Online Instructor Professional Development for a Continuing Studies Unit

Overview

- Introduction
- Background
- Planning and development
- The workshop
- Debrief, revisions, round 2
- Moving forward and initial conclusions

Hi. I'm Emily Schudel, and I'm an Instructional Designer, currently at the University of Victoria, Continuing Studies, working for Distance Education Services. In this presentation, I'm going to talk about the planning and development of our *Professional Development Workshop for Distance Education Instructors*. This was a pilot project designed to assess the usefulness and the feasibility of providing professional development opportunities for distance education instructors teaching in Continuing Studies programs.

In this presentation, I am going to talk a little bit about: The context for the development of this workshop. The background of the situation at Continuing Studies. Give you a bit of the story of the planning and development of the workshop. Talk about the workshop itself – how it was run, and what happened. Talk a bit about the debrief, revisions, and re-run of the workshop. And then talk a bit about some initial conclusions and what the current plans are now for moving forward.

Introduction

- Professional programs
- Subject matter specialists
- Adult learners at a distance

So, first to put this project into context, at Continuing Studies, at the University of Victoria, we work with mostly professional programs – credit and non-credit, undergrad and grad level, certificate and diploma programs. The courses are developed following a team-based model, and they are developed and taught by contracted subject matter specialists, and the courses being delivered to adult learners at a distance; these are typical continuing studies students - usually people who work full-time, have family commitments, and looking for professional certification/upgrading skills, etcetera. All of the work I do is for courses or programs at a distance.

Background

- Contract subject matter specialists
- Some have never taught before
- 5 Program units, many different programs delivered by each
- No collective ProD for online instructors
- Past program-related ProD has been intermittent and not been sustained

And now to give you some background on why we designed this professional development workshop.

Continuing Studies contracts subject matter experts who may or may not teach the courses they develop. So sometimes a course is developed by one person and taught by another. It's not unusual for us to contract people who have never taught at all, let alone online. There are 5 separate Program units at Continuing Studies, and each Program unit delivers several different kinds of programs as well as individual courses– so there's a really large mix of things happening at Continuing Studies. As a result (with separate program units, a great variety of courses and programs being offered), there hasn't ever been an attempt to offer collective professional development for online instructors for the Division as a whole. When I asked about this a few years ago, there were a lot of reasons cited for this: instructors won't come because they'll want to be paid, they won't be interested in taking time out, they teach different subjects so the professional development won't be "valid", and workload issues – who would do this, how would they organize it – all of those things.

Past professional development opportunities within Program units has been tried, but it's been intermittent and not sustained, and we at Distance Education Services have had on and off discussions about possibilities in the past. So, some issues and examples of past attempts:

- Other Program units have tried offering Professional Development to their own instructors (with the support of Distance Education Services staff) with some success, but nothing that has been sustainable in the long term.
- One issue is that face-to-face doesn't really work well as many of our instructors work from a distance.
- In addition, the blended model has been tried, but it's a little clunky. For example, one program offered Professional Development for a few years using a mix of face-to-face and synchronous sessions, which actually ended up being a bit of a logistical nightmare – the people in the room were distracted, and the people online felt distant.
- The other issue , as always, is always time – who has the time, and also the expertise to organize this? How do they get others involved? Trying to get multiple people involved with a larger venture, well we know, is always challenging.
- But, basically there seemed to be a need (from a lot of side conversations I've had with with people over the years), and it just seemed like it would be a good thing to do, given the number of online courses and programs being developed, and the number of new instructors coming on. So it always felt to me like something we needed to try.

Planning and Development

- The idea
  - Out of website development and interviews with instructors
- The proposal
  - Funding request
  - Discussions with staff

So, the idea for online instructor professional development has been percolating for awhile with me, and then was supported through doing professional development activities with one particular program area (the one that tried the blended model), but it was definitely on the back burner for awhile. Then, we at Distance Education Services revised our website. Our former manager and former media specialist (who have both retired recently) worked on new media pieces for our website. These media pieces featured interview snippets from longer interviews with seasoned Continuing Studies online instructors. The interviews brought out some themes of interest and confusion among instructors, revolving primarily around creating and maintaining instructor presence in an online course.

As the media pieces were produced, my manager and I began having conversations about the possibility of running workshops for online instructors. So we decided that we should create a list of topics from the interviews and create a topic survey for instructors, with topics based around instructor presence as a major issue that sometimes puzzles online instructors (especially first time instructors). We discussed the idea of doing a workshop around these kinds of topics with Distance Education Services colleagues to make sure the potential topics would fit well with everyone's practice. We also discussed the idea with program coordinators to see how they would feel about Distance Education Services running some workshops with their instructors, and they were all on board. So this was all preliminary feeling things out kind of discussions, but then we did get serious.

In order to put this idea into a place of more validity in our Division, we decided to put in a funding request to our Continuing Studies Program Development Fund. We knew we would have expenses as we wanted to hire a facilitator, but also, putting in a proposal would make the workshop more valid across the division, so we were trying to give it legitimacy and also to create interest in it. The proposal in addition helped us to frame the workshop – who it was for, what it would cover. So, in the proposal we talked about:

- That we would have a pilot workshop delivered twice, giving instructors the option of which one to attend.
- The pilot workshop would offer an opportunity for discussion of common issues in online distance teaching, for example, engaging, motivating, and helping students you can't see.
- And each workshop session would be approximately 2 hours long and delivered via synchronous online technology, namely Blackboard Collaborate.
- This workshop would also provide participants with take-home material that would expand on the workshop topic, so we actually provided them with a recently published book on the workshop theme. The take-home material was kind of both a reward for participating and a recognition of participants' contribution to the Division's programming.

Planning and Development

- The plan
  - Invite instructors to tell us what they want to know
  - Choose a topic (creating community online)
  - Hire a facilitator
  - Plan the session around a model for creating community

So, the proposal was accepted and we began to plan. We first asked program coordinators for a list of all current online instructors because we wanted to ask the instructors for input on a topic. So we emailed them all and asked them to complete an online survey, presenting a list of topics, all related to instructor presence in the online classroom. The survey was anonymous, but instructors were given the option to provide their names if they liked in case we wanted to follow-up with any of them. The winning topic: ***How to create community in the online classroom.***

Once the topic was chosen, we had to plan the session

We discussed our ideas and the topic to be covered with our Distance Education Services colleagues to make sure the session content would fit well with everyone's practice. We then invited all online instructors to register for one of the two sessions (or both if they wanted to). We also invited all program coordinators and all Distance Education Services staff to register. One week before session, we sent the session link with information of how to sign in and test their microphones to all registrants. I spent a day testing all the components of the session in advance, and we made sure that our Onlinehelp desk would be on hand to help if people couldn't get into the session.

The Workshop

- Invited instructors to register for workshop(s)
- First one, November, 2012
- 17 instructors and 4 program coordinators as well as DE colleagues
- Mix of presentation and discussion (large group and small group)
- Send all participants a book as a "reward"

The first session was in November 2012. We had 17 instructors attend this session (as well as 4 program coordinators).

Just to tell you a bit about what happened, we opened the site 1 hour in advance. There were a few technical glitches, but Onlinehelp was on hand to troubleshoot when we needed it.

The session started with Introductions. There was a larger discussion of what community and community in the online classroom means, both to the facilitator, and to the participants. There was a presentation of a model for developing community in the online classroom. There were small group discussions around specific aspects of the model presented. And then we asked participants to share one take away from the session. So we tried to have a mix of talk and discussion and interaction in the session.

Over all the technical side of the workshop went well – we planned everything in advance, rolled with the glitches, and had Onlinehelp on hand to help people who couldn't get in. But the important point here is that both the facilitator and I have worked a lot in Blackboard Collaborate, so are very familiar with how it works, which really helped to minimize and trouble we might have had otherwise.

Debrief and Revisions

- Debrief right after session (discussion with planners and facilitator)
- Reviewed notes from session
- Meeting with colleagues for suggestions for revisions
- Flow and timing needed to be adjusted
- Reworked discussion questions

Right after the session, we had a quick debrief online with the facilitator, and then later reviewed our notes from the session as well as debriefed with our Distance Education Services colleagues a few days later so we could make any revisions for round 2. The main issues we identified for revision were:

- That the timing needed to be clarified – for example, the first time the larger discussion around community took a little bit too long.
- We also worked out that we really needed to get people to test their microphones and say hello AS they entered, not after the session started, and this worked out much better as we could figure out right away who couldn't get their mics to work and who had to stay in the chatroom.
- We also adjusted the group work instructions, made sure to ask each group to assign, i.e., have someone volunteer to be a note-taker when they got in their rooms, and we also worked out who was going to give the participants the "countdown" to the sudden switch back to the main room.
- Of course, we re-learned the lesson of "you can never be too clear online", and gave participants a good experience of what a synchronous class would be like, and this, of course, was a highly organized experience, but you can always clarify your instructions no matter how clear you think you're being!

Round 2

- March, 2013
- 13 instructors and 3 program coordinators
- Much improved!

The second session was in March 2013. We had 13 instructors attend this session, as well as 3 program coordinators. It went really well! The revisions we went through after round one really made for a fun and engaging session.

Moving Forward

- Final debrief
- Asked for input from participants
- Considering second topic and will run another survey to confirm

In the end, we were really pleased that 30 online instructors attended the first series of workshops, and that there were instructors from every program offered at Continuing Studies. In addition to providing instructors with a model for community building online, and a set of activities they could use outside the whole model we presented in their courses if they chose, the point was really to get people talking about their practice and to share ideas and experiences with other online distance instructors. And we succeeded in that. The challenge now is trying to figure out how to sustain this in the longer term.

So, after the session :

- We e-mailed all participants with the recording link for the session, and asked them for feedback on the session as well as for suggestions for next time.
- We presented a final report to the Dean as part of our funding requirement.
- And we have started planning this year's workshop, and we've also set up a blog for our online instructors .

Initial Conclusions

- Involve appropriate parties
- PLAN PLAN PLAN
- 2 hour session seemed to work
- Group discussion met the needs of the participants
- It was encouraging to see that instructors were interested and engaged!

Some of the conclusions we've drawn from running this workshop for the first time was that, first of all, timing was key for the implementation of this kind of professional development at Distance Education Services. It was the right time and everything just seemed to fall right into place. It's really important to involve appropriate parties – consult with them, invite them to participate, and keep them up to date on how things went and how things are going as you move forward. Plan, plan, plan! You can't be too prepared or too clear! A 2 hour session seemed to work really well, and the group discussion also worked really well – it met the needs of the participants, and also my underlying goal of starting to create a peer network. I recommend running the same session more than once to work out the kinks, and also remember not to get fussed when things go wrong, because they will. It's really important also to have adequate help on hand when you're running a session like this. So we did have 2 facilitators and Onlinehelp on hand.

In the end, I was most excited and encouraged to see that instructors were interested and engaged with each other and with the topic at hand. It will be really interesting to see if any of them try to integrate some of the various activities into their own online courses, and of course, interesting to see if they come back for more next year!

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