

Self-paced Online Tool for Faculty Professional Development
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Abstract

Teaching and learning online is no longer a new phenomenon, the current competition from local colleges has stirred the administration of a large research university in Virginia to reconsider their stand on developing online programs. Some of the faculty that were excited about the opportunity to teach in the new environment jumped onboard testing and trying different options, while others have stayed on the sidelines. The administration has admitted that professional development for faculty has not been utilized. Faculty interviewed expressed time constraints, among other things, to be an obstacle with the traditional professional development offerings. This is a significant problem because there are very few full-time faculty at the university that have any background knowledge or training in teaching online. This paper outlines the creation of a new self-paced professional development tool established to support university faculty using new digital tools in order to improve teaching and learning online.

Self-paced Online Tool for Faculty Professional Development

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is in the initial development stage of instituting an official online learning initiative. The university offers very few completely online courses and the mandate from the provost is to develop a virtual university by 2020. Along with this goal, it is the hope of the administration to strengthen the technology enhanced learning environment by offering blended as well as online courses. New blended and online delivery modalities have emerged, which require training and support for faculty to grow and evolve to understand the full spectrum of tools (Rhode & Krishnamurthi, 2016). The university has found itself a little behind in incorporating technology in the teaching and learning process as compared to competitive schools. Unfortunately, the infrastructure to support faculty interested in incorporating technology in the classroom has not been developed. It is only recently that the university started interviewing applicants for a Director of Online Learning position; there is, however, a Learning Systems department that has been charged with supporting faculty with workshops and consultations.

Faculty have not been very receptive to workshops or consultations, therefore, professional development has been slow to almost non-existent at the university. After discussions with university faculty about professional development options, a technology based learning environment (TBLE) has been created for faculty who would rather have the option to work on their own in a self-paced environment. The expectation is that a self-paced application will not only allow faculty the luxury of participating when it fits their schedule, but it will also remove some of the unnecessary pressure the faculty have expressed that the university's traditionally paced professional development courses have, e.g., learning material not pertinent to one's subject matter, having to ask questions in front of peers, rushing to keep up with the rest of the participants, finding time to come to campus, making time in the weekly schedule to participate in face-to-face sessions, adapting to equipment being used for the session, and taking notes while trying the demonstrated techniques. If the faculty are more comfortable with the material and are able to grasp the value and usefulness, the groundwork for incorporating and integrating technology into existing and yet to be developed courses has been laid. Perez,

McShannon, and Hynes (2012) cited that faculty who participated in professional development programs reported improved student success. It is the hope that faculty participation in the self-paced professional development initiative will inevitably lead to the production of a multitude of quality online courses at the university.

Literature Review

Hawley and Valli (1999) considered the education and professional development of teachers a central component of educational improvement. The push for faculty to integrate new technology in the classroom stresses the need for teachers to be able to enhance and build on their instructional knowledge, but faculty who engage in professional development are often interested in increasing their skills and knowledge in their area of expertise, not necessarily with technology (Vu, Cao, Vu, Cepero, 2014). Bates and Poole (2003) explained that high-quality teaching, whether traditional or technology based, requires mastery of the subject matter, hard work, and practice. Teaching online demands different technical skills and different approaches to teaching than what has been traditional practice (Berge, 2007). Hilliard (2015) contended that departments tasked with the job of supporting faculty using technology are seeking ways to utilize applications to improve professional development and delivery of instruction and assessment.

Bates and Poole (2003) asserted that the additional workload perceived by most instructors as the inevitable consequence of using technology for teaching is the most serious obstacle to increasing its use. Visser (2007) explained that regardless of whether faculty consider online education to be a positive development, they may have to adapt as education evolves. There is also a need for professional development that can fit into teachers' busy schedules and provide access to ongoing resources (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009). It is important to provide flexibility to manage educational pursuits with work and personal responsibilities (Stanford-Bowers, 2008). Hilliard (2015) submitted that faculty want to use their time wisely, suggesting the administration should support quality professional development programs by providing timely resources. Faculty professional development can be offered in various formats: synchronous, asynchronous, or self-paced online courses (Russell, Carey, Kleiman, Verde, 2009). Hilliard (2015) challenged that, regardless of the instructional method, professional development should comprise quality content and delivery.

Problem

The administration at a university in Virginia believes that the institution is not offering enough online courses and degree programs to be competitive in the educational arena. The faculty, staff, and support personnel have been tasked to increase the number of courses and degrees offered by 2020. A symptom of this problem is that faculty are not taking advantage of professional development workshops and consultations offered by the university's Academic Technologies department. The university would like to offer more online degree programs but the faculty do not have the expertise using technology to develop effective online courses. Some of the complaints from faculty include timing of workshops, limitations when working in a group setting, and time needed to practice. Other issues related to face-to-face consultations are finding a location, timing, and advertising the schedule to a large number of the faculty. The Academic Technologies department is seeking more effective ways to offer faculty training that will be more flexible. In order to bridge the defined gap between the ability to offer workshops to faculty and the faculty's scheduling challenges as well as their inherent desire not to change, these Academic Technology initiatives must be seen as solutions, not an additional burden. The new TBLE was developed to aid the faculty in embracing a specific technology application, in

this case VoiceThread, while demonstrating the how-to-apply techniques that will allow incorporation into courses. The self-paced nature of the materials allows faculty to work independently but still have help with specific problems or concerns. This concrete and ready-to-use program is meant to be a guidepost and a helpful tool for faculty when using VoiceThread in a blended or online course.

Research Questions

1. How will the faculty embrace online self-paced professional development materials?
2. To what degree can faculty understand and apply the VoiceThread application through online self-paced training?

Explanation of the Technology Based Learning Environment

The TBLE was created in Blackboard because it is the university-supported Learning Management System (LMS) and the hope is to also reinforce the use of the university standard system. The developer created a menu driven program that is more visual based than text heavy to make the product as easy to use as possible. The menu allows the user to jump directly to a specific instructional area or work through each module in a step-by-step fashion. A table of contents format that can be traversed using the forward and back buttons built into the program drives the modules. The pages are filled with screen shots and short explanations as well as pointers highlighting the best use of the tool in the classroom. There are tips, tricks, pointers, and examples available in the course. Short video clips were created for each technique to allow faculty to view and review the steps as needed; all of the videos are housed in a collection that can be accessed separately if reinforcement of a technique is necessary. The course was also developed as a collaborative instrument for faculty to share their knowledge and experiences with the tool through the use of a discussion forum.

There is no final knowledge or skills assessment in the form of an exam at the end of the course specifically because of the target audience. Many faculty are already apprehensive about incorporating technology in their classes and several professors who were questioned recommended against including an exam. There is, however, a final project requirement which will help the trainer determine if the professional development tool was helpful to faculty, as well as determine if the faculty member will be able to successfully use the new application in the classroom. The final assignment requirement is to create an actual working VoiceThread to be used in a class the following semester.

Assessing Efficiency of the Tool

The self-paced professional development course was created this semester and has not been used yet to determine its effectiveness. Implementation is planned for May 2017 at which time the TBLE will be available to faculty and advertised through the faculty support website. The course will also be advertised in workshops over the summer and if it is well received, the developer plans to create additional similar materials for other university-supported applications. The basic proof of concept will be how well the course is accepted by the faculty at the university. Further, as the course contains many tips and techniques that can be applied in the virtual classroom, there is added value for the students. The effectiveness of the professional development tool will be evaluated through the faculty discussions posted in the forum as well as a review of the VoiceThread elements created for the following semester.

Currently there are no policies or specific practices with regard to the development, delivery, or participation in faculty development programs at the university, therefore, assessing the proper execution of the TBLE implementation will be challenging. The plan to evaluate the impact of the TBLE includes assessing the relative motivation of faculty as it relates to the

TBLE, as well as successful implementation of the application in the classroom. A survey will be distributed to all faculty that complete the self-paced material. The final VoiceThread assignment required of all faculty participants will be evaluated by the Learning Specialist in Academic Technologies before implementation in a Fall 2017 course to ensure that the execution is successful. A follow-up survey will be distributed to participants at the end of the Fall 2017 semester.

Conclusion and Future Suggestions

There exists a need to have faculty engaged in professional development and be exposed to and involved in the new university supported technologies that are available to them as they build online and blended courses. Creating a self-paced tool for faculty is the basic idea of the new TBLE and aims to fill this need. As is true with most newly available resources at the university, the faculty break into three distinct groups. The early adopters – those who embrace change and immediately see the value of adding technology into their existing as well as their yet to be developed courses. The wait and see group – once others have worked through the particulars and challenges of the newly available technology, they will venture in the space and take the opportunity to see if it fits their teaching methodologies. Finally, there are the nay-sayers – who are completely satisfied with how their current courses are taught and see no need to augment how they have taught for the past 35 years. The focus of the university is to create applicable and useable connections for the faculty to draw upon as they venture into the online space. While the advent of online learning has proliferated the educational arena, the current lack of online courses at the university offers both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge, being supported by the Provost, is to author, publish, and offer online degrees in the near future. The opportunity is how to integrate successful learning techniques into multiple disciplines in a void. If the new TBLE is unsuccessful in netting more faculty willing to participate in professional development, it may be prudent to borrow the already established protocols of other institutions and also to utilize relationships with other universities to provide examples of success and pathways to follow.

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