

A Needs Assessment of Distance Education in the School of Education at Indiana University Bloomington

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this need assessment report is to identify the needs of instructors who are teaching distance courses at Indiana University in the School of Education (SoE). Questions included within this needs assessment encompass issues of design and development of online courses, online teaching practices, obstacles to learning, and technology implementation.

Research participants were selected from six academic departments within the SoE as well as supporting staff currently involved in distance education. Thirteen Professors, three stakeholders, and four support staff were selected to answer a semi-structured interview conducted by two team members. The primary framework of the semi-structured interview targeted previous experience in teaching online courses, access to support resources, actual or potential obstacles, and issues in design of online courses. The average duration of the interview process was one hour. One team member led the interview, asking initial and follow-up questions, while the other team member took notes.

After conducting interviews, team members prepared for a card sort content analysis by reading the interview notes, identifying individual “thought units” and attaching these units to cards. Analysis of interview content and identification of themes and subthemes occurred during two rounds of card sorts. Among the nine main identified themes, Obstacles, Faculty Development, and Teaching Strategies were the most important topics as noted by frequency. Other themes include: the instructors demand for more knowledge and skills in creating online syllabuses, using and teaching Oncourse features, receiving professional development at a time convenient to them, overcoming their negative perceptions about the effectiveness of online teaching.

METHODS

Participants

The target population for this need assessment is a group of people who are actively involved in the distance education process in the SoE. A sampling frame was from the distance education faculty list as of Summer 2010, from six academic departments within the SoE, and the actual participants were purposefully chosen by the course instructor, Dr. Ted Frick, in addition to support staff currently involved in distance education. The actual participants consisted of 13 professors, 3 gatekeepers, and 4 supporting staff (n=20).

Interviews

The authors paired up, and each team had a 30–60 minute long interview using the semi-structured questionnaires. All five questions were asked, and based on the participant role slight changes in wording have been made, without obstructing the purpose of the question.

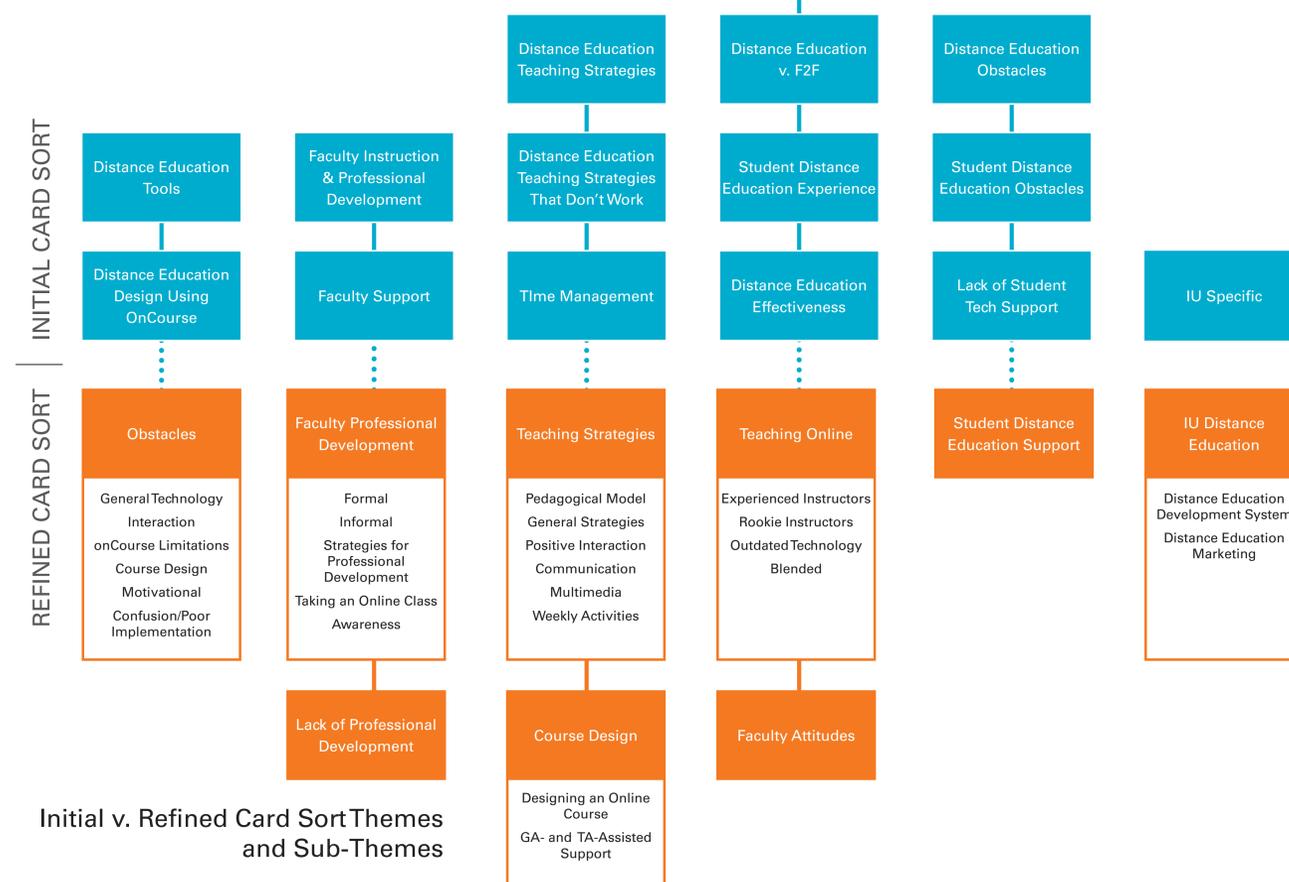
Interview Questionnaire

- Briefly describe your experience in online *learning* (at a distance).
- Briefly describe your experience in online *teaching*.
- Have you received any instruction about teaching online? If so, please describe.
- What obstacles have you encountered when teaching courses online? (If you have not taught online before, what do you anticipate will be the biggest challenges?)
- Briefly describe your experience in designing and developing an online course. What were the biggest challenges or obstacles you experienced? (If you have not developed any online courses, what do you anticipate will be the biggest challenges?)

Following each interview, team member notes were compared and revised. The revised notes were sent to each interviewee for member-checking and potential revisions. Final member-checked notes were used for the remainder of the needs assessment analysis.

Card Sorting

After the member-check, the content of interviews were printed and separated as single thematic meaningful units on index cards. Ten IST graduates, including the authors,



and the course instructor participated in the initial card sorting. Each card was read aloud by a student, and the class as a group decided where to categorize the card based on its thematic relevancy to the rest of the ideas in that stack. By the time the preliminary card sorting had reached its saturation, the class was able to complete labeling the stacks with their emerging themes. This process took about four hours in total and 21 thematic categories were identified as a result.

Then, the authors performed a second round of card sorting, taking approximately two hours to complete. During the process, ideas in each original stack were checked for its consistency and grouped as a bigger theme or sub-categorized within a theme. In addition, some of the labels were renamed to better represent the theme of the stack (i.e., Teaching Online, Faculty Attitudes) whereas some other ones remained the same as from the original stack (i.e., Obstacles, Teaching Strategies, etc.). Related sub-themes will be described further in the result section.

RESULTS

As a result of card sorting, our final card sort revealed nine main themes and twenty-seven sub-themes in total. We found that the largest theme is “Obstacles”, which has 133 responses encapsulating all problems or barriers to effective online instructions across the remaining eight main themes. Also, the smallest theme is “Student Distance Education Support” with 8 responses. The theme of “Faculty Attitudes” has been created as the fourth theme by merging a couple of sub-themes.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the card sort and themes that emerged, our team identified recommendations that serve to strengthen existing attributes of the IU Distance Education program, while providing additional support for areas of identified weakness. A sampling of these recommendations include:

- Creation of extra incentives for instructors to enhance their skills in distance education
- Find effective ways to support instructors’ ongoing activities in course development and blended course administration
- Increase opportunities for technical skills training
- Provide the infrastructure for all instructors to take an online class before offering their own distance courses
- Define a teacher support system (such as a mentorship program) to create a framework of support to establish baseline skills and encourage ongoing the cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas and strategies

Frequency of Responses by Primary Category

