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Faculty Development Initiative for Converting F2F Courses into Online Courses

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Abstract: With faculty development changes in practice from traditional face-to-face to online delivery modalities, this paper describes an initiative for faculty at a College of Education whereby pre-existing courses are converted for online delivery. Opportunities and challenges are examined and used in the development of best practices for faculty development that embrace the use of online modalities. What strategies can Online Learning Mentors use to achieve the expected outcomes when mentees differ in technology competencies, pedagogical skills and have minimal online experience? Implications for faculty preparation, professional growth, and considerations for online conversion are discussed.

Introduction

Long-term strategic plans at a number of universities indicate that online courses have become a mainstream educational option for both undergraduate and graduate students. Survey data from the Babson Survey Research Group (2014) reveals that student online enrollment growth far exceeded that of overall higher education enrollment. Although student enrollment in online courses has tripled over the last decade, faculty continue to debate the value of online learning and have been reluctant to adopt online teaching methodologies due to a number of concerns related to the perceived quality of instruction, learning outcomes, and student interaction in such environments (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

Background

During the Spring 2013, a self-growth study was conducted as part of a continual program improvement process in the College of Education. Data revealed that faculty had the desire to become more technologically literate and innovative regarding online course delivery. At the time, the majority of the courses offered in the teacher preparation, literacy, and educational leadership programs were delivered via a traditional face-to-face methodology (F2F) with the exception of educational technology courses which were offered via online or blended formats. To foster innovative teaching and learning, college administrators charged the College Faculty Affairs Committee with the task of researching the topic and offering recommendations as to the feasibility of online course development. By the end of the semester, this committee presented several recommendations that included: (1) create and maintain a curriculum development lab for the creation of online courses, (2) offer course releases or other compensation to interested faculty instructors who collaborate in the conversion of courses for online delivery, (3) offer course releases or other compensation to interested faculty instructors who collaborate in the conversion of courses for blended delivery and 4) assign a full-time educational technology faculty member to serve as an Online

Learning Mentor and assist faculty as they converted their course curriculum for online or blended delivery. The faculty mentor would also be provided with the option to either receive a course release or other compensation. As a result, the Faculty Online Course Development (FOCD) initiative was established during the Fall 2013.

This initiative demonstrated the College's commitment to supporting a more diverse student body by providing greater flexibility in course offerings and course modalities. The full-time work schedules and family obligations of candidates were taken into account. According to Platt, Raile, and Yu (2014) the use of a variety of online course delivery methods "have the potential to transform the landscape of higher education by expanding educational opportunities, transforming student populations, and prompting the development of new pedagogical methods" (p. 490).

Context

This College of Education is part of a private Catholic University in eastern United States offering degrees that range from Baccalaureate to Doctorate. The university offers learning opportunities to all faculty for using centrally-supported technology including Blackboard Learn™ Virtual and Course Management System, lecture recording software, social media tools, Microsoft® SharePoint and other digital tools through various campus offices. The College is comprised of two departments: the Department of Teacher Preparation and the Department of Educational Leadership & Literacy. It has a total of 19 full-time faculty with approximately 450 candidates enrolled. The College offers Elementary and Secondary Teacher Preparation programs leading to teacher certification in the state, a Master of Arts in Teaching and Certificates of Advanced Studies in Literacy and Educational Leadership.

Faculty Development Goal

Faculty development targets teaching with technology since a number of faculty have little to no prior experience in teaching online or developing online and/or blended curricular content. Their training consists of six separate phases that include: (1) initial consultation, (2) development of an action or personal development plan (PDP), (3) teaching and learning, (4) learning technologies, (5) team capacity building and (6) course implementation. Phases 1 and 2 are implemented at the beginning of the faculty development period, Phases 3 through 5 continue during the semester; and Phase 6 is launched at beginning of the following academic semester. Faculty development is viewed as a crucial means for enabling faculty to develop the required competencies for teaching online and developing appropriate content (Bybee & Loucks-Horsley, 2000; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001; Kelsey 2000; Moore, 1994). This developmental framework calls for a combination of support, guidance, and networking as well as self-directed learning (Gibbons, 2002). In collaboration with their mentor, faculty engage in planning, pacing, and monitoring both their progress and activities.

The initial consultation phase is a critical step for gathering information about the faculty member's technological skills and content area expertise (Neighbour, 1987; Roter, Stewart, Putnam, Lipkin, Stiles & Inui, 1997). Faculty information is then used by the Online Learning Mentor to develop a personalized and tailored plan for each participant. During this phase, the mentor connects with and builds a rapport with the faculty member. Prior to developing the PDP, it is important to consider and understand the talents, motivations, expectations as well as the faculty member's technology-based fears in order to assess technology strengths and prior knowledge. Recommendations are shared and discussed with the faculty member for the purpose of establishing a common understanding.

Following the consultation, the mentor prepares a PDP which identifies shared goals, training needs, and an anticipated time frame for the completion of each phase based on SMART objectives (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2006). Training includes a variety of specific, measurable, attainable, and timed tasks to help the faculty member prioritize course elements and focus the development of the online or blended course. Tasks include formal training sessions, independent work, the development of specific technological skills, and review of instructional design principles. The variety of activities demonstrates that there is no single best way of providing faculty development.

The primary goal of the third phase is to review the course curriculum and convert it for the online environment. The faculty member's course curriculum is reorganized into groups of lessons called modules which provide the structure for the course (Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2005). Modules are organized by specific topics that provide the context for the student's learning activities, objectives, instructions, reading, and course requirements. In this phase, new digital learning objects are developed such as screencasts or simulations for the purpose of fostering student engagement with the course content and online learning community. Topics relating to teaching and learning are also introduced including learning theories, principles of backward design, and assessment.

During the fourth phase, faculty receive training in the methods for integrating technology into the curriculum for teaching and learning. Topics include the development of technological skills such as learning how to develop a screencast, create a web-based survey, create a blog, and others. Digital pedagogy is also introduced. Important theoretical concepts that will help faculty enrich their courses include: instructional design and knowledge representation, technologies and learning theories, and criteria for media and technology selection. Issues regarding Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (United States Department of Justice, 1973) which mandates that electronic and digital information must be accessible to persons with disabilities are introduced.

The fifth phase consists of building a social network with other learners to capitalize on best practices, share knowledge and reflect on challenges and opportunities (Daly, 2010). In this phase, faculty members develop a formal network of individuals through their participation in conferences, seminars, workshops, and webinars. They also meet informally with colleagues in the college to share and collaborate on ideas regarding online course development. The goal for faculty members in this phase, is to seek individuals, organizations, and groups who can support them in their ongoing professional growth. Networking with individuals from within or outside of the University is encouraged.

The last phase requires the faculty participant to independently pilot the course during the following semester. The course is offered for at least three years, allowing the faculty member ample time to refine the practice of teaching online and make improvements. This process allows faculty members to reflect on their professional growth, thus deepening their knowledge and skills in teaching and learning with technology (ISTE, 2011).

Positive Program Outcomes

A number of positive program outcomes resulted from the FOCD and are described below.

Curriculum Development Lab

Prior to 2013, the College did not house a facility that would allow faculty to develop online curricula. During the Summer of 2013, a Curriculum Development Lab was developed to enable faculty and their mentors to create multimedia content for their online and blended courses. This lab is a private self-contained environment ideal for one-to-one training. Based on the Microsoft® Windows 10 operating system, the lab has video recording cameras and screens to allow professional background recording as well as quality sound microphones. A variety of software is available including Camtasia®, iClone, and Adobe Creative Cloud. Faculty also have access to a digital drawing tablet.

Application & Compensation Process

A newly created application process requires faculty volunteers to submit a letter of interest to the Dean at the start of the academic year. The letter of interest typically includes a description of the course along with rationale of converting the course to either an online or blended format. A brief teaching philosophy statement is also required. For conversion to a fully online course, the faculty member can choose compensation in the form of one course release or receive a stipend. The option of a blended format, is also available. Two stipends are available to full-time faculty members who prepare curriculum for blended delivery. One course needs be developed per semester. The Online Development Screening Committee reviews each application, selects finalists and an announcement is sent via email to faculty each fall.

Faculty Online Learning Mentor

In exchange for mentorship of one online course or two blended-format courses, a course release/stipend is provided for the Online Learning Mentor. Aligned with ISTE C standards (ISTE C, 2016) and philosophy, mentors contribute to development of a shared vision for the full integration of technology with the College. They communicate and model best practices as well as advocate for faculty growth and development. The faculty development training sessions and times are negotiated to fit the unique schedules of both the faculty mentee and the Online Learning Mentor, taking into consideration committee work and service, teaching, and research activities.

Clarifying the Definition of Blended and Online Courses

Originally the Sloan Consortium (now the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) defined a blended course as one in which 30%-79 % of the instruction was delivered online and an online course as one where more than 80% of the instruction was delivered fully online (OLC, 2016). The 2010 Blended Learning Report stated that: " The ways in which blended learning is implemented at a given campus, such as the ratio of F2F and non-F2F elements, are highly context dependent. More concrete definitions of blended learning, ones that are appropriate to your institution, college, or department, need to emerge from local curricular and institutional goals and priorities". (ELI, 2010, p.4). As a result, universities have adopted an array of definitions about what constitutes an online or a blended course. While this debate continues at the College, the administration has made a practical decision to begin this initiative to achieve consistency for the student learning experience. Minimum requirements were crafted to provide guidance to interested faculty when initiating this journey and are described as follows.

An online course consists of a minimum of 10 modules, utilizing a variety of instructional activities, communication tools, discussions with rubrics (synchronous or asynchronous), video-clips, reading assignments, or equivalent. Online courses are offered fully online without the requirement for any campus meetings. This removes travel constraints which may impede student enrollment. A blended course consists of 5 or 6 modules developed for online delivery. Each module is equivalent to standards for online course mentioned with an expectation 50% of the sessions are conducted online. Redesigned courses are offered for 3 years.

Lessons Learned

Technology Knowledge and Content Integration

During the semester, 75% of the time was devoted to technology knowledge training and the rest was dedicated to teaching and online pedagogy. Technology knowledge (TK) refers to skills and competencies faculty possess regarding use of applications, digital media, interactive boards. While there are other competencies such as engagement of student active learning and teaching presence, the time spent mentoring was significantly biased towards learning Blackboard Learn Virtual and Course Management System (Blackboard, Inc. 2016) and various technologies. Technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) refers to types of technology integration tools used for teaching in specific areas (e.g. multicultural, reading, student teaching methods). Tools used ranged from presentation tools such as Prezi and PowerPoint, research databases, discussion board, Google apps, and survey pooling applications. No content specific applications or tools were used at the time. Both of these technology components relate to the relationship between technology, pedagogy and content described by Mishra & Koehler (2006).

For the faculty members with the highest technology skills and competencies, the transition for course conversion was significantly different and was much easier. The development of technology skills is a faculty challenge that needs to be addressed. All faculty members wished that they had more time to master and become more comfortable with the various technologies presented by the mentor. A single course release was insufficient for technology novices. Faculty believed that converting courses into a blended learning format required significantly more time than preparation for teaching in the classroom.

Accessibility and Universal Design

During training, faculty members agreed that accessibility and universal design are essential for developing robust blended courses (e.g. websites should be accessible for screen reading software, and video material should be captioned), none of them implemented these principles in their own course design due to time constraints. It is

essential that faculty have more time to create inclusive learning materials and learning environments to recruit, sustain, and retain diverse learners.

Course Content and Copyright Issues

The availability of instructor-created course content materials varied among faculty; some used a textbook, some used an oral tradition, others used web-enhanced materials, and a minority had original work. Faculty also had to re-examine their course content and choose between content better suited for F2F delivery and that for online work. They also had to review copyright laws and verify copyrights for material usage as well. While the access to an instructional designer (or team) might vary from one institution to another, the input of such professionals would greatly benefit content delivery.

Learning Communities and Support

After implementing their blended learning courses, it is important for faculty to join learning communities. This will provide them with support from colleagues who already teach blended courses. The university offers formal and informal venues for continuing with online professional growth. It was clear that by the end of the semester, many faculty members believed that they had just started a new teaching methodology and there was much more work to be done.

Conclusion & Future Research

This paper described the implementation of an initiative for faculty online course development in higher education. Positive program outcomes relate to new curriculum lab infrastructure, college policies, and the creation of a framework for online and blended learning requirements. Lessons learned relate to technology and time constraints, course content development, and implications for copyright, accessibility and universal design standards. The importance of learning communities was discussed as well.

Without a doubt, online course offerings can expand College outreach and increase enrollment through the removal of time and geographical constraints. By applying to the Faculty Online Course Development initiative, faculty members signaled enthusiasm in online learning and teaching. Technology skills and competencies as well as time for professional development are important for designing courses online. It is essential that the University and College Administrators continue to support and commit resources to this endeavor.

This paper forms the foundation for further research in the area of faculty professional development models that target technology and digital pedagogical practices in higher education. Further investigation is required to determine the proper combination of technological skills, motivation, and time that will lead continual improvement in this online learning initiative.

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