



Continuum College Instructor Development May 2024

Understanding the Needs of Our PCE Instructors



Our Study Participants

- All participants taught with Continuum for 3 years or less
- Three participants had prior experience teaching in-person classes
- Two participants were former certificate students in the programs where they now teach
- None of our participants had previous online teaching experience

Background

During Autumn Quarter 2023, the Instructor Development Team invited instructors to participate in interviews focused on their initial experiences teaching with UW PCE. The goal of this project was to learn more about the coaching and support needs of our instructors, and to understand how they are navigating online teaching challenges. Findings from this project are helping to inform the development of onboarding resources, the redesign of the Instructor Development website, the revision of Continuum's Teaching with UW PCE Course, and a new instructor experience study.

Methodology

In November, Instructor Development e-mailed two calls for participation to 33 Continuum instructors identified by Program Managers as having taught with Continuum for five years or less. Six instructors responded to our e-mails and five participated in this study. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and focused on three areas: the skills and prior experiences instructors brought to teaching with UW PCE; the Continuum resources participants utilized when encountering teaching challenges; and instructor knowledge of the students they taught.

All interviews were conducted by Quality Metrics Specialist Casey Clevenger and Instructor Development Specialist Morgan Bell. Data was analyzed inductively, and participants are identified by pseudonyms. Although our findings are not generalizable to the wider Continuum instructor population because of the small sample size, our conversations provided rich qualitative insights regarding the challenges our PCE instructors navigate as part-time instructors who are new to teaching online.

Findings

The UW PCE instructors in this study were experienced professionals who had limited teaching experience. Onboarding experiences varied widely among instructors, and most were not aware of the teaching and learning resources available to them at Continuum College.

Experienced Professionals New to Online Teaching



During this study, we spent time reflecting with UW PCE Instructors on their initial teaching experiences, and learning more about how their professional backgrounds and expertise shaped their approaches to online teaching.

Our participants were all accomplished professionals with one to two decades of experience working in industry, and they expressed confidence in their subject matter expertise, instructional materials, and course content. Most described themselves as seasoned public speakers who enjoyed connecting certificate students and facilitating networking opportunities. They also brought management and hiring experiences to their work with students, offering students advice on industry trends and sharing “tips and tricks you can use to land a job” in industry.

While participants were eager to share their professional knowledge with students, they were also new to online teaching. “I felt confident in my knowledge and material. I know this topic,” reflected Paul, “That is not to be confused with confidence in being able to convey it or teach it, but I felt prepared for any question anyone might ask me.” Sean also spoke to this tension. “Substantively, I have no problem with the materials. I deal with this stuff every single day and that’s something I’ve been doing for 26 years. But I have limited ability as a teacher and that has been my learning curve.”

Guiding Questions

Who are our instructors?

How do they describe their initial teaching experiences?

What types of support are our instructors looking for?

Low Awareness of Continuum Resources

Onboarding experiences varied widely between participants. Some new instructors worked closely with previous instructors, while others had no contact with them. Participants who inherited courses that had not been updated recently spent many hours wading through outdated materials on Canvas. Overall, there was low awareness of the resources available to instructors through Continuum or the Instructor Development Team. Participants were unsure of exactly what instructor resources exist and where to go to access resources. Some relied on their program managers for support, while others turned to instructional assistants and instructor colleagues.

Angie described feeling “disconnected” and “siloe,” not knowing where to look for resources or what was available at Continuum. Others mentioned lack of time as a barrier to accessing resources. “I think the program has definitely offered the resources,” Steve reflected, “I haven’t always had the time to figure it all out.”

Findings

Our instructors bring a range of professional skills, expertise, and experience to our professional programs, and they face a unique set of constraints as professionals who are working full time and teaching part-time.

Online Teaching As a Sink or Swim Experience



During our interviews, we asked participants to share one piece of advice they would have liked to give themselves before teaching their first class. The most common response was more time to prepare and get comfortable with the online teaching format and technologies like Zoom. Paul invested a lot of time updating his course, preparing materials, and practicing before his first class began. “Even so,” he explained, “I felt a little caught off guard. I may have taught face to face in other topics, but this is my first time teaching over Zoom.” Class time seemed to move twice as fast online, and he felt he needed even more time to plan and prepare.

Looking back, Rebecca wished she had asked for more time to prepare before teaching her first class. At the time, Continuum was looking to hire someone who could begin teaching immediately. She agreed and found “it was kind of learn as you go that first time.” Angie had a similar experience. When she began teaching, she was unsure what resources were available to her or where to look for them. “I came in late in the hiring process,” she explained, “so it was just [a] jump in, sink or swim kind of experience for me.”

“It felt a little disconnected. I came in late in the hiring process, so it was just a jump in, sink or swim kind of experience for me.”

Knowledge of PCE Students

Our team was also curious to talk with new instructors about their knowledge of PCE students prior to teaching. While some participants were former certificate students, others knew little about the student population before teaching their first certificate course. Several expressed surprise at the level of skill and experience students already possessed. “When I first started, I was kind of surprised as to how good they were at what they were doing,” Angie recalled, “Many people already had a lot of experience in this [area] and were just wanting to get the certificate to show that they had the experience.”

Alongside students who already possessed considerable skill and experience in their respective program areas were others who were completely new to the field. There was general agreement among participants that knowing more about student work experiences and motivations for enrolling in a certificate program would help instructors teach to the level of students in their courses. “I’ve got folks who may have been doing it for years and just never got a certificate, but have a lot of experience,” Rebecca explained, “Then I have a few folks that don’t have any experience at all. Knowing how many I have on one side or the other might help me determine how to teach that class as a whole.”

Discussion

In the future, we envision creating more structured ways for instructors to interact with each other and with the Instructor Development team through onboarding, training, discussion boards, and other shared communication channels.

Coaching & Support

Not surprisingly, participants cited time constraints and competing professional commitments as the greatest obstacles to accessing online teaching support and building new skills. Teaching part-time presents unique challenges. For instructors who teach a course once a year, it can be difficult to stay current and engaged between classes. “When you teach like I do — part-time — a lot of things I learn I forget because it’s so long before I use [those skills] again,” explained Sean, “It’s almost like doing it all over again for the first time.”

Teaching part-time can also contribute to feeling siloed and disconnected as described earlier. Across different certificate programs, participants were looking for opportunities to connect with other instructors and collaborate. Some envisioned gathering in an informal setting with other instructors to share classroom strategies and practice using online teaching tools in a low-stakes environment. Others envisioned a discussion board for instructors to crowdsource questions and answers.

Instructor Wish List

- Time to prepare
- Support with online teaching technologies
- Practice in low-stakes environment
- Inclusive learning and engagement strategies
- Grading and student feedback resources

Upcoming Projects

- Formalize and expand onboarding for teaching
- Update asynchronous resources for teaching online
- Convene an instructor community of practice
- Launch new instructor experience study

Directions for Future Work

This project provided a rare opportunity to speak face to face with our UW PCE instructors about the challenges they encounter when preparing to teach online for the first time. We found that some participants leaned heavily on their program managers and instructor networks for support and resources. Others felt disconnected, trying to figure things out on their own. Although onboarding experiences and engagement with other instructors varied across programs, our participants all expressed an interest in peer learning and collaboration.

Drawing on findings from this study, we envision creating more structured ways for instructors to interact with one another and with Instructor Development. Our team is currently working on new initiatives to expand onboarding for teaching, convene instructor communities of practice, and launch a broader instructor experience study. Through these efforts, we are partnering with other teams to raise awareness of Continuum resources and promote peer learning, integration, and belonging among our instructors.