

Learning by Doing - Using a hybrid course for faculty learning about hybrid course development at Niagara College

Opportunity

Niagara College in Welland and Niagara-on-the-Lake has increased its emphasis on online and hybrid learning in the past few years in order to promote student success and accessibility, improve the digital competency of students and faculty, increase the choice of locations for learning, and provide more opportunities for self-paced learning. As stated in Niagara's Academic Plan, the goal is to have one course in every program offered in hybrid format.



An essential step in expanding online and hybrid learning on campus is to provide training and support for the instructors who are developing hybrid courses. The course that is offered to the college instructors is offered in a hybrid format so that they have the same learning experiences as their future students in hybrid courses.

Innovation

Until 2009, support for technology integration and online learning was provided through workshops, regular meetings, discussions, presentations, and release time for course development. In 2009, Niagara College began offering a course to support instructors, self-nominated or nominated by the Chair of their department, in the redesign of their courses for hybrid delivery. The course integrated face-to-face instruction with online activities, with the development of a teaching and learning plan for a hybrid course as the desired deliverable.

Beginning in fall 2011, Hybrid Course Development was offered as a four credit post-secondary course. College instructors register in this General Education hybrid course which has a three hour face-to-face class, plus three hours of online work weekly for 10 weeks.

Hybrid Course Development is taught through the Centre for Educational and Professional Development, with goals that reach beyond the introduction of technology into teaching:

- College instructors experience a hybrid course from a student perspective so that they are more aware of the strengths and challenges of student learning through a hybrid model;
- Instructors develop confidence in their skills so that they can mentor and coach others in the applications of interactive technologies to learning;
- Instructors go through a transformative and interactive experience so that they recognize the effectiveness of teaching approaches other than lectures and learn to work with colleagues from different faculties;
- Instructors are encouraged to keep a journal of the experience as that they may become more reflective practitioners focusing on learner-centred values.

The course is divided into five modules that look at the hybrid learning environment, re-design issues, the tools for active learning and engagement, assessment strategies, and implementation and evaluation of online courses. Instructors learn about the tools, including podcasts, wikis, blogs, learning objects, and discussion boards. Participants who are familiar with the tools explore richer integration and share their experiences with the technologies thus far. They are given the course shell in the learning management system (BlackBoard) as the frame for building their hybrid course.

As the course is offered through Continuing Education, the participants are given a mark, based on their contributions to the discussion boards, wikis, journals, demonstrations, and a teaching and learning plan. Full-time instructors have their tuition subsidized by the College.

Each instructor who completes the course becomes part of a community of practice and has continuing access to all the tools and resources that were available during the course. They can take part in ongoing sharing of resources, workshops, panels, and presentations on hybrid learning.

Outcomes and Benefits

The hybrid model of teaching ensures that the instructors learn about the educational applications and design of the tools by actually using them. They have to access them, learn from them, and apply them to the course assignments, receiving an active appreciation of the potential and effectiveness of the tools.

Having learned from a hybrid model themselves, the instructors are better equipped to design hybrid courses for effective student learning and interaction.

About a third of Niagara College instructors have completed the Hybrid Course Development course over the years and the number of hybrid courses is increasing.

Challenges and Enhancements

The course is not always long enough to allow for the complete re-design of a course. This has meant that many more instructors have completed the program than have been able to complete the re-design of a course. The challenge is what happens after the course is finished.

Before beginning the course, the instructors are encouraged to use the learning management system to set up their course outlines and to take workshops in podcasts, wikis and blogs. This is not mandatory and has met with mixed success. Instructors who have not done this preparatory work often have to work harder in the course.

The instructors tend to have a strong belief in the lecture as the optimal method of teaching and can be overwhelmed by the online tools and the time it takes to develop a quality hybrid course. It is necessary to start slowly and have reasonable expectations. The class participants are expected to produce a teaching and learning plan for a hybrid course, not a completely redesigned course.

Potential

Barbara Smith, Faculty Consultant, Centre for Educational and Professional Development, is open to discussions on the hybrid course model used at Niagara College and the challenges and approaches of introducing online and hybrid learning in a post-secondary institution.

She has suggested that a common curriculum and centralized source of courses for instructor training in such areas as hybrid course development would be very useful as many of the colleges lack the resources to develop a full range of courses on their own. A course on online and hybrid course development could support the instructor through the entire process of re-design, implementation and evaluation, in a self-paced environment.

For Further Information

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