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EXPERIENCES OF A COLLABORATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL TEAM IN SUPPORT OF ONLINE LEARNING

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Through the intentional design of a community of practice, a team of instructors engaged in professional conversations and meaningful collaboration to empower themselves as online educators and to promote critical reflection ‘in’ and ‘on’ action. This community of practice helped inform course design, development and implementation, which strengthened the overall online program. In this article, the instructors share their experiences and insights into working as a collaborative team and present three recommendations for collaborating in support of the development and facilitation of an online graduate program.

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging the importance of teachers’ agency in defining and shaping their online teaching experiences, a collaborative instructional team was formed. The purpose of this team was to facilitate

the empowerment of three online sessional instructors and support the overall program cohesiveness of the Assistive Technology for Learning in the Inclusive Classroom graduate certificate. Baynton, Groen, Willment and Slater (2003) have recommended a collaborative approach for practice “because it can provide instructors with the opportunity to exchange ideas, concepts and other strategies throughout the online development, teaching and learning process” (p. 47).

Building a collaborative instructional team in support of online learning required a perspective of envisioning the content of individual courses, as well as the knowledge building required for the overall program. It also required empowering instructors as ‘learners’ and creating conditions that nurtured the examination of their online teaching experiences. ‘Reflection in action’ occurred as individual instructors examined their online teaching experiences during teaching of the courses they designed. ‘Reflection on action’ played an important role in the community of practice that was created by the instructional team.

CONTEXT

In 2013, the Werklund School of Education launched an innovative online graduate certificate program (four courses) entitled Assistive Technology for Learning in the Inclusive Classroom. The focus of the certificate is on current assistive technology and inclusive learning research and practices. Students in the program inquire into “design, development, delivery, and evaluation of technology-enabled learning experiences for all learners, and for addressing the needs of exceptional learners” (Graduate Programs in Education, 2014). Four sessional instructors and an academic coordinator formed the original instructional team responsible for transforming the program proposal into rich, meaningful learning experiences for the online students.

COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

Collaboration played a critical role in the success of the instructional component of this online program. From the start, the sessional instructors agreed to work collaboratively to support each other in the development of each other's course outlines and the creation of a common assignment that went across the program. They were responsible for their own course development, but the work was not done in isolation which often occurs in higher education. Through online communication, the sessional instructors shared drafts of course outlines and assessment rubrics to seek input from their colleagues. They committed to meeting on a regular basis (e.g., on-campus or online) for the purpose of sharing their learning based on the teaching, to help provide direction for the next course and future assignments, and to learn with and from each other in terms of content, technological and pedagogical issues that emerged as part teaching in this program. The nature of their collaborative work and professional conversations over the one year has helped to foster alignment, continuity and cohesion across the program and assignments. Further, it has helped to set direction for the next iteration of the program.

The courses had similarities in terms of using the latest knowledge about learning sciences and technology with the goal of having students build on the knowledge from the previous courses in the program. For example, one of the assignments required students build a "toolkit" of technology tools that would support their work in promoting the use of assistive technology to support inclusion in their various professional roles. This toolkit began in the first course where the students contributed two entries to their kit. They summarized each tool and also identified ways that it could be utilized to support inclusive environments. Students shared their toolkits with their classmates for further peer feedback. All students grew through the knowledge they gained from their own work, as well as from the exploration of their classmates' toolkits. The students contributed more entries to their toolkit for the second and third courses. Each time, they further refined their purpose for the tools they chose to

include. For example, in the third course students chose a specific compensatory support to focus on and included three different assistive technology for learning tools that provided that particular compensatory support. In addition to summarizing each tool and identifying ways that it could be utilized to support inclusive environments, they also critically analyzed each tool to identify its affordances and constraints. In the fourth course, students will draw upon these tools to complete a practical final assignment. The “toolkit” assignment supported a deeper investigation of tools that aligned with the research around inclusion, universal design for learning and assistive technology.

ROLE OF REFLECTION

Working in collaboration as a team of instructors for a program, also empowered the instructors as ‘learners’. Conditions were created where these instructors engaged in ‘reflection in action’ examining their online teaching experiences and practices based on developing and teaching their courses. This was primarily a solitary reflection. However, it contributed to ‘reflection on action’ when the instructional team debriefed a course and considered design revisions for the next course and / or the next section of a particular course. This collaborative ‘reflection on action’ required a relationship of trust within the group where everyone contributed to constructive criticism, feedback and active reflection.

These critical reflective practices contributed to the ‘evolution to becoming online instructors’. The experience of this instructional team demonstrated that professional conversations created a deeper learning experience for instructors and contributed to an enriched experience for the students taking the certificate program.

INSIGHT INTO THE SHARED EXPERIENCE

Using a community of practice approach, a trusting, open collaborative environment was nurtured that created conditions where instructors shared their experiences, sought advice from their colleagues, and

learned from each other. Within this community, there was a fostering of open-mindedness to new ideas and new ways of doing things. The conversations had a communion focus, where it was not about an individual gain, but rather how the work and decisions would have a pedagogical impact on student learning in the program.

This community of practice approach was especially beneficial for the first-time instructor(s), who had no experience teaching at the university level, or teaching a course online. This collegial environment was a welcome source of support and resources not typically found in a more traditional approach of utilizing sessional instructors. The community of practice created a healthy support network for the instructors where they could share and seek insight from their colleagues. “It is through critical reflection that [online] teachers can be empowered as autonomous and self-directed professionals who constantly engage in a dialogue about solving complex problems, making decisions, reflecting in action, and collaborating with other key actors.” (Baran, Correia & Thompson, 2011)

The community of practice discussions also provided each of the instructors with a clear understanding of how individual courses fit within the certificate framework so they were better able to scaffold instruction and build on assignments; avoiding repetition of content. For example, when the students took the second course, Universal Designs for Learning (UDL), the instructor knew that the students had been introduced to the topic of inclusive environments in the previous course. Given this knowledge, the instructor of the second course was able to take the students from their introductory understanding to a space where they deeply explored the theoretical perspective of UDL. Further, the instructor assured students that although the course did not focus on technology and UDL, the next course would carry on through with studying assistive technologies. Given the working knowledge of all courses in the certificate, each instructor was able to talk about the work of the course and scaffold the learning to support students as they developed their knowledge and understandings through each course.

Working together, the instructors were better able to respond to the needs of the students, both within each course and in the implementation of subsequent courses. For example, the instructors modified the toolkit assignment based on student feedback. Getting together on a regular basis throughout the year helped to build perspective for planning the teaching of other post secondary courses based upon lived experiences and student input.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from their experiences in the design, development and facilitation of the program, three recommendations are shared for best practices for collaborating as an instructional team in support of online graduate programs. First, the academic coordinator is essential in creating the conditions required for meaningful and purposeful collaboration. Understanding that collaboration cannot be imposed, the coordinator has a major role in selecting instructors who are open to new ideas and willing to take risks, as well as bringing them together in a shared space on a regular basis. The leadership of the coordinator needs to support the creation of a meaningful learning environment where the instructional team members feel valued and supported.

Second, all instructional team members must be reflective practitioners, open to growth and improvement. They must be able to weigh new ideas and advice from colleagues against their own understanding of teaching and learning and be willing to implement change where needed. Through conversation and collaboration, their teaching practice is public and is open to feedback from colleagues. This openness and sharing of information needs to be reflected on and enacted in ways that support the instructor, the students and the program.

Third, the collaborative instructional team must be responsive to the needs of their students, recognizing their diversity, valuing their strengths and willing to incorporate a variety of methods to facilitate student learning. Being responsive to student feedback is addressed by the individual

instructor and shared with the team. Through the conversation as a team, decisions can be made related to the specific course and/or the program. As such, opportunities need to be made available for student input, as well as analyzing the input to inform next steps.

CONCLUSION

The collaboration of the instructors allowed the varied personal experiences and perspectives of the team to influence the course design and course facilitation. Constructive criticism and team planning enriched the process. Students benefitted from having the instructors working in concert with each other: the communication of the instructional team meant that each instructor knew where the students were coming from and what would be happening once they moved to the next course. Regular meetings provided the instructors with opportunities to continue to build knowledge about the students' journey and enriched the learning experience of all.

The design and implementation of an online graduate certificate program is strengthened when instructors work as a program team. They personally gain from the experience working in a community of practice. Students and the overall program benefit from collaborative instructional practice that fosters continuity and cohesion. The investment of time and support for a collaborative instructional team results in a robust program.

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