Chapter VIII

Establishing Communities of Practice for Effective and Sustainable Professional Development for Blended Learning

Terrie Lynn Thompson
University of Alberta, Canada

Heather Kanuka
University of Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT

The growing need for professional development to help university instructors with the adoption of online teaching is being propelled from several directions. But innovative professional development initiatives, intended to help university instructors better leverage technology, particularly through blended approaches, are not without tensions. The objective of this research study was to delve into these tensions. Directors in several North American professional development centres were interviewed in order to explore how their programs supported the integration of technology into teaching. Findings suggest that there is a tension between what professional development centres are doing and what they would like to do regarding: (1) deeper integration of technology into their own teaching practices as a centre, including blended approaches; and (2) how to nurture communities of practice, comprised of university instructors focused on teaching-related issues in higher education, such as adoption of blended learning strategies. Four themes emerged: uncertainty about how best to leverage technology and blended learning, questions regarding a professional development centre's role in cultivating communities, the importance of being strategic, and desire for scalability. The chapter concludes with policy implications and recommendations for future development of effective and sustainable professional development practices.

INTRODUCTION

The growing need for professional development to help university instructors with the adoption of online teaching is being propelled from several directions: efforts to enhance the student learning experience and therefore the quality of teaching, the constant churn of new technologies, and the evolution of higher education institutions driven by, and driving, changing expectations. The need for effective and sustaining professional development is also linked to a desire for innovations in teaching and learning methods, including blended learning.

Professional development programs do feel some pressure to integrate technology and move beyond traditional classroom approaches. Innovative professional development strategies can include not only a mix of face-to-face (F2F) and online approaches, but also nurturing communities of practice (CoP) throughout higher education institutions. But innovative professional development initiatives are not without tensions.

The overarching objective of this study was to gain a broader understanding of these tensions. We therefore interviewed directors in professional development centres in higher education institutions (most often referred to as teaching and learning centres in North America) located in the United States and Canada. We were interested in the direction professional development centres were taking to support university instructors. One objective of this research was to better understand effective and sustainable professional development programs intended to support the integration of technology into teaching through blended learning strategies and CoP.

We begin this chapter with a review of the literature on blended learning and CoP within professional development contexts, followed by a description of our data collection, analysis, and a discussion of our findings. We close this chapter with recommendations for creating CoP in blended learning environments and conclude with implications and considerations for future developments.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Blended Learning: Defining it

There is a growing body of literature advocating blended learning as a core activity to professional development within institutions of higher education. At present, however, there is little agreement on the definition of blended learning. A quick search on the Internet reveals the diversity and widely interpreted views of what blended learning is. For example, Wikipedia defines blended learning as the following:

the combination of multiple approaches to learning. Blended learning can be accomplished through the use of 'blended' virtual and physical resources. A typical example of this would be a combination of technology-based materials and face-to-face sessions used together to deliver instruction. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning)

Others, such as Heinze and Procter (2004), define blended learning as "*learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course.*"

Garrison and Vaughan's (n.d.) definition, while not entirely dissimilar to Wikipedia's definition, provides a more bounded view:

At its core, blended learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences. The basic principle is that face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context

17 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/establishing-communities-practice-effective-sustainable/9192

Related Content

A Case Study of a Blended Doctoral Program in Educational Technology
Michele Jacobsen (2011). *Blended Learning across Disciplines: Models for Implementation (pp. 173-189).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/case-study-blended-doctoral-program/52548

Empirical Research into Students' Mobile Phones and their Use for Learning
Claire Bradleyand Debbie Holley (2011). *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning (pp. 38-53).*
www.irma-international.org/article/empirical-research-into-students-mobile/60138

A Situated M-Learning Perspective to Develop Individual Entrepreneurial Competencies
Juliana V. Vieira Mattiello da Silvaand Amarolinda Zanela Klein (2020). *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning (pp. 1-19).*
www.irma-international.org/article/a-situated-m-learning-perspective-to-develop-individual-entrepreneurial-competencies/256836

Utilizing Audio and Video Captures to Train and Engage the Net Generation in Effective Presentation Skills
Jessica Fargnoli (2012). *Teaching, Learning and the Net Generation: Concepts and Tools for Reaching Digital Learners (pp. 340-357).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/utilizing-audio-video-captures-train/60711

The 5Ds Model for Planning and Teaching Online Courses: Stage Two – Designing the Online Course Instruction
 (2020). *Utilizing a 5-Stage Learning Model for Planning and Teaching Online Courses: Emerging Research and Opportunities (pp. 35-54).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-5ds-model-for-planning-and-teaching-online-courses/246953