FACULTY DEVELOPMENT FOR EMERGENCY ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The University of Central Florida transitioned to remote online instruction in the Spring of 2020, revealing a substantial gap in emergency response to faculty development online teaching needs. This study aimed to examine the response to faculty development needs during the COVID-19 pandemic determining how a large four-year public university leveraged its online pedagogy experiences, instructional designers, and resources to respond to COVID-19 with an emergent online faculty development program for online teaching, ensuring quality online instructional practices. Eight participants from the university participated in the study and semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Spring of 2022. The findings of this case study revealed that instructional designers felt a sense of connectedness and collaboration while working amongst colleagues, key factors of defining the purpose and intent of the training and use of material already in existence were the most important and influential elements of the design and development, and barriers that existed included an absence of leadership direction and limitation of faculty time commitments. Recommendations for further study include further exploration of the impacts of the faculty development programs and how effective the practices taught were for students and their learning outcomes and learning experiences.

Keywords: Online learning, faculty development, pandemic.

1. Introduction

In the Spring of 2020, colleges and universities responded to the most disruptive global health crisis since the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, transitioning to remote instruction in response to COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Preparing faculty to transition rapidly to remote instruction through en-masse faculty development was challenging for learning management systems support staff, faculty developers, and instructional designers, especially supporting faculty moving online courses that required in-person activities (e.g., laboratory activities, cooking demonstrations). The transition to remote online learning was immediate and unexpected, forcing instructors to simultaneously learn and implement online teaching and learning strategies (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020). Limited knowledge about online remote teaching and the different implications associated with the delivery and communication in online remote instruction disadvantaged instructors and students alike (Gillis & Krull, 2020). The students' lack of digital competence and the limited faculty experience in developing and delivering online instruction negatively affected communication between students and faculty instructors. Despite these challenges, some faculty reported high satisfaction levels and approval of the technological opportunities and platforms they learned and used for instructional purposes; faculty appreciated new opportunities to teach in new and innovative ways that maximize student learning (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020). The instructional faculty also experienced tensions regarding instructional goals and the effectiveness of teaching methods (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020).

Adapting to new situations without the support of institutions or mentors can be daunting for faculty. The rapid transition to remote online learning has surprised instructional faculty and forced them to solve problems not previously encountered (Flores & Swennen, 2020). Van der Spoel et al. (2020) compared faculty attitudes about online teaching expectations before transitioning to remote online teaching. The researchers conducted two surveys of two hundred Dutch instructors (Van der Spoel et al., 2020); the results showed that prior experience significantly influenced a smooth transition. Instructional faculty who had experience with learning management systems and other online teaching technologies conducted remote online instruction more positively than initially expected (Van der Spoel et al., 2020). Most of the instructional faculty underwent an increased sense of urgency to transition to the remote

online modality. The instructional faculty also reported the lack of interaction with students and colleagues as one of the negative aspects of remote online instruction (Van der Spoel et al., 2020).

However, remote online instruction did bring about benefits in other ways. For instance, the instructional faculty also reported that more introverted students benefited from online learning as they were more engaged than in regular classroom contexts (Van der Spoel et al., 2020). Van der Spoel et al. (2020) also found that instructional faculty looked forward to integrating technology into their teaching after the threat of COVID-19 subsided, indicating that they wanted to improve or enhance active and collaborative learning, feedback, and overall instruction (Van der Spoel et al., 2020). Instructors also reported that technology increased efficiency and enhanced students' motivation by providing personalized educational experiences (Van der Spoel et al., 2020). Essentially, the researchers concluded that the urgency created by the COVID-19 pandemic shifted instructional faculty's intentions to incorporate technology in their lessons even after the pandemic (Van der Spoel et al., 2020). It is also important to note that these motivations emerged even without professionalization programs to support remote online instruction (Van der Spoel et al., 2020). Nonetheless, instructional faculty must be motivated to use online technology even after transitioning to face-to-face modalities.

The OECD and UNESCO stress the importance of preparing students for an uncertain world (Hadar et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity to assess the impact of faculty development programs on teachers' social-emotional competencies (Hadar et al., 2020). Evaluating 54 student teachers and 24 educators, Hadar et al. (2020) found many struggled with remote instruction and lacked essential teaching skills. Addressing instructors' social-emotional needs is crucial, considering their potential stress and burnout. To enhance faculty competencies, institutions should integrate stress management, mindfulness, and teamwork strategies into faculty development programs (Hadar et al., 2020).

Public institutions must not overlook the significance of faculty development programs in preparing instructional faculty for emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented circumstances that will not always remain stable. The unpredictability of crises could cause disruptions in daily processes. Thus, faculty development programs prepare teachers to transition during unpredictable events.

2. Objectives

In March 2020, educational institutions worldwide confronted the necessity of transitioning to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty development for online teaching, previously important, became even more critical for ensuring the quality of online education. Known as educational development, faculty development, or professional development, this area has evolved to meet institutional and educational needs. However, defining faculty development remains a challenge amidst its importance. Higher education institutions also grapple with financial and logistical constraints, exacerbated during the pandemic (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). These challenges include selecting, purchasing, and training on new technology and instructional practices suitable for online or remote learning.

Current research on faculty development in online pedagogy, especially in response to the global pandemic, is scarce. To address this gap, the researchers aimed to investigate a public state university's response to the pandemic by creating an effective faculty development program for online teaching. Following Creswell's (2015) recommendation, the study utilized a case study approach, collecting data from various sources to analyze the institution's response comprehensively. This study seeks to provide a detailed account of how the university adapted to the pandemic and addressed online faculty development needs. Additionally, it aims to explore the program's development process from the perspective of instructional designers. By employing qualitative case study methodology, the researchers aim to offer a holistic understanding of instructional designers' experiences during the pandemic, as recommended by Yin (1994).

The following research questions were considered to prompt an intensive analysis of the phenomenon: RQ1: According to instructional designers involved in the development of EOT, what key factors influenced the design and development of a large-enrollment faculty development program? RQ2: According to instructional designers who participated in the development of EOT, what were the primary challenges and urgent obstacles encountered during the rapid implementation of the faculty development program aimed at serving a substantial number of faculty participants?

3. Methods

The University of Central Florida, a leader in online teaching and learning, boasts a student body exceeding 70,000 individuals. Renowned for its diverse academic programs, the institution offers

numerous bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Its online programs consistently rank among the top institutions surveyed by U.S. News & World Report. Spearheading these efforts is the university's distance learning department, which oversees online faculty credentialing and training. This department also provides comprehensive support services, including an online help desk, Learning Management System administration, instructional development, multimedia resources, and instructional design. These resources aim to enhance the quality of online instruction university-wide.

This study occurred in the 2021-2022 academic year following the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Eight stakeholders were part of this study, including the instructional designers and administrative personnel. Of the eight participants, two focused on the course design, two led the implementation and development, two designed and developed evaluations, and two facilitated the program. To protect anonymity, interview respondents are only identified by pseudonyms.

Data collection involved interviews as the primary data source, complemented by document analysis. Approved by the Institutional Review Board, planned interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, using closed and open-ended questions to address research inquiries. Conducted via Zoom, audio files were transcribed within the platform. Document analysis provided detailed insights, leveraging publicly available documents from the development team and stakeholders. These artifacts encompassed institution needs, COVID-19 concerns, student barriers, faculty development plans, and meeting agendas. This analysis furthered the evaluation process.

The researchers employed deductive analysis to interpret interview data initially, using constructivism to conceptualize the study. Coding and clustering mechanisms were utilized to break down significant themes, such as attitudes, beliefs, and values, aligned with constructivist practices. Dedoose, a qualitative software analysis tool, ensured accuracy during data reduction. Clustering occurred during the fourth coding cycle, forming themes that answered the research questions. Document analysis, following Bowen's systematic procedure, provided additional insights into the faculty development program's design and development. Publicly accessible documents were examined to identify emerging patterns, themes, and trends.

4. Findings

Each of the eight participants shared similar backgrounds despite varying levels of involvement and past experiences. Despite some differences amongst the responses received by the researchers, five main themes emerged through the extensive data analysis of the transcribed interviews. Six participants were instructional designers, both serving on the design and development team and serving in a facilitating role supporting assigned faculty participants. Two participants served in administrative-supervisory roles overseeing the team designing and developing the faculty development training.

ID1 has seven years of instructional design experience in higher education, collaborating with the faculty development team during the pandemic. ID2, with twelve years in higher education, contributed to the flagship faculty development course, informing the new online course for remote instruction. ID3, with nine years of experience, promoted adaptive learning strategies. ID4, with eighteen years in higher education, incorporated instructor perspectives into course design. ID5, with twenty-two years of experience, focused on participant engagement. ID6, with fourteen years of experience, served as the main liaison to university leadership. ID7, with six years of experience, handled more administrative tasks. ID8 has twenty-one years of experience and acted as a content expert, supporting faculty post-course completion.

All IDs defined how they felt challenged to find a starting point in the faculty development program they were building and facilitating. The participants explained that the challenge of finding a starting point stemmed from a lack of direction from the university's leadership team. Several of the IDs claimed they lacked direction from their leadership team, and several participants felt "overwhelmed" in getting started in the design and development of this faculty development program. This commonality amongst all responses led to the discovery of the second theme: defining the purpose and intent of training.

The participants emphasized the reliance of the faculty development program on existing resources and practices. Prior to the pandemic, faculty engaged in a semester-long credentialing process focused on online or blended course development, centered on pedagogy, technology, and collaboration with instructional designers. ID1 underscored the importance of preserving these foundational principles. The instructional designers shared a collective commitment to ensuring "quality" in the program's courses, drawing from their expertise in online pedagogy and repurposing existing materials. Leveraging the university's flagship blended program, they adapted content to meet the urgent demands of remote instruction during the pandemic. ID1 highlighted this approach, emphasizing the utilization of existing

resources to maintain quality in the transition to online modalities. Despite vague initial instructions, the team prioritized key objectives: LMS utilization, Zoom best practices, and meeting credentialing goals for a large faculty cohort. These objectives informed their development process and future actions.

Participants referenced an existing self-paced tutorial introduction for the usage of the learning management system (LMS) based on a minimum of forty hours required for completion. According to ID4, this existing self-paced LMS tutorial was not focused on designing and building a course in the Canvas LMS but more on how to navigate through an existing course. ID2: "We had to have everyone start somewhere, so it was decided early on that anyone even thinking of taking this faculty development course had to take the existing self-paced tutorial first."

The participant responses highlight the immediate challenge faced in implementing the faculty development program, primarily due to the unknown factors surrounding its development. Participants expressed concerns about the tight timeline, the need to train a large number of faculty, and the scope of the curriculum. For instance, ID7 described the pressure to condense a typical ten-week training into just a few weeks while supporting ongoing faculty needs. Document analysis revealed a lack of initial guidelines from leadership, leaving participants uncertain about timelines and expectations. Despite frustrations, ID5 acknowledged the unprecedented circumstances and emphasized the opportunity to demonstrate value by anticipating needs. A key issue arising from the lack of direction was identifying the target audience, which varied widely in terms of experience with the learning management system (LMS). Participants noted the diverse backgrounds of faculty, ranging from novices to self-proclaimed experts, spanning different age groups and teaching experience levels. Notably, larger departments like Education, Sciences, and Engineering presented unique challenges, particularly in their historical resistance to online teaching methods, as highlighted by ID4.

5. Discussion

Defining the purpose and intent of the faculty development program steered the pedagogy and drove development decisions. Participants utilized the "backward design" framework by Wiggins and McTighe to work from the end goal, determining desired outcomes and planning course content based on faculty needs. This approach, widely accepted for over twenty years, specified mastery evidence and guided content and instruction planning.

Participants recognized faculty time constraints as a barrier to program implementation, exacerbated by COVID-19 factors. Understanding these limitations, the team developed an estimated timeline and workload distribution to manage development tasks efficiently. Clear communication and transparency about delays and impacts were vital for success.

6. Implications

This case study indicates the importance of identifying a timeline and determining what can and cannot be accomplished within these parameters. The study participants revealed the impact of time constraints and limitations on their ability to design, develop, and facilitate a faculty development program. The ID's time had to be fruitful and progressive consistently. Beyond the time constraints of the IDs, acknowledging and being mindful of the workload balance and calculation of how much time faculty will be asked to invest in the course. Deciding on the engagement of faculty participants may impact the sense of focus and rhythm of participant progress. It is crucial to consistently ensure a healthy and manageable expectation for faculty participation throughout the program.

Collaboration between IDs was highly effective throughout this case study, which addressed problems afflicting the design and development of a faculty development program. The ongoing partnerships proved successful as the team of IDs worked collectively to address the needs of the university. By sharing a common goal, IDs may leverage their unique expertise and experience to cultivate a masterful approach to providing solutions and successfully developing faculty development programs. Additionally, working in these collaborative conditions may enhance a team's innovation, efficiency in the design and development process, and ability to deliver ongoing and transparent communication.

By creating a culture of collaboration, similar to that of team learning, IDs improve their work outcomes and learn from their experiences. In addition, the collaborative culture cultivates a place for openly inviting feedback and opinions, transferring knowledge amongst the team, and accumulating a better understanding of individual approaches to working. Furthermore, IDs that collaborate have a chance to learn from each other, gaining value and new perspectives. Finally, learning from others in this setting allows the workplace culture to promote its emphasis on learning and development.

Higher education institutions have faced crisis shutdowns due to human and natural disasters. All crisis response teams have focused on the physical safety and needs of the institution yet neglected to address how to sustain access to learning during these moments. This pandemic precursor gave no valuable lessons on how enhanced LMS usage and required faculty development programs would have mitigated the impact of a nearly two-week shutdown. However, as this study has established, having elements in place, such as generic LMS faculty training instruction, an ID response team, and a basic plan, could help to efficiently shift to a remote online instructional modality without impacting faculty and students.

7. Conclusion

This case study highlighted critical practices that instructional designers at the University of Central Florida used to design, develop, and implement EOT, a faculty development program developed to respond to the instructional challenges precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic - namely, moving all instruction online. Based on the themes found after conducting a semi-structured interview with participant IDs, the results indicated that IDs felt a sense of connectedness and collaboration among their colleagues. Because of that, they successfully defined the purpose and intent of their faculty development program despite limited time and insufficient leadership direction. This case study filled previous literature gaps regarding faculty development needs and responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of knowledge about online remote teaching and the different complications associated with the delivery and communication in online remote instruction have disadvantaged instructors and students alike (Gillis & Krull, 2020). To overcome the barriers reported in this case study, future endeavors must prepare institutions to respond and adapt to emergencies or urgent needs to shift to an online or remote learning modality.

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