Technology Enriched Active Learning (TEAL) for Summer Sessions

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INTRODUCTION

Faculty within academic departments, colleges, and universities are now routinely faced with the decision to offer courses or programs in an online environment in addition to the more traditional, face-to-face classroom format. These decisions are made both by an individual faculty member who wants to expand teaching and learning formats to include online learning, to entire departments that decide to offer an entire program/course of study online.

The regular school year (August through May) offers faculty many opportunities to present both online and hybrid courses. There is much research in the efficacy of online learning as well as specific types of pedagogical tools such as type of feedback provided to students (Morgan & Toledo, 2006). However, little research has been done on the possibilities that the summer school session provides to meet the needs of students who are enrolled in traditional, residential programs but living at home during the summer as well as learners who are interested in completing a specific course but not enrolled during the regular school year. The summer school session offered by most universities opens unique opportunities for faculty and students as well as academic departments and colleges to be involved in online courses.

This article describes the experiences of one college at a Midwestern university to provide a systemic approach to offer online summer courses taught by faculty with differing levels of experience as well as different disciplinary backgrounds. The Technology Enriched Active Learning (TEAL) project was piloted in the summer of 2007 and continued in the summer of 2008. This article describes the processes of development and implementation used in the highly successful summer of 2007 so other universities may apply these processes to fit their own institution if they are interested in enhancing their summer school offerings to a variety of students in the online environment.

BACKGROUND

It seems evident from a review of literature that online education in higher education institutions is growing and will be a significant factor for many faculty and academic departments/colleges as they strategize their future. According to an ongoing annual study conducted by Allen & Seaman (2006) nearly 3.2 million students were taking at least one course online in fall semester, 2005. This represents an additional 800,000 students in online courses, which is twice the number in any other year of the four-year study (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Although the summer semester was not identified specifically in this or any of the research reviewed, nearly 96% of large universities (defined as having a student population over 15,000) offer one or more courses online (Allen & Seaman, 2006).

Research studies provide a great deal of insight on why individual faculty, academic departments, and universities as a whole are pursuing online course opportunities. One benefit is meeting the needs of non-traditional learners who often juggle classes with work and family obligations (Maguire, 2005). Online courses can be designed to be flexible and convenient for students and faculty while increasing revenue for institutions (Berge, 1998). Models for funding summer school certainly fall into that category as revenue sources for faculty to teach summer courses have been diminishing over the past five years.

There are many barriers or concerns expressed in the literature with online courses. One study published in January 2002, revealed the dropout rate of students

in online courses was higher than in hybrid or face-to-face/traditional instruction (Bonk, 2002). Adequate provision of technical support and infrastructure was identified as significant barriers (Cho & Berge, 2002). Yang and Cornelius (2005) found that opponents of online learning believe that it is inferior to traditional classroom environments and online courses are growing in popularity because of their ability to generate revenue. However, Allen and Seaman (2006) found these perceptions have changed significantly. In their published study of responses of over 2200 universities and colleges, 62% of academic leaders who responded rated learning outcomes in online courses the same or superior to courses taught in a traditional face-to-face format. Also, generating revenue was the lowest rated reason for offering online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2006).

In an article by Moore, Fowler, and Watson (2007), six strategies were suggested that are necessary to ensure program longevity and faculty participation when making changes in the institutional culture such as the move to online courses. One of the six strategies is the utilization of colleagues and peers in mentoring. Florida Community College provides a variety of techniques to support many online instructors in large distance education programs. One of the critical strategies is the provision of a mentoring program (Hardy, 2007). Additionally, the role of the instructor changes from a face-to-face classroom to the online environment (Wickersham, Espinoza, & Davis, 2007). Course redesign and technical support are critical tasks provided by the mentor. The roles played by the mentors appear very important to the success of both faculty who are teaching online and the students who complete the class. Pickar & Wheatley (2007) suggest that the faculty teaching online courses must become mentors then to students who are taking the class and want to be engaged as active learners in this online environment where they "are guided, not taught "(p.1).

The new world of online learning offers both opportunities and barriers for faculty and higher education institutions. It is clear that more and more opportunities for online education will be explored and the role of mentors is a critical element to both faculty satisfaction and student success.

TECHNOLOGY ENRICHED ACTIVE LEARNING (TEAL) PROJECT: DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Many colleges consist of diverse disciplines; the TEAL Project was developed in a College with seven (7) departments. Funding for summer school was based upon the previous year's student credit hour production; the more hours in the previous summer resulted in more funding for the next summer. All departments were exploring ways to increase their student credit hour production. From a review of course offerings it was evident that the Department of Health Sciences was producing a high number of student credit hours and did not cancel summer school courses. Most of the courses were offered online in a six week schedule. Department chairs and the Dean became interested in extending the success of this department to all departments. As a result, the TEAL Project (Technology Enriched Active Learning) was initiated.

The goals of the TEAL Project were twofold. By capturing the technology expertise that was widespread in the college, the online course inventory throughout the college and especially in the summer would be increased. A second goal emerged as several departments in the college were planning physical moves in the next few years due to building renovations. The Dean saw the online courses as a way to maintain instructional capacity when faculty were asked to teach in less than desirable spaces.

Mentor and Mentee Selection

Two Health Sciences faculty members were selected by the Dean of the College based upon a very successful record of delivering online courses in both the regular academic year and the summer session, along with a strong recommendation and support from the Department Chair. Each mentor was proficient in redesigning course instruction from the face-to-face (F2F) classroom-based environment to the totally online, distance education environment. Collectively the TEAL mentors brought eight years of online teaching experience to the project. To provide sufficient time for the mentors to do this work, the Dean provided funding to "buy out" one course for each mentor in spring, 2007. In addition, the mentors were informed that they should

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