

Chapter 34

Lessons Learned From the Implementation of a Technology– Focused Professional Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, “lessons learned” and best practices that have resulted from the implementation of technology-focused professional learning community in a College of Education, as well as recommendations for future implementations are addressed. The Technology & Teaching Professional Learning Community, which was created by faculty in the College of Education at UNC Charlotte, provided professional development to faculty engaged in teaching hybrid and online courses. This was one of several professional development efforts at UNC Charlotte, but one, the authors suggest, that created a safe and effective space for scaffolding instructors less familiar with online learning technologies and tools.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of new technologies, such as e-mail, learning management systems, and more recently Web 2.0 applications, into various aspects of everyday life has considerably impacted the design and delivery of instruction at the university-level. Issues such as the methods in which teaching and learning materials and content are accessed, the methods of delivery of instruction, and the role of the instructor and student in the classroom, have changed significantly in recent years (Barnett, Keating, Harwood, & Saam, 2004). For example, many Web 2.0 applications (blogs, wikis, etc.) facilitate students becoming more active in the learning environment; and accessing, creating, and sharing new information from sources beyond those in traditional classrooms (Maloney, 2007). These tools also provide numerous additional pedagogical benefits in that they support scaffolding and active learner participation; provide opportunities for student publication, feedback, and reflection, and the potential for development of a community of learners (Ferdig, 2007).

While students entering higher education are typically prepared to utilize these tools in both social and educational contexts (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001), university faculty have been slow to integrate these emerging technologies into their classroom instruction (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Maloney, 2007). Research has also shown that, while faculty feel that these tools have significant pedagogical value, they typically have limited knowledge of how to use these tools in instructional contexts (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008). Thus, if the pedagogical value of these emerging technologies is to be realized, it is critical to provide professional development opportunities for faculty that facilitate increasing exposure and comfort-level with these tools, as well as addresses issues related to utilizing these tools in instructional settings.

One method of providing such professional development opportunities is through a technology-

based professional learning community (PLC). In this chapter, the authors will report the results of a year-long faculty-initiated technology-based PLC in the College of Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. This discussion will include an overview of the impetus, origins, and focus of the PLC, vignettes from two varied participants in the PLC, as well as “lessons learned,” best practices, and recommendations for Colleges of Education and teacher education programs considering PLCs as an alternative to traditional professional development opportunities for faculty.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Pedagogical Affordances of Emerging Technologies

While many tools that are utilized in higher education classrooms were not developed specifically for educational purposes, many of them possess many characteristics that support their use in instructional settings (Ferdig, 2007). First, technologies such as learning management systems, social software, and various Web 2.0 tools can support active and social learning environments (Boulos & Wheelert, 2007; Franklin & Van Harmelen, 2007; Sturm, M., Kennel, T., McBride, M., & Kelly, M., 2008). These environments are more student-driven and provide arenas for social and collaborative efforts, characteristics espoused by constructivists as critical to effective teaching and learning environments (Bruner, 1966; Ferdig, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Secondly, learning management systems and other emerging technologies provide opportunities for both local and global student publication. Past studies have cited increased motivation, more positive attitudes toward the content area, and increased student achievement among the numerous benefits of the publication of student work (Dixon & Black, 1996; Riley & Roberts, 2000; Schofield and Davidson,

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