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Abstract

This case study describes the creation of a supportive culture for online teaching at a western university that was transitioning to a new learning management system. The case study highlighted the creation of a faculty learning community as one strategy to address the challenge of faculty working through a change process. The faculty learning community provided a space for the development of best practices in teaching, drawing from the pedagogical experiences of teachers from diverse disciplines. The learning community also provided a venue for expanding the technical knowledge level of faculty members with a range of comfort levels with varied technologies.

Creating a Supportive Culture for Online Teaching: A Case Study of a Faculty Learning Community

Colleges and universities throughout the United States, and throughout the world, continue to integrate technology into their instructional offerings (Hignite, 2011). What was once a small industry of providing software to institutions to provide online learning experiences has become one of the fastest growing areas of technology development. The programs that facilitate online learning, referred to as learning management systems, have refined how they are designed and now offer a broad array of sophisticated elements that enhance both the user (that is, the faculty member) and student experience in online learning. The result has become a second generation problem: no longer is it a problem to get faculty to teach using technology, but now faculty members must learn how to adapt and change to new and revised technologies that they had just mastered.

Institutions have struggled to find consistent and effective ways of keeping faculty current with technological innovations (Brown & Green, 2003). Indeed, faculty development is an ongoing challenge to higher education leaders, and at least one response has been to build technology into an institution's faculty development program. Undergirding the effort to keep faculty fluent in the best practices of teaching is the continued belief that the faculty are the lifeblood of an institution and the driving force in an institution's quality. The quality of the student's learning experience can be directly tied to the effort, quality, and skill of the faculty member who delivers instruction (Bai, 1999). The period of great debate about whether this instruction must be face to face or if it can be effectively offered in an online format seems to have subsided, as virtually every college and university in the United States now makes use of some online or at least hybrid instruction (Hignite, 2011).

In one western United States university of over 30,000 students, one of the academic colleges found aggravated problems with online learning as the learning management system underwent a significant upgrade. This academic college, one of eight on the campus, had an enrollment of approximately 3,000 students, and in the spring of 2010, offered 115 classes entirely online and 1,476 classes that had some technological element that would classify the course as a 'hybrid,' meaning that some significant element of the class was offered using a learning management system. In developing a response to the changed learning management system (LMS), the academic unit's leaders had to give special attention to the range of instructional and learning needs of the unit's students. Ultimately, the unit leaders consulted with the continuing education branch of the university for assistance in embracing the changes to the LMS, and jointly, the two units developed a faculty-in-residence program.

The faculty-in-residence program was designed to support the goal of ensuring that unit faculty members were trained in

developing courses and programs that encompassed best practices for teaching and learning online. In consultation with the university's faculty development center and through meetings and interviews with unit faculty, the faculty-in-residence developed and launched a faculty learning community initiative. The current discussion was drawn from the experiences of the faculty-in-residence's effort to establish a faculty-based learning community.

Challenges to Transitioning Faculty

A variety of scholars have discussed the importance of multi-tiered support for faculty members transitioning to online teaching, including technical and moral support (program or department, university staff, and faculty peers), education on changed processes for everything from entering grades and hosting discussions to new ideas about attendance and even student registration (Covington, Petherbridge, & Warren, 2005). An effective transition to online learning requires two key types of support: increasing the value of online learning by enhancing faculty understanding of the pedagogical value of technology and increasing competence in online learning, including faculty knowledge of specific technology-based skills (Jones, Lindner, Murphy, & Dooley, 2002).

Part of creating a supportive culture for online teaching is effectively communicating the value of online education (Jones, Lindner, Murphy, & Dooley, 2002). Enhancing faculty and staff comfort levels with technology, and supporting technical training in specific technology-based skills can help address skepticism about online pedagogy and reduce a faculty member's reluctance to change (Covington, Petherbridge, & Warren, 2005). A major challenge for faculty to the online environment is often that the new learning experience is markedly different from live classes: changes in communication, participation, and even the social dynamic between students and between the students and faculty member (Ascough, 2002). Online education changes the roles and responsibilities of faculty members, requiring them to adapt to the changes in delivering instruction to remain a viable part of the campus community (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Faculty responsibilities change when online components are incorporated into teaching, including the provision of instructional and personal support to students, greater expectations that faculty are highly competent in technology, grading that is tied to specific formats of feedback (such as tracked changes in the Microsoft suite), greater management of the learning calendar, and even mapping the equivalence of course learning to the tradition of instructional minutes required for credits. Additionally, with online courses, faculty availability changes as learners want immediate and timely feedback rather than waiting for a formal class time for feedback or weekly office hours (Murihead, 2000).

At the case study institution, online courses have been developed and offered for over a decade. Considering the state's financial situation and expanding enrollments with reduced state budgets, there was an encouragement for faculty members to use more technologically-mediated instruction. So although many faculty members had embraced and enjoyed online instruction, there were equally many who had resisted the growing use of technology. For those who had been reluctant users, the new LMS resulted in frequent complaints with the common cry of having to completely reconstruct course content and material. Additionally, the new LMS was adopted as the primary supporting mechanism for all courses, so that course handouts, additional readings, discussion boards, and in many cases even textbooks, were all instructed to be incorporated through the LMS.

Creating a Faculty Learning Community

The benefit of faculty learning communities as enablers of lasting change in higher education is well documented (Cox, 2001; 2003; 2004). The process of participating in a learning community allows individuals to contextualize material, ideas, and concepts in a different manner, using socialization and interactions to ground problems and experiences in individuals as well as abstractions (Dees, Zavota, Emens, Harper, Kan Niesz, Devine, & Hovhannisyan, 2009). The purpose of the faculty learning community at the case study university was to create a safe and non-judgmental environment to discuss the challenges and successes of online teaching. Considering differing attitudes about technology (many of which bordered on hostile) and a broad range of skills, the potential for judgment by others was seen as a particular challenge for the new LMS integration and was a compelling motivator for creating a learning community. In the community, faculty members shared their experiences getting started with online teaching, how they instituted changes, how they adapted to student issues and concerns, how to improve student engagement, and even rudimentary discussions about how technology works. Many activities were initially designed to help bring the group together and begin communicating at an honest and meaningful level. Over the semester, the faculty-in-residence sponsored three formal one-hour sessions that were open to faculty from the academic college. Through guided discussion, the faculty-in-residence offered advice and specific detail on how to improve experiences with and adapt to the new LMS.

Session participants ranged from experienced online instructors to highly skeptical professors who viewed online instruction as nothing more than a passing fad. The structured sessions were augmented with informal, voluntary continued meetings throughout the semester, ultimately creating teams of faculty who cared deeply about each other. Admittedly, some faculty members simply went in their own direction and had little interaction with others, while some built email distribution lists, joined others for lunch in the faculty club, and yet others frequently met over coffee to discuss exciting new websites or online instructional methods that could aid in course design and effectiveness.

From the discussion, debate, and continued interaction with the faculty in this academic college (a social science-based academic college), at the completion of the formal faculty-in-residence program, there were a number of lessons learned that have application to other institutions either undergoing a major LMS upgrade or simply implementing new initiatives in online instruction.

Faculty-in-residence kept notes, agendas, and journals based on their experiences working with the faculty learning community. At the conclusion of two semesters of observation (one of formal meetings and a continuation of discussions and observations while supporting faculty during the summer), a series of key constructs were identified that could aid in faculty development programs that incorporate technology. These constructs were identified individually by the faculty-in-residence, and data were shared with a neutral third-party to compare themes and validate the identification of the constructs. Seven constructs or elements key to faculty development in technology were identified:

Technology should be thought of as alive: technology and the mechanisms that are used for instruction are typically considered tools; technology changes rapidly, though, and current versions of applications and methods of instruction in use today will be obsolete in two or three years. This means that if faculty members are to truly buy into the use of technology for delivering course content, they must begin to see that technology is indeed alive and will continue to grow and change on a regular basis. Courses developed for the current semester will most likely need to be completely overhauled within a brief period of time due to the expansion rate of knowledge, the accessibility of resources, and the availablity of media resources available that fit students' learning styles and correspond appropriately with instructional needs. This is a dramatic change from Professor X's (1973) commentary on yellowed lecture notes that went unchanged for decades.

Courses are in competition: previous generations of faculty held the mindset that once a student walked into a classroom, the rest of the world faded away. The emergence of portable electronics gestating to today's handheld internet tools demands that faculty members have to try and find ways to compete with all of the distractions around students. This is not to argue in favor of entertaining students, but rather, to acknowledge that the current society is media-saturated, and faculty must have more than a 'click here' use of technology.

Seek new ways to preserve a dynamic classroom: courses are not dynamic because they have or do not have a classroom, but the ability for faculty personality to engage students can be lost with the conversion to online learning. Additionally, faculty member responsiveness, coupled with personality, had the potential to create dynamic, exciting instruction, both elements that can be lost in converting courses online. Dynamism means that course information is not static and is not delivered in a static manner. Courses need to make use of multiple instructional methods that respond to multiple ways of learning. Online courses must be constantly monitored to integrate media that prompts and personalizes critical thinking.

Undergraduate research and then some: undergraduate research has been a growing part of the classroom experience for the past decade, but in the world of online and technologically mediated courses, faculty must find ways to build information literacy into course assignments. This also means that faculty must continually be learning about new technologies and how they can be used for instruction, cueing faculty development programs to finally give real attention to technology as a life tool and not just something to be used for class presentations.

Technology is 24/7: online technologies can bridge the in- and out-of-classroom time for students. Often acknowledged as the location of most student learning, the time students are not in class can further bridge the application of course material, helping make it relevant to students as they live in the world (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Technology's ability to be a tool for student learning around the clock can also build on the student's exposure and experience with material.

Employ technology to support diverse student needs: a number of faculty in the learning community noted that student dialects, accents, and stutters disappeared in online discussion boards. Similarly, many faculty noted that they were able to draw more diverse examples and experiences into the classroom through the use of varied media, and that the exploration of these new media was more time consuming and challenging than what they claimed they used to do: go to the library. As writing apprehension may increase for some students, courses can be constructed that respond to more varied learning preferences and may even allow some students with high levels of communication apprehension an easier time to engage in course discussions.

Develop and facilitate best assessment practices: online technologies can help faculty provide more prompt and meaningful feedback (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996), but at the same time can fundamentally change how faculty engage in their work of teaching class. From an administrative perspective, helping faculty build courses in the new LMS was a tremendous advantage in adopting academic program learning outcome measures and was consistent with the university's effort to better document student learning. Online instruction is not a panacea for learning assessment The process of re-designing courses was a successful strategy for aligning curriculum with larger program, department, and institutional learning objectives.

Discussion

Learning to teach online was described by faculty in the learning community as similar to learning a new language. Those who

undertook the challenge described the process as one in which they needed to play and experiment with technology, but also one in which they needed room to make mistakes and not be judged for trying new and different approaches to learning about technology. They also described a need to have support that they could see and would respond to their learning styles; and in many cases, faculty members described a need to "simply play with technology, and for administrators to understand that playing is learning." The learning community implemented at the case institution was designed to be a safe and supportive environment, but there were still faculty who balked at the thought of doing more with technology. The range of responses included the comment "eaching with technology for the sake of saving money is ridiculous!" Yet, another faculty member said,

It's been a long time since I was a student in a classroom, but I think fundamentally the process is the same. We just have to figure out how to connect with students - on their phones, online - however we can do it. The learning management system seemed incredibly complex, but after I spent time, time, and more time with it, it all started to click. I started to see the entire learning process from my students' points of view, and my change in thinking was nothing short of amazing.

The evaluation of the faculty-in-residence program and the faculty learning community provided the conclusion that the characteristic of faculty curiosity is strong; and given an opportunity to experiment, faculty members are generally willing to try new and different approaches to teaching. One senior professor said, "I really had a hard time getting started, but being able to just sit around and talk to others in the same boat made a big difference for me." A key variable must be institutional support, however, and this support must be visible from the highest levels of institutional administration. On a practical level, this means that the president or provost demonstrate a value about online course conversions and that the process of converting courses is not a simple task. A provost who takes the time to look at faculty members' work, for example, exhibits an excellent way to demonstrate the valuing of course conversion. Also, deans and department chairs who recognize outstanding online instruction can be strong tools for building a culture that values and supports more experimentation with online learning.

Technology changes very rapidly, and student levels of comfort with change continue to increase, suggesting that the future of quality higher education instruction will be directly linked to an institution's willingness to invest in faculty development. Faculty need to be encouraged today to explore interactive podcasts, second life simulations, and even how different applications might be effective tools to aid in student learning (such as turning on a studying time management system). A junior faculty member at the case study institution commented that it was good to see the entire culture of the college becoming more progressive and open to thinking differently about instruction. She also indicated that hosting meetings and providing support from the teaching center "really kicked it into gear for me - I went from being just a junior faculty member who commuted an hour a day to someone who had value for my colleagues."

As technology is increasingly integrated into higher education, blended courses can be expected to increase, not only making the best use of technology but also meeting the needs of a burgeoning population of adult learners (Lu, Mao, & Miller, 2007). While all faculty will probably not use or embrace online instruction, all faculty should be aware of the positive aspects of this option so they can make informed decisions about teaching and learning (Fish & Gill, 2009). And, representing a new direction in thinking, institutional leaders must become more active in developing responsive technologically mediated instruction that fits well with content and student learning styles, and not just relying on pre-packaged LMS programs. The case study identifies key new thinking about online conversion and upgrading, suggesting that institutional systems and leaders have a critical role advocating different thinking about technology; and such discussions need to be sponsored by the institution instead of relying on faculty to make their own adjustments to course content and delivery.

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