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FROM STUDENT TO COACH: EXPERIENCES OF THE D2L COACHES IN THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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Triggered by the implementation of a new learning management system, a graduate student coaching team, led by the Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning, was created to provide instructional and technical support to academic staff and sessional instructors in the Werklund School of Education. Drawing on their background as teachers, as well as, on their knowledge developed as educational technology students, these coaches share insights into their experiences as members of a coaching team within a larger technology support network. Further, recommendations are identified in how student coaches can play a key role during new technology implementation.

Instructors using Learning Management Systems (LMS) must not only be technologically competent in the workings of the LMS but also require support for their technology skills, course design and delivery (Kyei-Blankson & Keengwe, 2011). This becomes even more important when a new LMS is implemented. As the Werklund School of Education embraced the implementation of a new LMS, Desire2Learn (D2L), strategies needed to be in place to provide ongoing at-the-elbow support for academic staff and sessional instructors who were engaged in blended and online learning.

To address this need, a group of educational technology graduate students were invited to become members of the D2L coaching team. Coaching in education, according to van Nieuwerburgh and Lane (2012), is “an activity with educational observation at its centre, and professional learning as its aim” (p. 7). As graduate student coaches, their purpose was to provide both technological and pedagogical support during the first semester of D2L operation. This innovative approach to implementing and supporting D2L involved going beyond the basic sharing of technical support. It required all stakeholders, coaches, instructors, and trainers to engage in an organic grassroots collaboration for a more comprehensive support network. To achieve this end, the graduate student coaches engaged in an ongoing, dynamic exchange of ideas and support with each other, which led to more informed decisions with regards to finding solutions and supporting academic staff and sessional instructors. Also in this approach, they gathered information that in turn helped to inform protocols and practices. This led the coaches and instructors into a cyclical process of learning about the adoption of the new LMS into people’s teaching practice.

This paper is based on the experience of three graduate students who engaged in a coaching initiative to provide additional support to academic staff and sessional instructors during the implementation of D2L. They share four themes that emerged from their experience as members of a D2L coaching team. Drawing on their perceptions of this learning process, they discuss how this can influence the development and/or refinement of formal and informal training and support when implementing new technology using a coaching model.

THE D2L COACHING TEAM

Following the decision to adopt D2L as a new LMS for the institution, several measures were implemented throughout the University of Calgary to ensure a smooth transition. Focusing on academic staff and sessional instructors, large-group workshops were offered on D2L which addressed such items as the creation and management of content, the use of various communication tools, and how to

set up and use assessment and grade tools. These workshops, combined with self-guided tutorials, allowed many instructors to learn how to use D2L. However, it was identified that further support was needed during the implementation phase of the LMS while instructors were both preparing for its use, transitioning to D2L and also using it in their teaching.

To address the need to provide additional assistance beyond telephone support, tutorials and structured workshops, several faculties organized in-house coaching teams. The purpose of the coaching was to complement the large group workshops and to deliver a more personalized and directed support that would not only instruct, but foster the development of skills in using D2L. The Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning in the Werklund School of Education initiated the creation of a D2L coaching team within the School. The Werklund D2L team consisted of two doctoral students and one master's student, all studying in the area of educational technology. A host of well-rounded work and life experiences contributed to the richness of the team's pedagogical and technological knowledge and skills. In addition to being graduate students, they brought their own expertise from a multitude of teaching experiences including K-12, higher education and corporate training, as well as knowledge in online learning. The Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning supervised the work of the team, helped to organize the management of their work, and ensured resources were in place for the fulfillment of the task, bringing in her extensive expertise in online learning.

Initially, the Werklund School of Education offered this type of coaching support for instructors during the first two months of implementation of D2L. This was achieved through one-on-one and small group support offered by appointment or on a drop-in basis.

In their role as coaches to support the adoption and effective use of D2L, the three students developed and maintained their own knowledge and skills needed to provide the necessary support in three ways: 1) attending the same workshops offered to academic staff and sessional instructors; 2) engaging in weekly meeting of the graduate student coaching team; and 3) participating in the monthly meetings of

coaches from other faculties supported by the University of Calgary's D2L training team. Although this triad of learning secured much of the technological knowledge required to assist and guide the work in supporting people in learning and using D2L, they found as a team they relied heavily on the assistance of each other through spontaneous "on the fly" troubleshooting sessions.

LEARNING FROM DEBRIEFING THE WORK

Drawing upon their field notes and activities over the first two months of implementation of D2L, the three graduate student coaches identified the following four major theses based on their experiences and insights from the weekly debriefing sessions.

Nurturing confidence

The first theme addresses the unanticipated need to nurture confidence in participants attending the D2L coaching sessions. Although attendees came with varying degrees of technological and online teaching experiences, many arrived with some degree of insecurity surrounding the use of the new LMS. It was observed by the coaches that for many, the D2L implementation meant the safety net of a system that had previously worked for the instructors was now gone, and many required confidence in the use the new LMS, but for different reasons.

For example, some individuals would attend the coaching sessions on a drop-in basis to get assistance on a basic how-to. In these instances, it was observed not only were these individuals looking for instructions on how to include audio feedback or how to link a rubric to a gradebook item, but they were also seeking reassurance that the new LMS could meet their needs. Those who booked a coaching session for this reason developed the necessary confidence by simply having the coach on hand. This was seen when instructors would book appointments for assistance with a specific tool, for example with entering marks into the grades area of D2L, but they would require little to no guidance

from the graduate student coach. It appeared that some individuals felt more confident by having a coach present to watch and affirm that their process was correct.

The participants of the coaching sessions required some degree of technical support, the coaches observed these participants to also need support in the fostering of confidence. In some instances, the participants required confidence that the technology itself could meet their needs, and with the same degree of ease, as the previous LMS. The coaches also perceived that the participants required assurance in their own abilities to work with the features of the new LMS. In other cases, the confidence building centered on technological confidence that came as competence with the new LMS developed.

Team support

A second theme that emerged from the coaches' debriefing sessions related to the support needed by the coaches. They were required, at times, to provide immediate troubleshooting support that often went beyond the basic training they had received. Therefore, more than consulting documentation for information, they relied on other members of the team for help. This mutual support was vital to the success of their coaching.

Even though the D2L coaches were trained in the system and were able to provide support to instructors on our own, there were times when help was needed. In those moments, it was essential that they acted as a team, learning to rely on each other for assistance. This collaborative atmosphere allowed them to not only develop their skills individually, but more importantly, it helped them form collegial bonds that went beyond the work of this project. It enabled a form of support that can be applied to other components of their academic journey.

D2L Coaches as change agents

A third theme centers on the D2L coaches' role as co-leaders in the transformation of online pedagogical practice in the School. Entering into this project, they questioned how their support, particularly with regard to pedagogical support, would be perceived by academic staff members and sessional instructors with immense experience and expertise in the teaching profession. Although as graduate students the coaches lacked the formal credentials that put them on par with the participants of the coaching sessions, of Teaching and Learning Newsletter by offering suggestions and best practice recommendations in the use of D2L. A larger group of D2L coaches and trainers from other faculties also formed. The Werklund coaches were invited to contribute best practices within this group that would then be shared with other faculties as they began their adoption of D2L.

Moving to the driver seat

A fourth theme related to a transition. The specific goal of this initiative was to provide support to instructors in adopting the new LMS. However, a positive consequence, as perceived by the members of the coaching team during the weekly debriefing sessions, was the realization that they were agents in affecting positive impact throughout campus. These experiences as change agents, having a direct and appreciated influence on the School and University led them to a transformation of perspective from students to professionals. They were no longer considering themselves as students who received the influence of professors. They were able to act as educational developers working closely with instructors, creating an influence in the way these instructors structured courses and their practice. The coaches were engaged in a dynamic and organic process of learning, teaching and growth. It was an authentic learning environment, where the coaches were implementing what they had learned during their classes and projects into real-world situations, with meaningful results. They were drivers of change both in the educational development of instructors, as well as in their own professional growth and development.

LESSONS LEARNED

Based on coaches' experience with this initiative, three key recommendations to guide the development of a LMS student coaching team have been identified. First, preparing coaches involves more than technical training. As instructors seem to seek help not only to address their technical challenges, but also to receive pedagogical and psychological encouragement when using a new LMS, coaches have to be prepared to offer such complex and integrated support. Technological training may lie at the roots of a coaching team, however being open to recognize the need for support beyond the basic "how-to's" is vital.

A second recommendation involves developing a sense of unity within the team structure. Due to the innovative aspect of the LMS being implemented, the success of this endeavor relied heavily on true teamwork that promoted confidence and competence in being a team. As such, special attention should be paid to personal characteristics when selecting members of the team and a willingness to prioritize the collective.

A third recommendation is the need to allow and foster an organic evolution of support networks. A strong commitment to reach the goal (in this case successful transition from one LMS to another) is essential, but must occur without rigid expectations on how this goal can or should be achieved. When team members can carry a sense of openness and responsiveness to instances and circumstances, they can take advantage of "unplanned" opportunities to fulfill their duty and to provide the responsive support required. It can often be within this realm that the achievement of the goal can be most successful and additional benefits of the program can emerge.

CONCLUSION

For the three graduate students involved in this program, the experience of being part of a D2L coaching team was both empowering and rewarding. Although they perceived themselves to lack the

employment status necessary to have such an impact, their experiences as coaches, educators and students were highly valued by the participants they came in contact with during the coaching sessions. It was powerful for the coaches to recognize that their coaching was not only appreciated, but also respected while also having concrete results that will ripple through the School and University and in their own professional growth.

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