



Coaching Faculty to Teach Online: A Single Qualitative Case Study at an Online University

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Introduction

Learning Online: Student Engagement and Teaching Presence

A core competency for online teaching is the ability to incorporate and implement strategies that will keep students motivated and actively engaged (Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018). A central aspect to promoting engagement is the concept of presence, a vital component of the Community of Inquiry Model developed by Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2001; 2003). According to this model, three interconnected elements of presence pertain to online learning environments:

- ***Social presence*** relates to the activity of participants in establishing personal and emotional connections and presenting themselves as “real” people.
- ***Cognitive presence*** relates to instructors and students being able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained discourse (dialogue and critical reflection).
- ***Teaching Presence*** incorporates both social and cognitive presence, whereby instructors actively interact with students and establish and maintain supportive working relationships. Student perceptions of instructor involvement is a central factor, with higher levels of engagement leading to more profound satisfaction, higher levels of academic achievement, and a greater likelihood of course completion (Cole, Lennon, & Weber, 2019; Martin & Bollinger, 2018).

Literature Review

Faculty Development in Online Education

The research of Martin, Ritzhaupt, Kumar, & Budhrani (2019) sheds light on online instructors’ view of their role. This role extends beyond course delivery to include broader pedagogical tasks such as welcoming learners, being responsive to learners’ needs, providing timely and substantive feedback, and fostering ongoing engagement and interaction. This research found that all participants mentioned some form of professional development, either at their institution, within a professional organization, or making an effort on their own to seek avenues that will expand their knowledge and skills.

The significant ongoing expansion of online learning requires adjustments to the teaching practices associated with traditional learning environments, thereby placing new (and increased) demands on instructors. While there has been a trend towards developing professional training courses that focus on expanding technological knowledge, this does not necessarily assist instructors with effective pedagogical practices and their application in the online environment (Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). With rapidly increasing online enrolment, it becomes critical that instructors are provided with initial and ongoing support to understand learner needs better, ensure teaching presence, and enhance methods of facilitation. Considering innovative ways to support faculty in the online environment, and investing in professional development offerings to address

the challenges of teaching online, will provide opportunities to enhance teaching practice, thereby building both individual and organizational capacity.

Northcentral University's School of Education Faculty Development Approach

Northcentral University (NCU) is a fully online institution of higher education that has adopted a one-to-one pedagogical model. Each student progresses through their courses, interacting with an instructor, and learning by way of *Teaching through Engagement*. Promoting engagement among students and faculty is an integral part of the University's long-term success and strategic plan, and faculty are encouraged to strive for teaching excellence by engaging with their students in multiple ways. Research consistently illustrates that the issue of isolation is an essential consideration and that this can inhibit engagement and learning (Angolia, Pagliari, 2016; Buelow, Barry, & Rich, 2016; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Meyer, 2014). NCU promotes the idea that online learning should not be "alone learning," and a conscious effort is made to move faculty from a passive and quiet background presence to become responsive and collaborative partners in the learning process. Being an engaged faculty member at NCU includes an understanding of what engagement is and how to proactively develop meaningful working relationships with students so the learning experience can be optimally successful (Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018).

To accomplish these purposes, the University's School of Education has developed and implemented a faculty development process, which includes coaching as a central element. This comprehensive and ongoing faculty development process addresses all aspects of teaching graduate students online, from platform and policies to training and coaching in the pedagogical model, *Teaching Through Engagement*. All faculty are assigned a coach, and receive ongoing coaching to enhance their teaching practice and thereby strengthen student engagement. Before they receive students, faculty must first complete an introduction to *Teaching Through Engagement* in which they learn about the approach and complete activities that allow them to practice and receive feedback. Coaching formally begins after training is complete, with coaches conducting periodic checks on faculty work and providing instruction and support as they transition to a full teaching load. Initial coaching sessions are provided for all new onboarding faculty. Periodic coaching occurs at times of need where specific problems or issues arise, and also at the time of the annual performance review where necessary based on unsatisfactory performance. Coaching typically takes place using synchronous collaboration tools such as SKYPE or Zoom.

The essential goal of the School's faculty development process is that all faculty that have a consistent and informed approach to online teaching. The NCU faculty development process is centered on guiding ways of ensuring teaching presence and effectively facilitating learning. This is unlike some professional development opportunities for online faculty that emphasize technological training with little to no guidance regarding pedagogical practices and their application in the online environment (Bloomberg, 2014). The goal is to assist faculty with the principles and practices of *Teaching through Engagement* and encourage the application of these practices by engaging with their students in multiple ways to achieve teaching excellence.

Our Coaching Practice: Core Approach

Coaching has emerged from a synthesis of multiple fields, including training, adult learning, consulting, change management, and psychology. Each of these fields has its models and approaches to coaching (Essays UK, 2018). Different authors have defined coaching in their ways, with a shared focus on the improvement of skills and abilities of individuals and groups in an organization (Essays UK, 2018). As part of the faculty development process, we view coaching as a process of personal guided discovery which results in the following outcomes:

- Increased personal awareness and understanding
- Experiential learning and skill-building
- Goal setting and accountability for goal achievement
- Specific action planning

Our coaching approach includes a strong emphasis on the need to practice, apply, or implement new skills and behaviors. In this way, coaching becomes an excellent complement to traditional training. We view an effective coach as one who engages in the following activities:

- Explains the University's goals and mission and helps faculty understand their job responsibilities
- Identifies professional learning needs that are required to raise standards and attainment.
- Helps build faculty competence and confidence by providing opportunities for success in the workplace and positively reinforcing accomplishments
- Provides feedback and resources necessary for faculty to perform effectively, highlights strengths and opportunities for growth, and corrects inappropriate or ineffective practices
- Formally and informally evaluates faculty performance, and encourages faculty to improve work performance and engage in ongoing self-assessment continuously
- Seeks faculty opinions and suggestions, thereby developing a climate of collaboration in which professional learning can flourish and in which faculty feel supported in their quest to change and improve.

Coaching remains flexible and tailored to the individual needs of each faculty member. Examples of possible coaching sessions include the following:

- Coach provides feedback on a graded assignment selected by the faculty
- Coach provides feedback on a graded assignment selected by the coach
- Faculty and coach collaborate on developing feedback for an ungraded assignment
- Faculty and coach work on a teaching issue of the faculty's choice

Coaches work with faculty in ways that respect their status and accomplishments, and conversation takes place within the context of shared goals and standards. Coaches ask critically reflective questions and provide faculty with appropriate and useful feedback and resources. Our key

message is that *Teaching through Engagement*, like a thoughtfully structured pedagogical approach, can bring rich rewards to both faculty and students and that we are committed to our faculty's success.

Our Coaching Practice: Values and Goals

NCU's School of Education coaches strives to create an environment that instills in faculty the value of ongoing learning, an environment in which faculty members become engaged and in which they are supported in their efforts (Bloomberg, 2014). Coaches work toward developing an organizational culture that supports and guides learning for continuous growth and performance improvement, and involves three levels of learning: tactical problem solving; developing new ways of thinking that can apply to other situations and roles; and "learning how to learn"; that is, developing skills and habits of self-reflection and meta-cognition that ensure that learning will continue after coaching ends. The third level is an essential goal of coaching, aiming to teach habits of learning and self-reflection, thereby enabling ongoing development. Raelin (2017) refers to this as "new learning,"; replacing the idea of skill or competence learning with learning for "meta-competence" or learning to learn. Our coaching is focused on three fundamental values and goals:

1. Build a culture of learning and collaboration
2. Foster an academic growth mindset
3. Facilitate reflective practice

Build a Culture of Learning and Collaboration

Coaching is viewed as a collaborative process. We recognize that teaching one-to-one is a paradigm shift for many faculty members, whether they are new to teaching or seasoned veterans. By presenting themselves as "co-learners" makes it possible for coaches to establish and nurture positive relationships in which faculty feel they are invested, and therefore share a commitment to the learning experience. Coaches affirm progress, strengths, and accomplishments, and also point out areas of concern or in need of improvement. Specifically, coaches ask questions that promote critical thinking about aspects of teaching and pedagogical skills to identify areas where faculty may need support. Actionable feedback is provided that includes information, suggestions, direct instruction, and reference to resources that faculty can use to improve and succeed. Coaches welcome and value faculty input and suggestions as to how we can more fully support their teaching practice. The overall goal is to stimulate individual growth and development, foster critical thinking, and inspire faculty to remain passionate and energized about their teaching, and to continually strive to improve their skills so that their learners are provided with an optimal learning experience.

Foster a Growth Academic Mindset

Equally important to actively engaging with their students through *teaching presence* is that faculty also maintain a growth academic mindset (Dwek, 2007). An understanding of mindset allows instructors to challenge themselves and ensure that they focus their instruction on how their

students can improve by providing the necessary support and motivation to ensure ongoing learning and development. Instructors with a “fixed mindset” can create an atmosphere of judgment and may tend to give up on those who are not performing well. Also, because they do not believe in improvement, they may not attempt to foster it. Alternatively, instructors with a “growth mindset” will hold the view that extra time and effort as well worth it, and will find it rewarding when they witness their students’ progress and achievement. As Dweck (2007) states, “Great teachers believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning.” (pg. 194). Faculty with a growth mindset are therefore more likely to look for ways to prepare their students for success by providing necessary support and encouragement so they will keep working and persevering.

Facilitate Reflective Practice

Our goal is to develop faculty as reflective practitioners who see the value of coaching, and who are invested in their development as teachers so that their students can be maximally successful. Reflective practice involves examining actions in order to challenge beliefs and has its origins in the work of Dewey (1933), one of the key proponents of adult education. Dewey’s work is very evident in present-day social Constructivist teaching, and the use of the reflective practice is a pedagogical cornerstone in adult education. This body of theory has been further developed by Donald Schon (1983, 1987), who writes about the instructor as a “reflective practitioner.” Rodgers (2020) writes about reflection as it relates to “teaching presence,” explaining how reflective teaching is grounded in a living and evolving philosophy of practice. Within the coaching context, reflection is a vital skill that is central to the capacity to learn from experience and to apply that learning to professional practice. There are various stages in the process of facilitating reflective practice. Some examples include awareness (the coach focuses on an issue that stimulates critical thinking); critical analysis (a more in-depth and more critical examination of the issue at hand by challenging assumptions and exploring different alternatives); and synthesis (the process of integrating new knowledge and making the necessary changes in practice based on a new perspective). At the time of their annual performance review, School of Education faculty are provided an additional opportunity to reflect on their practice explicitly and also formally meet with a coach and School leadership to discuss their practice.

Method

Faculty Perceptions of Coaching Provided by Northcentral University’s School of Education

Qualitative Case Study Methodology

In late 2019 a qualitative case study was conducted to assess how and to what extent faculty coaching was serving the purpose of providing a platform and resource for meaningful learning and ongoing support regarding pedagogical expectations and requirements. The objective of this research was to more comprehensively understand the School of Education faculty’s experiences of coaching as a means to receive support and resources. The University IRB was contacted and confirmed that no formal approval was needed to conduct this study. Findings obtained from this

study illustrate how coaching provides the necessary support and contributes to ongoing and continuous growth and performance improvement.

Participants

A purposeful maximum variation sample was created by the researcher. Maximum variation sampling ensures that research participants are representative of diversity in order to display multiple perspectives (Patton, 2015) fully. The School of Education employs faculty who teach Masters and Doctoral level students in various academic programs, including Early Childhood Education, Special Education, e-Learning, Curriculum and Instruction, Organizational Leadership, Leadership in Higher Education, International Education/Global Training, and Sport management/Athletic Coaching. Some faculty teach research courses, and some serve additionally as chairpersons and subject matter experts for dissertation students. To ensure the representation of diversity, the participant sample for this study was selected to include variation among all relevant variables. Research participants varied by gender, number years worked at the University, area of specialization and the type, of course, taught, including content courses or dissertation courses. The length of time that the faculty had worked at the University ranged from 3 months to 15 years. A majority of faculty (83%) had taught or currently teach at another online University. Faculty were also diversified by area of program specialization and by their roles as dissertation Chair and Subject Matter Expert (SME).

Of the 124 faculty that were working in the School of Education at the end of 2019, 22 were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Of these 22 faculty, 18 agreed to participate, yielding a response rate of 82%. All actual names and identifying information were omitted, and faculty were assigned a numerical identity. Demographic information is presented in Tables 1-2.

Instrument

The 18 research participants were each sent an online interview to complete and return to the researcher (Appendix A). The interview was developed by the researcher to address the study's purpose of understanding the coaching experience and its potential impact on teaching practice. The instrument consisted of demographic questions as well as five open-ended items. In the letter accompanying the interview, the purpose of the study was clearly explained. Faculty were informed that participation in this research was voluntary and that there would be no consequence should they choose not to participate. Participants were also assured that all data would be treated as confidential and that no names or identifying information would be shared or disseminated. The research participants were given 14 days to complete the interview and return this to the researcher by email. The transcripts were manually analyzed by the researcher through a process of open coding and thematic development. All quotations that are presented are verbatim responses to the interviews' open-ended questions. Findings are presented by themes that fall within each area of analysis.

Results

Overall, the findings shed light on faculty perceptions, perspectives, and insights regarding the School of Education faculty coaching process. The findings are presented as five broad categories, with each category being subdivided into multiple themes.

1. Faculty perceptions regarding the significance of coaching
2. Faculty perceptions regarding the specific value of coaching
3. Previous experiences of faculty coaching
4. Suggestions for improvement
5. Conceptualization of the educator as a “reflective practitioner.”

Faculty Perceptions Regarding the Significance of Coaching

Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question:

Q1. The School of Education has an established faculty development program. What do you believe is the significance/importance of faculty coaching?

The following four themes were developed from an analysis of the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Ongoing learning and development
- Skill development
- Improved practice/Support effective instruction
- Familiarity with University/School requirements

Faculty appreciated the learning and development opportunities that coaching provides, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #2: *“Faculty coaching is important because coaches provide support in my effort to move students toward earning their degrees. Coaches share valuable knowledge to help faculty members understand the culture and implement the policies of the University.”*

Faculty Member #3: *“I recently had a coaching opportunity that allowed me to grow tremendously to best serve students. I still learn every day; however, I believe the significance/importance is to make me better.”*

Faculty Member #11: *“I believe coaching is an essential path to developing myself as a faculty member.”*

Faculty Member #16: *“To help faculty to continue to learn and grow to best serve students.”*

Faculty stated that coaching provides them with an opportunity to develop skills and teaching

techniques, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #1: *“We are always learning. A faculty coach helps us see new avenues for learning and strengthening our skills.”*

Faculty Member #8: *“The importance of faculty coaching is the professional development portion of the coaching. The faculty member will get an opportunity to view the coach in action. Coaching allows the faculty member an opportunity to manage his/her own learning in order to possibly develop his/her skills.”*

Faculty Member #9: *“It [coaching] keeps faculty up to date with online teaching techniques.”*

The view that coaching supports improved practice is illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #4: *“Faculty coaching helps us improve our practice. Without coaching we might practice our mistakes and miss opportunities to become more effective facilitators.”*

Faculty Member #7: *“Faculty coaching is paramount. It is important for faculty to know that what they are doing needs to help students progress from where they are to where they should be, and there are times when faculty coaches can see things from a different viewpoint.”*

Faculty Member #10: *“It [coaching] can help faculty to improve their performance.”*

Faculty Member #13: *“Faculty coaching provides 1:1 training, and feedback that can be valuable to supporting effective instruction.”*

Faculty Member #14: *“In an online work environment it is very important to have a friendly, helpful person to contact. Also, it is important to be nudged to continually improve.”*

Faculty Member #17: *“Providing personalized learning and ‘knowing’ your students is a crucial factor in education. Faculty coaching allows us to do this on a daily basis.”*

Faculty stated that coaching establishes and maintains familiarity with University and School requirements, including policy and procedures, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #5: *“If faculty coaching is done in a constructive manner, rather than punitive, it is an important source of information for not only the faculty receiving the coaching, but the coach as well. In addition, faculty coaching is especially important for new hires in order for them to get comfortable with navigating through the classroom and university policies. This is especially true in the online environment.”*

Faculty Member #6: *“Help new faculty members become acquainted with their new teaching surroundings. Provide guidance regarding policies and procedures.”*

Faculty Member #12: *“Guidance in the “Northcentral way” of responding, grading, formats, response to student concerns, etc.”*

Faculty Member #15: *“It is always good to have a refresher on the functions of the LMS and the requirements of Northcentral University.”*

Faculty Member #18: *“I don't believe the value of it can be overstated. Having someone to answer questions in a nonjudgmental manner has been critical.”*

Faculty Perceptions Regarding the Specific Value of Coaching

Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following open-ended question:

Q2. In what way/s has the coaching been of specific value to you as a faculty member? Please explain.

Faculty stated that coaching was of value to them for various reasons, as derived from a quantitative survey component that accompanied the above question. Faculty were permitted to list more than one choice. The findings are presented in Table 1. The following five themes emerged from analyzing the qualitative responses to the open-ended question above:

- Better service for students
- Receive necessary/personalized support and assistance
- Focus on areas in need of improvement
- Receipt of new knowledge and information
- Reflective learning opportunities

Table 1
Perceptions on Value of Coaching (Percent)

Familiarity with University policy adherence	28%
Understand university culture	11%
Improve teaching practice/skills	67%
Address student concerns	11%
Facilitate personal/professional growth	44%
Learn about resources for faculty and students	6%

Faculty acknowledged that coaching has ultimately allowed them to better serve their students, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #4: *“There have been several times when some student issues or concerns have come up and the faculty coach pointed me in the right direction.”*

Faculty Member #15: *“The coaching allowed me to see what areas I can improve upon, so I can fully assist our students.”*

Faculty appreciated that coaching provides them with the personalized support needed to be a successful instructor, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #4: *“For me, personally, the one-on-one coaching sessions have been valuable because we focus on my particular practices and address my unique questions.”*

Faculty Member #5: *“Coaching has been particularly important to me as a new hire and teaching in the online environment. Even though we received training, there is usually a lot to digest and remember.”*

Faculty Member #6: *“Coaching gives me precisely what I need to succeed. I’m still learning the ropes of teaching at NCU, so available guidance is greatly appreciated.”*

Faculty Member #11: *“It was a comfort to be assigned a coach and to hear from her right away as I began. I really appreciated that.”*

Faculty Member #13: *“My coach has been an outstanding resource to me in communicating key expectations, and even troubleshooting a few issues along the way.”*

Faculty viewed coaching as supporting them with specific areas in need of improvement, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #2: *“Coaching sessions enabled me to focus on area in need of improvement to become a better facilitator as a dissertation chair. As I expect my students to do, I incorporated constructed feedback into my daily practices.”*

Faculty Member #8: *“Faculty coaching has allowed me to receive career and professional advice as well as personal improvement.”*

Faculty Member #14: *“I am so glad to have my coach make herself available for telephone conversation, usually within the same day. She always takes plenty of time to work through an issue with me and is timely with follow through.”*

Faculty stated that coaching serves to enhance ongoing learning and knowledge, building their “toolbox”, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #3: *“It was a value to me because, to be honest, prior to it I didn't feel nearly as fulfilled in working with students assigned to me. This is good because it is about the learning... I have my toolbox which I pull from all the time and I continue to add to it as needed. This allows me to make ongoing improvements.”*

Faculty Member #7: *“Coaching has been very valuable to me because there are things that I would not have thought of without coaching.”*

Faculty Member #12: *“When the first issue arose, being able to contact my coach and receive prompt and valuable information was the key to success.”*

Faculty Member #18: *“It [coaching] has helped in many ways. Setting/clarifying NCU's expectations is helpful, as well as assisting in interpreting, for example, Turnitin expectations.”*

Faculty valued that coaching provides them with reflective opportunities, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #1: *“I don't have to suffer in silence. I can think through my practice with my coach.”*

Faculty Member #10: *“It's [coaching] helped me to clearly think through and better understand various Northcentral University regulations and expectations, and my own teaching practice here.”*

Faculty Member #15: *“The coaching allowed me the time to be reflective and adjust my engagement process to students.”*

Faculty Member #16: *“It has been helpful to remind me of the University's practices and expectations as well as do self-reflection to help me improve my feedback to students.”*

Previous Experiences of Faculty Coaching

Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question:

Q3. Have you experienced coaching in any of your previous faculty experiences? If so, can you explain how the SOE coaching is similar and/or different.

Two thirds of all faculty have not experienced coaching at any of their previous faculty teaching appointments. This data was derived from a quantitative survey component that accompanied the above question. The results revealed that 33% stated yes while 67% replied no.

The following themes were developed from an analysis of the qualitative responses to the open-ended question above, specifically where faculty have experienced coaching at other institutions, yielding both similarities and differences:

Similarities

- Refresher information
- More frequent support in the first year
- Focus on policy
- Focus on expectations

Differences

- Little one-one interaction
- Evaluation-centered
- More personalized and collaborative

Four of the six faculty members who stated that they had experienced faculty coaching at other institutions offered their ideas regarding similarities with NCU's School of Education approach to coaching:

One faculty member explained that coaching was similar in that it provided him with refresher information:

Faculty Member #5: "Yes, most of the coaching that I received centered around a required Dissertation Chair Annual Refresher. In the Refresher we had to submit assignments pertaining to working with dissertation students as a chair, and received constructive feedback as to our responses."

Another faculty member stated that what was similar was the focus on more frequent support in the first year of employment:

Faculty Member #6: "I have worked as a faculty coach myself, so I've now lived both roles. I've always believed in making myself fully available to my mentees because I know how stressful a new job can be. One thing that I always did was having sessions with faculty under my guidance to walk them through the institutional culture. In the first year of employment, I also offered my mentees a periodical assessment of their performance. I find that more frequent feedback in year 1, which is the same here, can help them make any necessary adjustments while they're still facing the inevitable ascending learning curve as a new faculty member."

A third faculty member explained that the area of similarity for the strong focus on policy adherence:

Faculty Member #10: *“I have had coaching in other places. It was similar because they both help me understand this University’s regulations and expectations toward faculty members.”*

A fourth faculty member stated that the area of similarity was the focus on teaching expectations:

Faculty Member #13: *“School of Education coaching is the same here as what I have experienced previously. Coaching is just that--an opportunity to brush up on expectations and expand knowledge and ideas for teaching.”*

A further three of the six faculty members who stated that they had experienced faculty coaching at other institutions offered their ideas regarding differences with Northcentral University’s approach to coaching:

One faculty member explained that coaching was different in that it occurred within a group rather than individual sessions:

Faculty Member #4: *“I have experienced coaching but, unlike here, the sessions were usually large group with little one-on-one interaction.”*

Two faculty members explained that the coaching received in the School of Education is more personalized and collaborative than their coaching experiences elsewhere:

Faculty Member #9: *“The coaching here is more personalized. I am comfortable asking questions to my coach.”*

Faculty Member #12: *“At my present full-time institution, we were not assigned a faculty mentor. To have the faculty mentor respond swiftly with answers or direction regarding my specific concerns and highlight where I could find additional information was very helpful.”*

Suggestions for Improvement

Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question:

Q4. Do you have any suggestions for improvement? We value your input and critique so please feel free to share any and all insights and ideas.

A majority of faculty stated that they were satisfied with the coaching support they received. A minority stated that they would like more contact with their coach. This data was derived from a quantitative survey that accompanied the above question. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Satisfaction Reported by Faculty (Percent)

Satisfied	89%
Unsatisfied	11%

Of the 16 faculty who were faculty who were satisfied 5 offered reasons indicating such factors as the student-centered approach, quality of the coaching, and the availability and support of the coaches.

Faculty Member #1: *“I think it's working fine. Innovative ideas are sought to improve old ways and the student is always at the forefront.”*

Faculty Member #4: *“My experience with coaching at NCU has been very positive. This is due not only to the quality of coaching but also the ability to reach out when help was needed.”*

Faculty Member #5: *“Since I am new, I will say that the culture at this University has been a pleasant surprise. In my first few weeks I had a lot of questions to make sure I was doing thing right, or gaining access to materials. The support has been great!”*

Faculty Member #8: *“The coaching continues to be invaluable. I suggest that faculty coaching becomes a mandatory short-term professional development for all faculty members.”*

Faculty Member #17: *“I learn new things everything about Northcentral and the resources available for myself as a faculty member and for the students. I feel support is always available.”*

The two faculty members who were somewhat dissatisfied both indicated that they would prefer more contact with the coach than was offered, especially during their first year:

Faculty Member #6: *“While I know that a formal performance evaluation will be conducted by the end of my first year, even informal feedback, no matter how brief, would have been great. Perhaps silence means all is well, but getting a quick pat on the shoulder from time to time can make wonders in motivating a new employee. Or a gentle slap on the hand can also help us adjust our performance in an attempt to avoid repeating mistakes.”*

Faculty Member #11: *“In my ideal world I would have more contact with a coach. Perhaps a monthly check-in would be helpful, especially during the beginning.”*

Conceptualization of Educator as “Reflective Practitioner”

Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question:

Q5. What is your conceptualization of “reflective practice” as an educator? Please explain.

The following four themes were developed from an analysis of the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Ongoing improvement
- Lifelong learning
- Enhanced self-awareness
- Self-review/Metacognition

Faculty valued reflective practice in that this facilitates ongoing improvement, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #1: *“Reflective practice is one where you are thinking about what happened. You examine your results and think of how that result might be improved. You discover new learning to help you improve and grow.”*

Faculty Member #4: *“To me reflective practices refer to thinking about what has been done and always asking what went well and what and how could improvement be made. I think an important part of reflective practice is listening to hear as opposed to listening to respond.”*

Faculty Member #5: *“Reflective practice to me is how can I do things better, not only in teaching online group classes but working one on one with dissertation students. One thing I try to do is ask myself what went well with the lesson; and what can I do to improve the lesson in the future.”*

Faculty Member #13: *“Reflective practice is integral to improvement as a professional. I regularly write down my reflections of what went well, and areas in need of improvement to work to improve my ability to communicate with my students.”*

Faculty Member #14: *“This means thinking about my own practice with the goal of continuous improvement. It is helpful to have an effective coach to support reflective practice. Reflective practice requires humility.”*

Faculty Member #17: *“Reflection is a key component of education. Without reflection we cannot learn... Receiving constructive feedback to better my own teaching practices to help myself and others improve and meet goals is essential.”*

Some faculty view reflective practice as an aspect of lifelong learning, as illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #2: *“My concept of reflective practice as an educator is thinking about the manner in which a lesson is taught. The process is cyclical. Teaching is evolving and revolving. Learning never ends. Reflective practice enables one to improve practices.”*

Faculty Member #3: *“To me, reflective practice means being introspective and always learning how to professionally grow. In my coaching experiences I have possessed that attitude.”*

Faculty Member #8: *“I simply know reflective practice as a strategy to reflect upon your own actions as a part continual learning.”*

Faculty Member #16: *“I view this as a process-oriented element of personal and professional development to help facilitate my own teaching and learning.”*

Enhanced self-awareness was viewed by some faculty as a byproduct of reflective practice as illustrated by the following response:

Faculty Member #6: *“It's an exercise in self-awareness used to evaluate what is working and what is not in our teaching/scholarly performance. Self-reflection must be an ongoing practice. My need to evaluate my own practice is one of the strong incentives I have in meeting with my students every week. Our conversations allow me to appreciate how I can help them to attain their goals, and see what I'm doing that works and what needs improvement.”*

Faculty Member #12: *“Reflective practice is the concept of continually striving for awareness and insight through careful self-evaluation and responsive action to what you have observed or perceived. It is the hallmark of best practices in teaching.”*

Reflective practice facilitates the opportunity to self-review and think more deeply about one's own thought processes (metacognition) was illustrated by the following responses:

Faculty Member #10: *“Reflective practice allows teachers to link their own experiences to their teaching, which helps them evaluate students' progress. The processes of self-observation and self-evaluation are both highly effective.”*

Faculty Member #11: *“For me, reflective practice takes two forms. The first is the moment to moment act of reflecting as I evaluate student work to ensure the feedback I am providing is thoughtful and conveyed in a way that a student can "hear" it. The second way I reflect is less student specific and more about where I decide to try out a new way of doing something and I pay attention to whether or not it seems to be working. Then I reflect and adjust accordingly.”*

Faculty Member #15: “Coaching can help foster deeper and more accurate reflection on my practice. I think this is because an outside observer sees things that might be in my blind spot.”

Faculty Member 18: “Simply stated, reflective teaching means looking at what you do in the classroom, thinking about why you do it, and thinking about if and why it works.”

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited in scope by focusing on a relatively small sample of faculty in one School only, and by collecting data by way of only one method of data collection. While the hope is that this research will contribute to the body of knowledge from a practical pedagogical perspective, further research with multiple samples of faculty across the entire University will shed light on ways to address the challenges of online instructor engagement through compelling faculty development offerings. Additional in-depth feedback might be attained through the use of interactive methods such as focus groups and roundtable discussions, where faculty can have a greater opportunity to share and reflect on shared experiences, and brainstorm approaches that might be effective in meeting their pedagogical needs. Information and data gleaned from ongoing research will be useful in refining our current process. Ongoing research will also serve to shed light on developing and implementing new and innovative ways to improve faculty development offerings, thereby further enhancing student engagement and academic performance.

Conclusions

This paper describes the faculty coaching process that has been implemented by Northcentral University’s School of Education, and the research findings of a single qualitative case study conducted in 2019. Northcentral University’s School of Education coaches strive to create an environment that instills in faculty the value of ongoing learning, an environment in which faculty members become engaged, and in which they are supported in their efforts. The philosophy of the School is that coaches work to connect with faculty and create opportunities to enhance their teaching practice by way of the University’s teaching approach, *Teaching through Engagement*. The findings of this study illustrate how faculty coaching contributes to establishing and maintaining ongoing pathways to counteract disengagement by providing faculty with support and assistance to apply effective pedagogical strategies and skills.

The findings of this qualitative case study illustrate the ways that faculty perceive coaching reflects the values and goals of Northcentral University’s School of Education. By presenting themselves as “co-learners,” the coaches establish and nurture positive relationships in which faculty feel they are invested, and share a commitment to the learning experience. Findings illustrate that faculty appreciate the ongoing collaborative learning opportunities to engage with their coach and receive support and resources. Coaches strive to encourage a “growth academic mindset” so that faculty are intentional in preparing their learners for success, and the study’s findings shed light on the many ways in which faculty are learning and developing practical pedagogical skills. As faculty have explained during this study, coaching is not only about skill development but also the development of thinking and metacognition. Our view is that “learning

how to learn” and developing skills and habits of critical self-reflection will ensure that learning will continue after coaching ends, thereby enabling ongoing growth and development. Investing in professional development specifically designed to address the learning challenges of teaching in the online environment is, therefore, an opportunity to build both individual and collective capacity. While contextually unique, the hope is that the lessons learned from this qualitative case study will be transferable and applicable to other similar online higher education contexts in the quest to ensure faculty success and strong student support.

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Appendix

Interview and accompanying cover letter

Dear [School of Education Faculty name],

Northcentral University's School of Education has developed a faculty development process which includes a coaching component, whereby faculty are provided with support and guidance to teach in our programs. Promoting engagement among students and faculty is an important part of the University's long-term success and strategic plan. As you know, we have adopted a one-to-one pedagogical model, *Teaching through Engagement*, the goal of which is for faculty and students to be actively engaged in the University community, helping to establish and nurture connections between faculty, students, and the university at large. Toward this end, faculty in the School of Education are each assigned a faculty coach, and the goal is to offer ongoing coaching to enhance your teaching practice and thereby strengthen student engagement.

Your perceptions regarding our coaching process would be very valuable in enabling us to enhance our process and make any changes as needed. All responses will be treated as confidential and no names or identifying information will be shared or disseminated. Please would you take a few minutes to respond to the following questions:

Demographics:

1. Are you Full time or Part Time faculty?
2. How many years have you taught at Northcentral University?
3. Have you taught at another online university?
4. What is your area of specialization?

Perspectives:

5. The SOE has an established faculty development program. What do you believe is the significance/importance of faculty coaching?
6. In what way/s has the coaching been of specific value to you as a faculty member?

Check all that apply:

- University policy adherence
- Your teaching practice
- Student concerns
- Other _____

Please explain further:

7. Have you experienced coaching in any of your previous faculty experiences? If so, can you explain how the SOE coaching is similar and/or different.

8. Do you have any suggestions for improvement? We value your input and critique so please feel free to share any and all insights and ideas.
9. As an educator, what is your conceptualization of “reflective practice”? Please explain.

Thank you! Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated!