

Starting with Pedagogy – New learning management system and an Interdisciplinary Applied Aboriginal Studies Diploma Program for Aboriginal students at Centennial College

Opportunity

The introduction of a new learning management system (LMS), Desire2Learn (D2L) at Centennial College in Toronto, coincided with the completion of the e-learning strategy and information technology strategic plan, providing an opportunity for inclusive planning. The implementation of D2L (branded as eCentennial) and the e-learning strategy start from a pedagogical rather than a technological perspective.

As part of its overarching Aboriginal Strategy, Centennial is introducing an Interdisciplinary Applied Aboriginal Studies Diploma that will use D2L to support the development and administration of the program as well as provide online and hybrid learning options to extend access for Aboriginal students.

Innovation

Learning Management System: The approach to bringing in D2L has been what Zafar Syed, Dean of Organizational Learning and Academic Development, describes as “soft sell” – where the focus has been on course and program content, students, and pedagogy rather than technology. The focus is on enhancing how professors teach and supporting whatever mode of delivery they choose as most appropriate. The previous LMS had been used largely for delivery of administrative information; the goal with eCentennial is to start by supporting ways in which it can enhance the teaching and learning exchange, in and out of class.

Student input was critical to the development of the e-learning strategy as they asked for consistent usage of the LMS to support learning. The e-learning strategy suggests three levels for improving learning opportunities and integrating the technology:

- Institutional – identifying issues, supporting developments, and collaborating on change to ensure that the infrastructure is in place for technology, in addition to faculty and student support. The Chief Information Officer integrated support for D2L into the strategic plan for IT.

- Curriculum – as part of the comprehensive program review process, incorporate consideration of how teaching and learning are practiced and might be enhanced with technology.
- Individual – all professors, whether or not they are part of a curriculum review process, reflecting on their practice and how it might be enhanced using e-learning tools.

D2L is being adopted as a full-service LMS, with faculty-friendly tools for ease of use and to inspire creativity. Tools such as Dropbox for assignment delivery, Turnitin the plagiarism checker, and Class Climate for automated course evaluations are integrated. Department portals are set up to bring people together outside class and to get information to faculty and students. The newly revised Centennial Teaching and Learning in Higher Education program, a six-course certificate for college instructors, takes a learner-centred approach that integrates the use of technology, global citizenship and equity, and reflective practice.

Interdisciplinary Applied Aboriginal Studies Diploma: The Academic Action Plan for developing programs in Applied Aboriginal Studies involves all eight schools at Centennial in creating courses for an Aboriginal Stream. For example, the School of Business is already offering a two-year Aboriginal Business Diploma created in partnership with the Aboriginal Finance Officers Association of Canada and a three-year Business Administration – Accounting (Aboriginal Stream) leading to a Certified Aboriginal Finance Manager designation. In this program, students complete a rigorous accounting curriculum, as well as courses in Aboriginal Strategy and Decisions, Aboriginal Governance, Values and Ethics in Aboriginal Workplaces, and Aboriginal Human and Fiscal Issues. Other applied programs and courses in areas such as Sustainable Tourism, Band Management, Hospitality, and Aboriginal Music and Arts are under development or already available.

Building from this initiative, a three-year Interdisciplinary Applied Aboriginal Studies Diploma is being put in place in which Aboriginal students can build their own curriculum from the Aboriginal stream courses. Many of these courses are to be offered online or through hybrid delivery. Students in the Interdisciplinary Program, to be offered in 2012-13, have access to outreach and counselling staff to help with the construction of their programs.

A prototype online computer software course was developed in partnership with Cisco, the Wallaceburg District School Board, and the Walpole Island First Nation. One-third of class time was spent on-campus at Centennial. The course was well-received with a 90% completion rate. This pilot reinforced the need for partnerships and collaboration with Aboriginal communities; many are asking for courses that the students can take at home through online delivery.

Outcomes and Benefits

Faculty have recognized the pedagogical benefits of using D2L, how it can be effective in helping them do their jobs – resulting in higher rates of adoption.

The Aboriginal streams in the eight schools and the Interdisciplinary Applied Diploma program are being offered to create an environment that is more welcoming and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal students. The courses and programs are built around partnerships with Aboriginal communities and organizations, as well as other organizations such as Cisco and TD Bank to build on the synergy they can offer. For example, TD Bank has offered its local branch training facilities when required by the size of the cohort. They can support online learning.

Challenges and Enhancements

The turnover time for introducing D2L was short, leaving a small window of time to train instructors who would be using the new system for the summer session. The staff in the Centre for Organizational Learning and Teaching provided the necessary training and with support from the IT department had all course shells set up in the D2L – winning a Board of Governors Award for their efforts.

Feedback from faculty on the two- hour online training modules for using D2L indicated that they did not reflect the differing levels of technological ability. They have now been customized to respond to both beginner and experienced learner needs and broken into smaller pieces to address specific topics.

Margaret Brigham, Dean of the Institute for Global Citizenship and Equity, links the challenge for the Aboriginal Studies Diploma to the fact that Centennial has not attracted many Aboriginal students in the past. The College must put considerable effort into recruiting the students and making sure they feel welcome and supported, academically, culturally, and personally on campus and in the online learning environment.

Potential

The pedagogically-based introduction of D2L is structured to encourage more faculty members to take a learner-centred approach to teaching, moving away from a stress on lecture-based information delivery. With the integration of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 social media tools, learning communities of students could be set up to create and share

knowledge, using multimedia options for presenting learning. Students have asked for mobile access to courses and apps beyond the current administrative uses.

Zafar Syed would like to share his experiences with colleagues and sees benefit in bringing together a group of those in roles similar to his to share their collective wisdom and learn from each other.

Much of the infrastructure for the Interdisciplinary Applied Aboriginal Studies Diploma Program is in place and, with D2L, the system will facilitate much of the work for online conversion of courses. Margaret Brigham's goal is that, within three years, all the courses in the Aboriginal streams will be available online.

For Further Information

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