eLearn@Mohawk – Moving to Blended Learning for Student Success at Mohawk College

Opportunity

By 2013, Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology in Hamilton has a goal of positioning itself as a blended learning institution. The move to blended learning has two key goals – to enhance student learning and to reduce face-to-face time in physical classrooms.

The College Strategic Plan highlights three priority actions, all of which resonate with blended learning:

- Quality – Develop differentiated learning and service models and pathways to promote individual student success;
- Innovation – Create opportunities and incentives for staff and students to embrace innovation as a driver of teaching, learning, and services; and
- Sustainability – Enhance access to the college and embrace inclusiveness.

Innovation

The move to blended learning involves three steps:

Web-facilitated: The Fundamentals. This first step is to take advantage of the tools and capabilities of eLearn@Mohawk, the online learning platform, to enhance face-to-face teaching and learning. Each course is to include the following essential elements in eLearn@Mohawk:

- e-mail;
- welcome message;
- instructor information;
- news/announcements;
- course information such as outline, schedule, instructor and student expectations, and technical requirements;
- assignment information;
- question and answer related topics in discussions to encourage collaborative learning;
- content resources; and
- grade book.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) created course shells, templates, and guides for using each basic tool to help professors efficiently create a consistent presence in eLearn@Mohawk. The CTL has an educational designer, instructional technologists, e-learning services, and a help desk. When this first step was fully implemented in fall 2011, students had access to all the key course information online, as well contact with professors through e-mail and other students through course discussion boards.

Web-enhanced: Focus on Sustainability. Sustainability is a focus of the Strategic Plan, including a goal of Greening Mohawk by embedding environmental sustainability principles into programs and practices. In this second step in integrating blended learning, the eLearn@Mohawk toolbox expands to facilitate paperless assessments and optimize meaningful online communication. Students will be able to submit and receive assignments and comments online, as well as use social media and other communication tools in their learning and collaborative projects.

Blended: Converging Sustainability, Customization and Convenience. In this final step, faculty use eLearn@Mohawk to deliver core and supplemental materials accompanied by a strategic reduction in face-to-face contact. The goal is to have high-quality contact, teaching, and learning happening in both the virtual environment of eLearn@Mohawk and in the face-to-face classrooms.

To complement the shift to blended delivery, CTL created a matrix that outlines four stages from traditional classroom delivery to full technology-integrated course delivery, with attention to such issues as access, contact and questions, content delivery, assessment and evaluation, and support and training. For example, under Course Design, the matrix moves from "traditional course design following Universal Instructional Design principles" to "little change to learning design required to integrate eLearn@Mohawk features effectively" to "extensive re-design needed for integrated and appropriate use of eLearn@Mohawk features" and finally to "full course re-assessment and peer collaboration required for blended courses."

Teaching with Technology Intensive. An intensive blended learning course for faculty has been developed to address two core needs – greater comfort with the technology and an understanding of the pedagogy of blended learning. Faculty are released from teaching for one day a week for 13 weeks to complete the course, which has both face-

to-face components and tasks to be accomplished online. As teaching with technology is still a new concept, the focus to date has been on the face-to-face delivery and teaching about the technology.

Each professor brings a course to be re-designed. To motivate the participants, the training begins by asking what they dislike most about teaching the course and looks at how online learning might help them address those aspects. For example, students in many programs are asked to write a persuasive essay. An online option is to have the students take part in an online debate in which they also have to use persuasive arguments interactively; the Educational Designer built an online module in eLearn@Mohawk providing tools, activities, and rubrics for running a debate for one hour a week for six weeks. The module included links to library resources, podcasts, embedded videos, and collaborative tools and activities.

Outcomes and Benefits

The move to blended learning has two major goals. The first is to provide more student flexibility for enhanced learning and the progress made to date with the introduction of the web-facilitated and web-enhanced stages of the transition will continue with the creation of a greater number of blended learning courses. The second goal is a better use of physical space, which is linked to the broader use of blended learning leading to reduced demand for classroom time.

General Education Electives in such areas as Arts in Society, Civic Life, Social and Cultural Understanding, Personal Understanding, and Understanding Science and Technology have integrated blended learning in response to a College policy requiring one hour of in-class and one hour of structured learning outside physical class each week. As the General Education Electives are offered in almost all programs, this gives each program area an initial experience with blended course delivery.

During the intensive course, the most popular tools were Cantasia for lecture capture, web conferencing, online quizzes, Dropbox for the delivery and return of student assignments, and an integration of Turnitin and Grademark for online marking.

Some programs, such as Child and Youth Worker in the Faculty of Community and Urban Studies, are offered with a combination of delivery methods for increased access and flexibility in student learning. The program includes options for distance/online education, blended delivery, and traditional face-to-face classes.

Challenges and Enhancements

The major challenges are in change management and quality assurance. Faculty has to be encouraged and supported through the process of moving from traditional to

blended learning to ensure the quality of student learning and program delivery. Due to time restraints and faculty skill sets, the intensive faculty training has focused more on the use of technologies than on pedagogical considerations for blended learning.

The College goal of reducing class time requires extensive re-structuring of courses and programs, as well as strategic planning concerning class scheduling.

The intensive course for faculty did not provide enough time to completely create a blended course. At the completion of the training, professors were encouraged to outline what they required to finish the task and what gaps they still had in their training.

Professors in the intensive training were concerned about the additional workload from discussion boards that needed to be moderated. A suggested approach was to divide the class into groups with monitors changing every week. The monitor's role is to summarize the group's discussion each week and the professor assesses the summaries.

Professors wanted detailed information on the impact of online teaching and learning on copyright regulations, academic freedom, and intellectual property.

Potential

The Centre for Teaching and Learning is in the beginning stage of working with Student Success Advisors and Counsellors in Student Services to build modules related to the services they provide. The First Generation Counsellor developed an online course to support the success and integration of these students. Learning objects from these modules and those from the library, such as time management and research, can be put into a repository and embedded into courses.

The Essential Employability Skills (EES) outcomes are a requirement for the granting of Ontario College credits. Courses have their own learning objectives, with an overlay of the essential employability skills objectives in topics such as communications, problem solving, diversity, information literacy, and interaction. Professors assess the course learning objectives but are sometimes not clear on the assessment of the EES. Peggy French, the Educational Designer in the Centre for Teaching and Learning, is planning to build online modules for the EES to convey activities and assessment. These online tools can be used by professors and students to assess student learning in the appropriate EES, separate from the course assessment and grading, that is reportable to the students, College, and the program advisory groups.

Peggy French is willing to discuss the intensive training program and the resources mentioned above with colleagues at other post-secondary institutions. She is particularly interested in learning more about growing faculty engagement and

supporting learners in an online environment. Mohawk College may be offering more graduate certificate programs online and students may prefer more self-paced, flexible learning opportunities. Supporting learners in a highly flexible environment is imperative.

For Further Information

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Many of the resources can be found at
http://www.mohawkcollege.ca/about/TeachingLearningQuality/CTL/e-learning.html