

Improving the Quality of Online Instruction through Professional Development

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### **Introduction**

Higher education institutions are experiencing an increase in the number of students requesting and enrolling in online courses. As a result, adjunct and part-time faculty members are being hired more frequently to replace tenure track faculty, especially to fill roles in online courses, and these instructors often need training to effectively perform in this capacity (Lewis & Wang, 2015). De Smet, Bourgonjon, De Wever, Schellens, and Valcke (2012) found instructors are more likely to use technology provided in an LMS when proper support is offered at the institutional level. Professional development is critical in the ongoing growth of instructors (Altany, 2012). A research university in Southern Virginia currently utilizes Blackboard as its LMS but is lacking in the amount of courses currently being offered online.

According to the Provost in a confidential correspondence with the faculty, the university will embark on creating a virtual university in order to expand and enhance opportunities for students. One of the goals is to provide university access to students in rural Virginia who cannot commute to the university brick and mortar class offerings. This would increase enrollment and server the greater community. Additionally, the Provost is committed to offering more degrees online. This university only recently created and began offering an online MBA. The current lack of online courses at the university offers both a challenge and an opportunity.

Rutz, Condon, Iverson, Manduca, and Willett (2012) believed faculty that are well-informed should be able to respond effectively to the changing demands of the classroom. However, many of the faculty that will be required to teach online have never experienced the online environment as a student, which may put them at a disadvantage. As a result, the faculty, staff, and support personnel have been tasked with increasing the number of courses being offered by administration; however, many faculty members have also never taught online and are

unsure how to properly utilize the LMS. According to Rogers (1995), “getting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is often very difficult” (p. 1). It can often take years for something to be widely adopted; “therefore, a common problem for many individuals and organizations is how to speed up the rate of diffusion of an innovation” (Rogers, 1995, p. 1).

A Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence was developed at the university in Virginia to promote teaching and learning effectiveness. Unfortunately, many of the face-to-face activities have been poorly attended. Faculty were surveyed and responses indicated time constraints were one of the main obstacles with the traditional professional development offerings. To address this problem, an instructional multimedia project is being proposed to assist faculty with instructional concepts and strategies for teaching in the online environment using Blackboard. Learning management systems are evolving and offering even more features and tools, so instructors will need well-designed professional development to learn how to improve their teaching practice (Milman, 2016; Rhode & Krishnamurthi, 2016). The proposal is to create a multimedia professional development tool to support faculty at the university who will be teaching online for the first time, but can also be used by faculty not comfortable teaching in the online environment.

Faculty are interested in hands-on techniques and practical tools they can effectively implement immediately into their classroom (Nicholls, 2001). The university supported learning management system (LMS) is Blackboard; therefore, the multimedia instructional project will focus on tools within this LMS. The Learning Systems department at the university has access to Blackboard, Collaborate Ultra, Kaltura, Camtasia, the Adobe suite, and VoiceThread.

Lynda.com is a resource available to all faculty, students, and staff, so videos from this library

will be considered for the project. The three developers come from diverse backgrounds which will offer great perspective for content creation.

The project will be visual and menu-driven to make it user friendly and easy to navigate, and replicates what a student might experience in their online class. The user will be able to choose a specific instructional area or work through each module in order. The project will include activities, such as assignments and discussions, for faculty participating in the course to interact with one another as they learn to build their own course. The project will be built in Blackboard using tools such as Kaltura for video capture, VoiceThread for asynchronous discussion, and Blackboard Collaborate Ultra for synchronous sessions. Short videos will be created to demonstrate different tools and techniques in Blackboard as well as discussion prompts in VoiceThread. Graphics will be developed to illustrate examples of different elements of the LMS. Since the modules will be created using multimedia in the LMS, an instructional message that reinforces learning is created (Mayer & Moreno, 2002). These multimedia tools will aid in learner retention of information (Mayer & Moreno, 1999). The inclusion of annotated screen shots of the software and other graphics will be useful in illustrating information for learners to better retain for future use and problem solving (Mayer & Moreno, 1999). Presenting more than one form of communication simultaneously is what defines multimedia (Mayer, 1997; Mayer, Moreno, Boire, & Vagge, 1999).

The main goal of the course is to prepare faculty to teach an online course. The following are the intended learning objectives of the project, and there will be a module for each objective: develop personal teaching strategies to teach a course online, write comprehensive learning objectives, formulate a viable course structure and navigation, plan for engagement -- course activities and assessments, and assemble a basic course framework in Blackboard.

Assessment of the participants will be via quizzes, discussion posts, and a culminating capstone project that the faculty will implement into their own online course for student instruction. Weekly modules will include required discussions where participants will explain what they have learned and exchange ideas with other participants on the weekly topic. Weekly modules will also include assessed tasks that demonstrate the participant's use of the technology. There will also be a focus on the principles and theories of online learning. Participants will engage in these ideas via online discussions and the creation of basic elements of instructional design documentation and justification for their own course design, the capstone project for this course. See outline below:

- **Module 1 – Developing Personal Teaching Strategies**
  - Participate in a discussion using VoiceThread about theories behind personal teaching strategies
  - Write a two-page paper outlining personal teaching strategies and peer-review each other's submissions
  - Create an introduction video to be used in a course
- **Module 2 – Learning Objectives**
  - Participate in a traditional asynchronous discussion about the importance of establishing clear learning goals and objectives
  - Complete the Bloom's Taxonomy drag and drop activity to aid in writing objectives
  - Submit a document containing finalized learning objectives for a course
- **Module 3 - Course Structure/Navigation**

- Participate in a discussion using VoiceThread - requires posting a menu and explaining the rationale
- Develop a storyboard
- Quiz -- Participants will be assigned to groups and can retake the quiz as a group after individual completion
- **Module 4 - Planning for Engagement**
  - Participate in a traditional asynchronous discussion about what constitutes student engagement in a course
  - Develop two lessons/activities for sharing knowledge
  - Develop three assessment opportunities (only 1 can be an exam/test/quiz). The assessments must be complete with instructions and a rubric for grading
- **Module 5 – Blackboard Framework (Capstone Project)**
  - The capstone project is a preliminary course that must include:
    - Intro video
    - Completed menu
    - Three assessment activities

A pre- and post-survey will be required to determine prior knowledge and skills as well as skills learned upon completion of the course. The post-survey will also include questions to ascertain faculty perceptions on the course itself and determine areas for improvement. The success of the project will be assessed based on faculty survey input, discussion responses, and the quality of the capstone project. The university would like to implement this tool before the end of the year to enroll the first class of faculty during the winter break; therefore, the timeline will be very tight. The proposal and outline will need to be approved by October 6, 2017 to allow

for resource gathering before November 2017. Scripts for videos will be written and recording will take place in November while content and graphics are being developed throughout the month as well. Considerable time will be needed for testing, evaluation, and implementation before December.

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