

Supporting Online Teaching through Online Learning at Western University

Opportunity

The Teaching Support Centre at Western University in London, which provides instruction and support for teaching for both graduate students and professors, has already been integrating instruction and practice on the use of technologies for teaching and learning in their course offerings. For example, in the Western Certificate in University Teaching and Learning for graduate students, techniques for designing and teaching blended learning courses and the use of tools such as Twitter for in-class polling are part of the curriculum. Microteaching is also included in courses for graduate students and faculty members; participants present a ten minute 'class' followed by peer assessment and discussion. Many of the 'microteachers' include technology in these sessions. The microteaching is videotaped and given to the participants for review and analysis.

Among the training opportunities offered to faculty members is the Instructional Skills Workshop, the internationally recognized certificate program originally developed in the post-secondary education institutions in British Columbia, in 1992 as a program for teaching assistants and shortly thereafter for faculty at the University of British Columbia. This workshop stresses peer teaching and communication and incorporates learning about the use of technology for effective teaching. This workshop has recently been re-designed for online delivery by Kim Holland, Instructional Designer in the Teaching Support Centre, based on the model created at Royal Roads University.

Innovation

Kim Holland based the design of the Instructional Skills Workshop on Online Facilitation Skills on the belief that: "Having the experience of being a student online makes you a better instructor online". The five-week course was offered for the first time in November 2012. Each unit is online for a week, with participants expected to devote six to eight hours a week to reading and online activities and to log in at least five times a week. Twelve faculty members participated.

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Home Page Visual for the Online Instructional Skills Workshop

Prior to starting the course, the participants are provided with video explanatory information about the process of the course and the materials included. They complete the Kolb learning style assessment and review the rubric for assessing their participation in this course. Each participant is assigned specific facilitating roles in the online class, so that all participants function as both facilitator and learner.

The first unit looks at Community Building and Facilitation. The course participants are provided with learning objectives, a description of what they have to do to complete the unit, links to required and optional readings, links to YouTube videos with explanations of their content and purpose, and course notes with videos and animation. There are also short audio tracks that respond to specific questions, such as 'how to create a sense of community in online communities'. The audio tracks focus on how these skills can be transferred to their teaching.

As the course is structured around peer interaction, numerous activities are incorporated.

- For the class forum on work-life balance, three participants facilitate a discussion on the topic and arrange a class-wide activity related to it.
- Community building is the topic of another facilitated discussion group and course participants submit images of community building activities that the facilitator arranges on the course site.

- A discussion forum is set up related to the readings with specific questions posed by the facilitator.
- Each participant starts a course blog, and one participant reads through all of the blogs and comments on them to encourage participation and share ideas. Participants are provided with guidelines on how to blog and some questions concerning their teaching practice that they might want to blog about.
- In Unit 2 on Putting Theory into Practice and Unit 3 on Facilitating Online Teams, case studies are used, with supporting documentation, and two participants are assigned to lead group discussions on how to resolve the issues presented. The two lead participants determine the online tools they want to use for group interaction – wikis, voice-over PowerPoint presentations, lecture capture, discussion forums – and the course facilitator sets them up.

The final unit stresses reflection on the course tools and strategies, the roles that the participants played, online management strategies, effective assessment, and other key observations about the course.

Outcomes and Benefits

The Online Instructional Skills Workshop provides faculty not only with skills they can apply to their online teaching, but also with experience in learning through online facilitation that they can apply to their course design.

All the tools and guidelines can be applied to the participants' teaching.

A Certificate of Participation is awarded on successful completion of the course.

Kim Holland established five guidelines for online development that he applied to this course:

- All instructions have to be extremely clear and repetitive.
- Navigation has to be direct, simple, and consistent in all modules.
- The course facilitator has to create a presence, often with video, to establish who he/she is.
- In a course structured around peer instruction and reflection, the active role of the facilitator is modified throughout the course as the participants take more responsibility for, and control, of the classes. The facilitator provides the model for online facilitation and support.
- In a peer-learning-based online course, 10 to 15 participants are optimum, with at least six necessary for effective learning. Twenty is the maximum number,

requiring two facilitators. The participants are often divided into smaller work groups.

Challenges and Enhancements

Designing this course can be double challenging as it must reach two goals. As with all courses, it must be an effective teaching and learning experience. As an online course about online teaching, it must model best practices and provide tools and resources that can be adapted to the participants' teaching practice. The preparation for the course is consequently very detailed and demanding.

Full course involvement demands a lot from the participants as they simultaneously learn about online teaching, about being an online learner, and about the technologies and tools. Considerable reflection on all three aspects of the learning is necessary to benefit from the course.

Potential

The online version of the course was offered for the first time in November 2012. It will be evaluated and modified to respond to the participants' comments.

An online Community of Practice for Course Developers is being set up, featuring resources and a discussion forum. It is a work-in-progress as new materials are continually being added on such topics as rubrics for assessment, online course development, short and long course review processes, and instructors as online learners.

Kim Holland welcomes the opportunity to share information and experience in all aspects of online/blended learning and faculty development and support with colleagues.

For Further Information

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