Chapter IX

Constructivist E-Learning for Staff Engaged in Continuous Professional Development

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Abstract

Professional development for academic staff in e-learning is currently a priority for higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland, as lecturers experience increasing demands to incorporate e-learning into their teaching practice. This chapter reports on the design and implementation of a blended module in e-learning for the continuous professional development of such lecturers. In it the co-authors (who designed and developed the module) discuss the effectiveness of exposing lecturers as online students in order to experience first-hand the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning. It argues that a constructivist, collaborative interaction can provide the scaffolding for lecturers’ future journeys into e-learning and into constructivist practices within their own teaching. Although this approach is still in its infancy, important outcomes were achieved in terms of influencing lecturers’ thinking and approaches to both their own and to their students’ learning.
Introduction

This chapter discusses and reflects on the challenges the authors encountered when designing and developing a blended module on e-learning for lecturers’ continuous professional development (CPD). In it, we consider the effectiveness of exposing lecturers as online students in order to experience first-hand the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning, and discuss how a constructivist, collaborative interaction can provide the scaffolding for lecturers’ future journeys into e-learning and into constructivist practices within their own teaching.

The blended module designed by the authors is jointly offered by the Learning and Teaching Centre and the Learning Technology Team, located within the School of Lifelong Learning at the Dublin Institute of Technology.¹ The main purpose of the Learning and Teaching Centre is to support the Institution’s 1,500 full- and part-time academic staff through provision of ongoing professional development opportunities (including those in e-learning) for all academic staff at individual, department, school, faculty, and institute levels. It aims to enhance the quality of the learning experience for all students.

Higher education institutions worldwide are devoting considerable resources to the development of e-learning and e-teaching. Like their counterparts abroad, academic staff members in our institution are experiencing increasing demands to incorporate e-learning into their teaching practice. As a result, they are required to have a broad range of knowledge and skills to use software and must be able to adapt their skills to a diverse set of classroom situations. The majority of professional development in this area is provided through one-off workshops and training sessions, which are accessed in a central location across disciplines, or in a discipline-based setting (most often by request from a faculty, school, or course team).

One of the main questions staff members have at these technology training events centres on their need to revise the way they teach or design the curriculum because of the influence of technology. As educators, they are acutely conscious of the need to stay current with technology for many reasons. However, like their counterparts in other institutions, they find, by the nature of their varied work responsibilities, that demands such as curriculum development, lesson preparation, student support, staff meetings, and so forth pull them in many directions (Alstete, 2000; Lawler & King, 2000).

As educational developers, our remit in designing an e-learning module was to cultivate an environment where academic staff members could discover new possibilities for learning and teaching through technology. Cognisant of maximizing our participants’ effectiveness as educators within an online environment, we needed to show them that producing online learning is far more than simply converting lecture notes to the Web; conversely, we also needed to guide them away from implementing content-high systems that would not engage and aid their students’ learning. Thus, the module needed to be both time-efficient and effective where participants would be involved in and challenged by an active learning process. The result was a four week blended module entitled “E-learning in Higher Education: An Engaging Introduction,” the first step in a complete professional development program in e-learning.
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