Faculty Professional Development for Quality Online Teaching

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Abstract

Meaningful technology use in education continues to improve given an increase in access to available technologies and professional development. For educators, professional development has focused on approaches for technology use that foster content-specific best practices and improve student learning in traditional classroom formats. Meaningful technology integrations are not, however, limited to traditional classrooms. In fact, the push for distance and online education in postsecondary contexts has complicated the issue; faculty must develop and balance content-specific practices with technology pedagogies for asynchronous learning environments to maximize opportunities for student learning. In this article, the authors discuss the findings from a secondary review of research and theoretical applications for faculty development. One model for faculty training based on these findings is posited.

Introduction

Meaningful technology use in education continues to improve given an increase in access to available technologies and professional development. For educators, professional development has focused on approaches for technology use that foster content-specific best practices and improve student learning in traditional classroom formats (Deaney, Chapman, & Hennessy, 2009). Meaningful technology integrations are not, however, limited to traditional classrooms. In fact, the push for distance and online education in postsecondary contexts has complicated the issue; faculty must develop and balance content-specific practices with technology pedagogies for asynchronous learning environments to maximize opportunities for student learning (Avgerineu &Andersson, 2007; Jaggars, Edgecomb, Stacey, 2013; Jamieson, 2004).

Approximately 89% of four-year public institutions provide online programs (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). Despite the rush to provide online course offerings at the postsecondary level, most faculty are ill-prepared to create and/or manage online courses that effectively use web-based learning management platforms or integrate technology in meaningful, innovative ways. Specifically, many of the courses currently offered fail to engage students in the learning process (Jamieson, 2004). Without proper training, these courses leave students feeling disengaged, self-taught, and lost in the content (Donavant,

2009; Gregory & Salmon, 2013).

One University decided an effective way to help engage students and teachers more fully in the practices of effective online education was to develop and implement peer-based faculty professional development for quality online teaching. Internal faculty with significant expertise and training in teaching online were selected to complete this work. To guide their inquiry and development, the faculty experts conducted a review of research guided by the following questions:

1. How is quality online teaching conceptualized in the literature?
2. How are relationships and quality interactions among the instructor, students, and content characterized in the literature?
3. How should module content be built to support content pedagogies? The findings from this secondary review of research and theoretical applications for faculty development are discussed and one model for faculty training based on these findings is posited.

Researching Quality Online Teaching

The faculty experts chose to search through ERIC, Education Full Text, WorldCat, and Google Scholar. Synonyms for keywords found in the actual questions were identified. Basic and advanced searches were conducted using keywords and controlled vocabulary, truncation, and Boolean searching. Given the nature and rate of technological advance, preference was given to articles published within the last five years. After reading relevant articles, faculty experts used open coding and content analysis (Patton, 2002) to identify themes in the literature and attend to their development questions. The following themes were identified 1) Critical Elements of an Online Classroom; 2) Best Practices in an Online Environment; and 3) Learning Module Creation.

Critical Elements of an Online Classroom

There is considerable research that lists the components necessary for effective online learning. Although each component is integral to an online learning environment, they cannot stand alone. The overall design, including organization, ease of navigation, and presence of multiple entry points, serves as the cohesive force that determines the viability of a course (Baghdadi, 2011; Seok, DaCosta, Kinsell, & Tung, 2010). With this organization present, instructors, instructional designers, and technology support then work to ensure the appropriate elements are embedded.

Barr and Miller (2013) assert that quality online classrooms be comprised of "course procedures and guidelines, measurable learning objectives, assessment and evaluation, methodologies that address learning outcomes, interactive learning opportunities, resources and materials, learner support services, and accessibility to all students" (p. 4). Specific strategies, such as discussion boards, blogs, case studies, wikis, embedded video, and student portfolios, are cited as such "interactive learning opportunities" that support students' mastery of learning outcomes (Thiede, 2013). To measure these outcomes, online courses should contain modality-driven assessments.

Assessments in online courses should be multidimensional, allowing the instructor and students opportunities to interact with one another. High-quality assessments for online learning include, but are not limited to, cited research to substantiate narrative statements, interpersonal engagements such as discussion, chat, and conferencing, and embedded

analytic and critical thinking (Thiede, 2011). Assessments, as in traditional learning environments, must be aligned to content-based and/or professional standards and learning targets (McMillan, 2013).

Above all, quality online courses must contain content that is appropriate for the established curriculum (Baghdadi, 2011). While centering students' online experience, faculty must assume the role of content expert and work with instructional designers and technology support to ensure that the both the content and opportunities to learn are aligned (Gregory & Salmon, 2013; Salmon, 2011). In so doing, faculty serve as "E-moderators" where faculty scaffold engagements between instructor, student, and content to maximize student learning outcomes in online environments (Salmon, 2011).

Best Practices in an Online Environment

Research-based best practices recommended for traditional, face-to-face courses differ from those required in asynchronous learning environments (Thiede, 2012). The role of instructor as a facilitator, rather than lecturer, is often unknown for faculty who are new to online teaching. In many ways, the online practices of these faculty serve to construct and convey this role. Key practices attributed to developing this role include visibility, intentionality, and active engagement (Jaggars, Edgecomb, & Stacey, 2013). Although these are framed by the elements and organization of course content, the communicative practices of the faculty should be positively diffused to foster a positive learning climate. Indeed, effective communication is integral to the development of positive learning climates regardless of modality (Baghdadi, 2011). That being said, creating inclusive and engaging classrooms in an online environment can be challenging given the asynchronous format.

Equally challenging is the development of a classroom community where engaged relationships between instructor and students are forged. For cognitive process and critical thinking to be present, instructors must actively engage in course discussions by scaffolding student comments (Hosler & Arend, 2012). Here instructors must frequently monitor and constructively engage across student comments. Kearsley and Moore contend these discussions or interactions should also be reciprocal between instructor and student (as cited in Barr & Miller, 2013, p. 3). Reciprocal engagement is indicative of the constructivist potential for online learning that, when coupled with the flexibility of the modality, is so appealing and amenable to 21st Century learners. Here, students' experiences as learners are centered rather than the transmission of knowledge from instructor to student (Gregory & Salmon, 2013).

Reciprocal engagement should also occur with assessment and evaluation. For online learning, discussions can serve as formative assessments that allow instructors to adapt instruction to better meet student needs (Vonderwell & Bobec, 2013). The discussion forum thereby serves as an assessment predicated on positive communicative practices and instructional engagements. Summative assessments also serve in this capacity for online learning. Feedback should be clear, comprehensive, consistent, and timely.

Building Learning Modules

Similar to traditional face-to face instruction, content organization is integral to student success in online environments. Here, organization needs to be explicit so as to ensure student focus on content (Elbaum, McIntyre, & Smith, 2012). The focus on content must then be linked to learning outcomes and corresponding assessments. Hosler and Arend (2012)

posit that for cognitive process and critical thinking to be present as they are in traditional classrooms, instructors must provide a well-organized learning plan that includes clearly delineated goals that align with meaningful assignments. Perhaps the most difficult task in module development is to create a sense of classroom community, where individuals feel engaged in a collective and inclusive learning process despite the asynchronous nature of those interactions (Elbaum, McIntyre, & Smith, 2012; Hosler & Arend, 2012).

Developing an Online Course for Faculty Online

After reviewing and identifying key themes in the literature for quality online teaching, the faculty developers ground the structure of the training utilizing: 1) Critical Elements of an Online Classroom; 2) Best Practices in an Online Environment; and 3) Learning Module Creation. As a development model, online instruction has been shown to improve faculty teaching and learning (Villare & Alegre, 2007). Faculty developers also value the potential for empathy by creating a professional development model that places a faculty member in the same role as their future eLeaners.

Then, faculty developers created a centralized course via the University's Learning Management System (LMS) that would serve three purposes: 1) provide faculty with flexible instruction in the development of online courses; 2) model best practices for online learning; 3) allow participating faculty to simultaneously experience the roles of student, developer, and instructor. These theoretical groundings and processes for development are discussed.

The most important goal for offering this training is to give instructors the opportunity to be an online student and instructor at the same time. As developing faculty, we worked collaboratively to create the online course for teaching hybrid and fully online courses using the University's learning management system (LMS). Best practices explored include creating a course community, interacting with participants on a regular basis, and creating a concise and recognizable course structure that included class expectations and grading criteria. The developmental objectives of the course are as follows:

1. Develop a series of online modules that promote awareness of online teaching and learning methodology and model best practices for online and hybrid courses.
2. Assist the University in maintaining SACS compliance with regard to training for instructors who are teaching in online environments.
3. Create a common basic vocabulary and methodology that models research-based, online instructional strategies for full-time and adjunct instructors across the campus.

The online course is set up in an 8-week format with a modular focus, which includes a social media component to offer participants an additional element of interaction with each other that in turn fosters an online class community. Additionally, participants are given feedback on assignments in an assortment of ways, including audio and rubric-based feedback. The format of the course is based on explicitly stated objectives that best practices would be taught through course content and course interactions with participants.

In addition to embedding an orientation to the LMS to promote facility with the platform, the faculty developers created three learning modules based on the literature previously discussed: 1) Critical Elements of an Online Classroom; 2) Best Practices in an Online Environment; and 3) Building Learning Modules. As a development methodology, we conducted a discourse analysis of the content, experiences, and assignments to ensure alignment with the secondary research conducted at the beginning of development. Each

module provides faculty with both direct instruction and interactive, hands-on applications for using the technology, which offers them a unique perspective as a participant in an online course. The learner objectives for the course are as follows:

1. Participants will utilize information from the online professional development to identify critical elements of an online classroom and implement best practices in an online environment.
2. Participants will engage in asynchronous, online discussions and collaboration with peers about teaching and learning online.
3. Participants will work on their own course content that will be used to create or modify courses that are already online or will be offered online in the future.

Module activities support these objectives and allow participants to begin to create materials for their own courses, including WebQuests, discussions, assignments, tests, external links, blogs, and videos. The instructional modules are broken into the five following topics:

Module 1: Introduction to Online Teaching and Information Literacy
Module 2: Identifying and Evaluating External Online Resources
Module 3: Communicative Modes of Engagement in Online Teaching
Module 4: Assignments, Assessments, Rubrics, and Grading
Module 5: Building Online Learning Modules

Module 1 introduced participants to using online resources and shared various online tutorials that promote information literacy to support both (1) the ability in identifying online resources for courses, and (2) issues students face when browsing, identifying, evaluating, and sharing online resources when taking online courses. Participants complete a WebQuest and Online Resource Appraisal to be included in their course planning.

In Module 2, each participant completes a Webquest to identify, review, and evaluate at least 5 online resources that are appropriate for their discipline and course. Participants are reminded that the structure of the process for a WebQuest depends on the sophistication of the learner. In this course, participants are considered to have a high level of sophistication for information literacy. As such, they are given the freedom to identify their own resources. When working with less sophisticated learners, participants are told to restrict the information used by selecting specific websites for students to use to answer the process questions. Specifically, faculty participants answer the following questions for each of the resources:

1. Why is this resource relevant to my discipline/course
2. How do I know it is dependable and credible?
3. How will I describe the resource to my students?
4. What assignment will be used in conjunction with this resource?
5. How will this resource support student completion of the assignment?

Module 2 introduces faculty participants to different modes of communication for engaging students in an online course. Here, faculty explore varied communicative modes, both asynchronous and synchronous, to determine which would be the best fit for their particulate course and/or content area. They are asked to think about what media they plan to use for student communication. A Communication Action Plan, designed to aid in the development of a personal communication strategy and course road map to fit their online or hybrid courses, is developed.

Module 3 introduces faculty participants to assignments, assessments, rubrics, and grading in an online course. Participants create one assignment or assessment as well as a rubric to use in their test course. Here, assessments and assignments are framed as a teaching mode in addition to content delivery. Furthermore, rubrics are defined as instruments used to communicate expectations to students by outlining the connection between expected criteria and performance levels. Given the instructional element in an online course, participants are encouraged to provide significant qualitative feedback in addition to rubric completion, by using the review pane provided by Microsoft Office or other features of the LMS.

Module 4 examines the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), security, and ethical issues in online teaching. Multiple tutorials are used to foster faculty understanding of all legal and ethical considerations for teaching online. Participants learn to audit multimedia teaching materials and created a compliant, tagged syllabus to be included in their course development.

The final module charges faculty participants to merge all learned elements together to develop one complete learning module. Module 5, therefore, builds on the lessons learned in the previous modules by bringing all the information together into one learning module for future students. Participants are asked to think critically about how they will structure their first learning modules for the class. The intent is such that participants develop their first content module, to come after the introductory module, serving as students' first exposure to how they present course content. As an end result, faculty participants develop first modules that are as engaging as possible and set the stage for the remainder of their instruction for the semester to come. Faculty participants are assigned peer reviewers to further promote the peer-led foundation for the development series. Here, peer reviewers also serve as content pedagogy experts who provide feedback regarding content delivery in addition to instructional design and online presentation. This particular, research-based model for faculty development for effective teaching online allows faculty the unique ability to be students/learners and instructors/designs at the same time. By engaging in an online course, they are able to see into the experience of their students, allowing for more authentic and responsive instruction.

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