Building an eLearning Faculty Community of Practice

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The Institute for Distance and Distributed Learning (IDDL) at Virginia Tech provides leadership, coordination, management, and support for more than 730 distance and distributed courses annually. A major function of IDDL is faculty development and support services. In order to provide distance learning, instructors the tools, pedagogy, and support they need to successful facilitate quality online courses, IDDL has implemented an eLearning Faculty Community of Practice.

This session illustrates the professional development practices developed by IDDL and focuses on the process for developing and evaluating an eLearning faculty community. Representatives from IDDL will provide an overview of the aims and goals of the eLearning faculty community and provide narratives from faculty members.

Introduction

Recent statistics reveal that delivering course content to students is of continuing interest to university faculty. Over one-third of public university faculty have taught an online class. (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning, 2009). At the same time, impediments to online course delivery have been readily identified by faculty, including acknowledgement that teaching an online course can take more effort than delivering content through traditional face to face venues (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning, 2009). In addition, support opportunities that would assist faculty in delivering courses online provided by higher education often fall short of faculty expectations (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning, 2009). As a result, and as individuals they have found effective ways to overcome these barriers. Finding effective ways to provide support for online teaching faculty is imperative to a successful online program. Learning communities have often been used effectively to find solutions to academic problems.

Since learning communities are grounded in constructivist theory they are often employed in higher education to provide teaching faculty a space to share resources and strategies. Distance faculty often report feeling isolated from their peers and crave the interaction that learning communities provide. Faculty members, who become involved and active participants in learning communities report positive result. Participants in faculty communities find collaboration across academic units, new ideas, and lasting friendships (Cox, 2004). Though moving learning communities into the online environment presents its own set of challenges, given time, learning communities in cyberspace can lead to stronger relationships than those of face-to-face communities (Palloff ad Pratt, 1999). In order to provide teaching faculty effective support, IDDL has formed an eLearning faculty community of practice. Made up entirely of faculty who teach at a distance, the group meets regularly in face-to-face environments and virtually to share resources, tips, pedagogical strategies, tools, and experiences in online teaching and learning.
Program Description

Using Mu and Gnyawali’s (2003) framework for developing quality learning communities, IDDL formed a faculty learning community of practice specifically designed for online teaching faculty. In order to create a vibrant community of practice it is imperative to obtain participation from a significant cross-section of the university. Understanding this need, IDDL worked to build support from within a smaller group of faculty members who were currently teaching online. Participation in the eLearning faculty community is purely voluntary. IDDL chose not to limit participation to faculty or online instructors. Graduate students who are planning on pursuing careers in the professorate and faculty who do not currently teach online at the university are also encouraged to attend. Participants are recruited through instructional design sessions, professional development workshops, certificate programs, and though targeted marketing.

Brown Bag Lunch Series

The learning community grew out of monthly brown bag lunch sessions that were led by faculty teaching online who had found innovative ways to teach in the online environment. Though IDDL had hosted brown bag lunch sessions in the past, they tended to lose momentum and falter over time. In order for a community to thrive there must be consistency and care given to keep participants engaged. Learning from our mistakes, IDDL invested a great deal of time organizing, planning, and nurturing the series of brown bag lunch discussions for the academic year 2009-2010. Early in the summer of 2009, IDDL started lining up dynamic online faculty members to serve as guest speakers. Minimal direction was given for the organization of each session. Speakers were then asked to give examples from their own courses so that there be a real discussion and dialogue. Though ten faculty members signed up for the first brown bag lunch session in August of 2009, only four faculty members were in attendance. Research attributed this small turnout to missed marketing opportunities, poor follow-up before the brown bag session, and adjunct faculty who were not present on campus were forgotten. For the next session an opportunity was provided for those not on campus to attend the session, reminder emails were sent to participants on the day prior to the session, and the team revisited the way information was disseminated about the sessions. Twenty individuals registered for the session and eighteen consistently have 12-20 participants.

Online Instructor Certification Programs

In addition, to our brown bag lunch series IDDL has developed a two-tier faculty development model that culminates with online instructor certification. In IDDL’s model, Tier 1 instructors are typically new to the online environment and receive tool based professional development. These instructors attend seven workshops meant to orient participants to distance education. Topics include creating online presentations (PowerPoint as well as tutorials); using online meeting spaces for office hours, group meetings, and lectures; creating accessible multimedia; and online interaction strategies. In addition to the hands-on sessions, participants will have the opportunity to meet with distance learning faculty of varying levels from a variety of disciplines.

Teaching faculty who have developed basic online teaching skills through previous online teaching experience, or Tier 2 instructors, are encouraged to improve the structure and value of their online classes by attending. Attending six workshops, Tier 2 participants examine strategies, pedagogy, and best practice information. Topics include writing clear objectives, effective communication, online assessment, and quality assurance. The series of workshops culminates with a hands-on session in which instructors demonstrate how workshop content will be implemented in their online courses. Faculty members who complete all Tier 2 workshops are also authorized to serve as course reviewers for new courses developed in coordination with IDDL’s instructional design team. A total of 88 individuals have participated in our certificate programs.
eLearning Faculty Community
Faculty who are active in our brown bag lunches and workshops are also encouraged to become a member of the Virginia Tech eLearning Faculty Community of Practice Online Network. Hosted by Scholar, Virginia Tech’s implementation of Sakai, the faculty community serves as a place for instructors to upload resources, discuss ideas strategies in a forum format, chat, and build relationships across disciplines. Participants have the opportunity to learn from one another and design online course materials without reinventing the wheel. This is the newest form of community that being promoted through IDDL. More information will be forthcoming as the community grows and expands.

Summary
Community building is an important part of any faculty development program. Finding innovative ways for online teaching faculty to connect, share resources, and create a support system can drastically improve faculty perceptions of the distance learning teaching experiences. Faculty satisfaction will lead to better student performance, learning, and student perception of the online class. The Institute for Distance and Distributed Learning at Virginia Tech has implemented a process for building a community of practice for its online teaching faculty. This process is ongoing and IDDL will continue to foster the budding community by providing ongoing support and coordination of the eLearning Faculty Community of Practice.

References


About the Presenters
Aaron Bond currently serves as the Coordinator of eLearning Faculty Development and Support Services for the Institute for Distance and Distributed Learning (IDDL) at Virginia Tech where he designs, develops, and delivers professional development activities for distance and distributed learning faculty while coordinating support efforts for faculty engaged in distance education. Aaron has worked in the field of instructional technology, distance education, and professional development since 1999. He has served as a corporate trainer, face-to-face classroom and online instructor, and as an assistant principal. Some organizations that Aaron has worked with include the Virginia Department of Education, Roanoke City Schools, PLATO.

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Peter Macedo has been with IDDL since Spring 2003 and has been working in distance education programs since 1995. He has worked with informal educators, K-12 and university programs with a focus in online instruction. Some of the organizations he has worked with include: The US Army, NASA, Baltimore County public schools, The Council of State Science Supervisors, The National Association of Science Teachers, The Institute for Connecting Science Research to the Classroom, the Networking for Leadership, Inquiry and Systemic Thinking group, the Center for Instructional Technology, and a large number of departments throughout Virginia Tech.

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