

Post-secondary educators' professional development: Investigation of an online approach to enhancing teaching and learning

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Abstract

Faculty in post-secondary institutions must continually reassess, refine, and revise their teaching, yet it is a challenge for them to gain this professional development with heavy teaching responsibilities and high demands on their time. Creating Optimum Learning Environments (CREOLE) is a collaborative project between one community college and one university to develop an online training program for post-secondary education faculty on the basic principles of teaching and learning and the development of online courses. Four independent modules were developed and taught in a one semester format for educators throughout the U.S. The goal of this research was to identify the strengths and challenges of this course; determine the changes in pedagogical practice of the participating faculty members; and to examine the resulting changes in participants' course materials to reflect learning and motivation theories, and appropriate online learning strategies. Methods included pre- and post-surveys of the participants, interviews, document analysis, and instructors' reflections. Results demonstrated high expectations from all participants, difficulty in forming a sustained learning community, continuing challenge in technological aspects, and requirement for intense instructor involvement to maintain morale.

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1. Introduction

Many post-secondary educators, and community college faculty members in particular, have had little preparation to be educators, and teaching expertise is not always a requirement for employment (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). As a result, most community colleges devote resources toward professional development of faculty knowledge and skills to reassess, refine, and revise these educators' teaching to enhance student learning. While this is true for all post-secondary faculty members, it is particularly difficult for community college faculty members, given their large teaching loads. These faculty members experience great challenges in transitioning to the use of web-based resources and moving to hybrid and fully online courses. Simultaneously, calls have been made for more constructivist and

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active learning in the community college classrooms and demands for more integration of technology and the development of fully online courses (Aragon & Laanan, 1999; Kumar, 2000; O'Banion, 1997).

There are more than 1100 community colleges in the U.S. and each is unique, but the majority share the common missions of open admissions and equity, comprehensive program offerings, a community-based philosophy, commitment to teaching and commitment to lifelong learning (Miller, 2004). Currently, community colleges are under pressure to work more closely with four-year institutions, and this has produced pressure for increased professional development for their faculty (Townsend, 2001) and these faculty typically have contractual obligations for minimum professional development activities (Troller, 2002). Community colleges also share a need to develop faculty members in a variety of skills and knowledge to increase their ability to teach and also to create online learning environments.

Creating Optimum Learning Environments (CREOLE) is a collaborative project between one Community College and an eastern research university to develop an online training program for post-secondary education faculty on the basic principles of teaching and learning and on developing their skills in online teaching. Primary funding for CREOLE was from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). Four modules were developed, first as stand alone professional development by various experts in their fields; the modules cover learning theory, motivation research, blending face-to-face classes with online supplements, and creating completely web-based courses. The goal was always to combine the four modules into one seamless, intense course, and recently, it was taught to a small number of community college faculty members throughout the U. S. in a traditional, one-semester, graduate credit-bearing, online format at a western research university. This research project sought to document and investigate this initial teaching of the course in an online format.

2. Perspectives from literature

2.1. Community colleges

Community colleges have a unique status in the post-secondary educational community. Since this research began with the perspective of online learning and simultaneously looked at community colleges, it was important to examine the literature on faculty members involved in this unique environment and their professional development. It has been posited that this is an overwhelming challenge,

The dissemination and discussion of research on community colleges are inadequate. Reports are difficult to obtain and usually include too little information to allow a judgment about the validity of the conclusions. Faculty and even researchers at community colleges rarely have the opportunity to discuss research on program effectiveness in a way that allows them to understand the strengths, weaknesses and lessons of the studies. (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, np)

Further, the students that attend community colleges, often with little or no prerequisite skills or preparation for post-secondary education, present a unique challenge to faculty members. The complexity of teaching at the community college is compounded by the wide range of skills and experiences with which students enter their classrooms (Cox, 2003), and this is complicated when faculty are trying to develop online courses that typically require more autonomy and self-direction than traditional courses (Schrum & Hong, 2002).

Hillocks' (1999) study of 19 English instructors at one community college delineated aspects of teaching knowledge and found a strong link between instructors' pedagogical practices and their attitudes about students' abilities. Given that many of these instructors do not have expertise in educational pedagogy, a chasm between practice and results may arise.

At the same time, community colleges are under enormous pressure to improve practice, expand student outcomes, and continuously develop faculty skills (Stolzenberg, 2002). Their teaching is extensive, and professional development opportunities are often above and beyond the heavy teaching load. "Community college faculty stand out from many of their professorial colleagues not only because of the size and diversity of their sector of higher education, but also because teaching—far more than research or service—is the heart of their profession" (Huber, 1998, p. 12).

Grubb (1999) conducted a qualitative study of instruction at community colleges. He and his associates investigated 60 administrators and instructors through observations and interviews. Grubb found faculty isolation

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