members are selected to attend COW events based upon a proposal submitted to the campus provost or based upon the campus' strategic planning process.

Faculty who participate in COW events receive a stipend for attendance and priority access to the support team assembled for their campus. Usually supported by a course release or additional compensation from the campus provost, participants design, develop and deliver their course over the next year. A COW reunion, held each January, reunites the cohort, providing them an opportunity to show off what they have developed, share insights from their frontline experiences, and receive more in-depth instruction. COW alumni are also invited to be presenters at subsequent COW events.



At the conclusion of each COW event, workshop participants have a chance to evaluate the event using a survey. The evaluation results are used to plan changes for the next cohort. Aggregate data from five years of evaluations speak to the value of the experience and its reception by faculty - with 74% of the 150 participants having rated the workshop as "excellent" and 26% having rated it as "good." In five years, no ratings of "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" were received. The participants also unanimously stated that they would recommend the workshop to colleagues, while 95% indicated their willingness to attend additional advanced topic workshops.

## Benefits of COW

The biggest benefit of COW has been the professional development of 150 faculty members throughout the university system who gained the knowledge and skills to design, develop and deliver online courses. For fall 2003, collectively, the COW alumni offered 267 online sections representing 150 different courses. As a result of this faculty development effort, several degrees are now being offered entirely online systemwide, including an MBA from UH-Victoria, a Master of Science in Instructional Technology from UH-Clear Lake, a Master of Science in Software Engineering from UH-Clear Lake, and a Master of Hospitality Management from UH.

A more subtle benefit of COW has been the positive impact on traditional classroom-based courses with the integration of the Web and other learning technologies. A COW alumnus wrote that "the COW workshop is the single most important thing the system has ever done to transform teaching and learning." Another wrote: "The workshop has given me new insights on myself and my teaching style - it will change everything I do."

Several of the campuses automatically provide an account and Web course space for each section of every course taught face to face. The development of these hybrid models, along with other hybrids using point-to-point instructional television, broadcast and cable television, as well as videotape rental or purchase, have enabled UH System's CampusNet to weave a broad tapestry of educational opportunities for students.

## What Made COW Work?

A meta-analysis of survey data reveals some of the factors that made COW successful. One survey question asked for the "ways in which the workshop exceeded your expectations." The aggregate responses are listed below in order of their frequency:

Faculty networking time. Each COW cohort was planned to balance content expertise and teaching experience. The

workshops were intended to maximize networking opportunities for faculty from across the system. This helped the faculty members get to know their systemwide colleagues, not just those associates from their own campus-based departments.

Sharing. Some sessions let previous COW alumni show their courses or talk about their course development and delivery experiences. For instance, one session during two COW events featured a panel of students from various online courses sharing their perceptions and answering questions. These sessions were well appreciated.

Balancing theory and practice. COW presentations ran the gamut from instructional design theory to the use of specific applications. Reflecting on the workshop, one alum wrote: "I learned both the concepts and the how-to's, which was very good. I have tons of ideas for my course and I understand both how to implement them and why."

Hands-on work with tools. Sessions for learning course tools and using technologies were held in a computer teaching laboratory, providing faculty hands-on experience in using them. One participant wrote: "Being able to sit down at a PC and actually use the tools exceeded my expectations. I had thought that the tools would be explained, but that I wouldn't have the opportunity to actually use them."

The nonthreatening atmosphere. One respondent noted that "the effect was wonderful and unexpected. The 'cow' theme and jokes and upbeat atmosphere were a great added element. It especially counters the connotation of technology being dry and impersonal. It reinforced how important it is to bring a professor's personality into an online course."

## Improving COW

Even though the workshops received consistently high praise, each year's evaluation offered an opportunity to suggest ways to improve the next workshops, with each new workshop being crafted from this feedback. The evaluations allowed the planning team to arrive at some general conclusions that are detailed below:

Course-focused activities. Faculty members want to work on the development of their course during the workshop as much as possible. Some even arrive with the expectation of completing their entire online course in the three days. Activities of the make-and-take variety, where faculty produce something that they can use in their course, were well appreciated.

Questions. Provide as much time for questions as possible. Most faculty members want to explore how a new concept or skill might be implemented in their course. Questions are among the easiest ways to accommodate this.

Go online. Put the basic facts and tutorials for skills into an online course for faculty. Teaching faculty about online courses with a face-to-face workshop was one of those oxymora that we had to live with. COW developed both a Web site and an online skills course, but faculty used these resources little until the face-to-face event required them to do so.

Advanced workshops. Faculty members come to a COW event with a wide range of technical expertise. Some already have mastered skills taught in certain sessions. Providing advanced topics or alternative tracks of sessions could keep more advanced participants from becoming bored.

Discipline-based workshops. Different disciplines might deal with online courses in different ways. Some respondents suggested a COW-like event that would focus on specific topics such as mathematics, art or writing in online environments.

## Future Derivatives of COW

The collaborative planning team has launched a series of quarterly Super COW events to address the need for advanced workshops. These workshops are open to COW alumni for early registration and then are opened to all system faculty for any remaining seats. A series featuring four of these events was planned for the 2003-2004 academic year. The planning team is also considering the suggestion for a discipline-specific COW event. If the idea is accepted, the first event would probably be on the calendar for this year.

In addition, the planning team is considering an Executive COW, which would better enable the universities' administrators to understand the time, effort and commitment required to design, develop and deliver quality online instruction. The inspiration for this did not come from the formal evaluations; instead, it came from a preponderance of hallway talk at COW. Comments such as, "I wish my dean would come to this" or "my provost needs to understand online instruction better,"

have prompted this consideration for executive professional development.

The University of Houston System is proud of the progress it has made in distance education as a result of the CampusNet online workshops and the collaborative which operates them. We would be happy to share additional information about COW or COW events. For more information, contact the author at [kidney@cl.uh.edu](mailto:kidney@cl.uh.edu) or Dr. Sandy Frieden at [sfrieden@uh.edu](mailto:sfrieden@uh.edu).

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