Team Models in Online Course Development: A Unit-Specific Approach

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ABSTRACT
This article profiles an educational technology assistance program titled Digital Language and Literacy, linking technologically literate graduate students in English with faculty developing online courses for the first time. Our reporting and assessment process includes the narrative evidence of two faculty and two graduate student instructional designers, chronicling the possibilities and constraints of implementing a team-development model for online course design and offering guidelines for academic units wishing to adopt similar models. Such models not only help with online course design but also help to establish technological and pedagogical learning communities among current and future faculty. Because these models have also been successful in business organizations through both reverse mentoring and communities of practice, we outline how they can positively impact faculty and graduate students within academic structures that are highly hierarchical and protective of instructional expertise and authority.

Keywords
Online course delivery, Learning communities, Faculty development, Reverse mentoring

Introduction
Many instructional design specialists can attest to the difficulties of helping faculty integrate technology into their existing classroom pedagogy. Even more difficult is using this newly acquired knowledge to enhance student-learning outcomes. Despite the amount of consulting, despite the quality, quantity, and diversity of technology workshops developed, and despite well-attended sessions, faculty use of this new knowledge is often limited. The reasons are typical: workload, inadequate incentive and reward for technology-based teaching, and educational philosophies that do not necessarily favor the student-centered pedagogies that technology has the potential to foster. Indeed, as Baldwin (1998) has noted, failure to utilize technology to its fullest extent is tied to “insufficient or obsolete hardware or software, inadequate facilities and support services, lack of time and money, and inappropriate reward system, lack of information about good practice, and underestimation of the difficulty in adopting new technologies” (p. 13). Faculty at our university, like faculty at many other institutions, have been encouraged to put courses online at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, largely to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse Ohio student population of adult learners who commute, regardless of the institutional constraints as Baldwin outlines. Our own distance education office is referred to as IDEAL, Interactive Distance Education for All Learners. Despite this marketing of online learning as “ideal” for busy adult students, the question of how “ideal” distance learning initiatives are to faculty remains to be seen.

The Problem of Technology Integration
The perceived difficulty of implementing technology into existing pedagogy requires a degree of expertise that faculty do not often possess. Thus, many faculty members across the university are skeptical about online
learning, with questions about curricular and pedagogical integrity, academic honesty, and intellectual property. Such concerns may reflect faculty ideologies that relate teaching to face-to-face instruction and communication. Their perceptions about controlling classroom content and personal process of instruction are at odds with the “ideal” environment that excludes the face-to-face communication and visible accountability.

Our own English Department faculty has been no different; they have raised similar concerns about the quality of educational experience that fits with the goals of a liberal arts education. Carstens and Knowles (2000) caution that online education is at odds with liberal learning, or the “give and take of communication,” and may contribute to the elimination of interpersonal communication and academic and cultural literacy. As a number of department meetings have revealed, many of the English faculty are unfamiliar with research that suggests that online learning has the potential to increase student responsibility and student interaction as opposed to the traditional lecture-discussion format of both undergraduate and graduate classes. According to Palloff and Pratt (1999), online forums have as much potential to be “learning communities,” encouraging not just collaboration but transformation, as face-to-face settings. As they note, without the purposeful formation of an online learning community in distance learning, we are doing nothing new and different. The importance of community as described by Wenger (2000) focuses on the exchange of knowledge in groups that share a common interest, “discussing new ideas together are all part of belonging to the group” (206). In academic settings, the participation in this learning community is focused on another group not associated with the academic learning community, and faculty do not readily grasp the possibility of exchange of knowledge taking place with the same degree as the direct face-to-face pedagogy offers. Perhaps this is resistance to change regarding knowledge transmittal in a community of academic learners, with faculty continuing to embrace a “banking” model (Freire,1970) in which knowledge transfer is a deposit by teachers to students with little reciprocity.

Because our English department had suffered losses of enrollment in our general Master’s program, upper administration demanded that departments find new audiences in order to keep the program from being eliminated. As a result, several faculty members cautiously “signed up” to teach their first online course. Although this was not the “ideal” exigency for the development of an online program, it certainly allowed for more compromise among programs to pilot five online graduate seminars to attract public school teachers needing a master’s degree as part of their teaching certification.

While a number of financial incentives existed (including development funds from IDEAL and additional teaching stipends from our College of Arts and Sciences), faculty continued to express concern about technical and pedagogical support, given the abbreviated timeframe for developing an online course—December 2002 to June 2003. This article overviews these concerns and addresses the role which educational technology assistance programs plays in alleviating the gap between technological training and pedagogical implementation. Within our English Department, we have attempted to address the sustainability of technological and pedagogical training by developing an educational technology assistance program called Digital Language and Literacy. This program links our doctoral and master’s students in rhetoric and technical communication with faculty desiring to integrate technology into their teaching, specifically in the development of fully online courses.

**Learning Community Research**

The design of Digital Language and Literacy (DLL) stems from a number of university level and campus models at the local and international level, including the House Calls program at the University of Alberta’s Academic Technologies for Learning (2003), where in addition to their regular technology and faculty development programs, there exists a program in which instructional design specialists make “house calls” to faculty members across campus. Admittedly, our own University through its Center for Instructional Media has a similar program in which a small number of faculty can apply for such educational assistance from undergraduate students. Yet, our English Department model is more closely aligned with The Ohio State University’s Digital Media Project (2003), an in-house English Department teaching and learning community complete with a computer facility, graduate student support staff, and a series of consultation and workshop programs. As we shall stress, these forms of educational technology assistance are not only consistent with a team-development model of online course development but are also philosophically aligned with learning community models of teaching enhancement. Such a model supports Moore’s (2001) conclusions about technology and faculty development: specifically, that faculty do not resist the use of technology when provided with resources and support, that technology can be used effectively to improve teaching in all disciplines and by faculty with varying degrees of expertise, and that faculty support must be easily accessible and ongoing to account for growth in expertise and approach.
We acknowledge that reverse mentoring models of sharing technological information and expertise exist in business communities (Greengard, 2002; Wenger, 2000). In this model the management hierarchy find or are paired with technologically savvy experts within the company, or with a knowledgeable graduate student. While business disciplines do not share their initiatives as research evidence the same way academic units do, the DLL model has similar properties that are noteworthy in the evidence this article presents. We intend to broaden the discussion of process by including narrative evidence that shows the personal contexts in which this literacy exchange takes place, and the difficulties of embracing such a model. Second, our research methodology for conveying this information draws upon narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin, 1997; Hones, 1998). While research stories are held suspect in traditional forms of research, we find this methodology allows us to expose some of the differential problems in power relations which the implementation of these models may trigger. This is the important consideration in examining the model, even when we attempt to combine the instructional pattern for the model with well-accepted guidelines for instructional cooperation (e.g., Chickering and Gamson, 1987). In another respect, we are attempting to locate transfer knowledge models with a specific preparation in mind—that of developing courses for online delivery. Whether or not these types of models are transferable to any reverse mentoring within differing hierarchical structures is a matter of further investigation and problematized by the references to both workplace literacy acquisitions and academic literacies using technology.

Our article is guided by Chickering and Gamson’s widely implemented “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.” Originally published in 1987, each principle listed below attempts to foster shared instructor and student responsibility for teaching and learning:

1. encourages contact between students and faculty
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. encourages active learning
4. gives prompt feedback
5. emphasizes time on task
6. communicates high expectations, and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning

Although the principles reflect research in face-to-face environments, recent adaptations to online teaching and learning include the National Council of Teachers of English/Conference on College Composition and Communication’s recent statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments (2004), and finally our own Ohio Learning Network, the statewide repository for both online learning opportunities for students and professional development opportunities for faculty. As the Ohio Learning Network indicates, its reasons for embracing the seven principles “have successfully stood the test of time and provide the foundation to high quality distance delivery methods.” Perhaps the most widely cited adaptation of the Seven Principles to online learning environments is Chickering and Ehrmann’s 1996 “Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever,” as they overview the range of online pedagogies which fosters good practice, all the while noting that technology is not enough in fostering active, contextual learning.

**Methodology and the Authors**

Because of the narrative methodology we employ, Table 1 summarizes our departmental roles and our findings.

Blair, as a professor with expertise in educational technology, shares a philosophy and methodology of in-house technology development. Alvarez, a professor with expertise in training pre-service language arts and college-level writing teachers, dialogues with online course designer and doctoral candidate Wolf about their collaborative working relationship and the move toward a team-development model of course design. Alvarez and Wolf ground their discussion of collaborating for online course development within Chickering and Gamson’s (1987), and later Chickering and Ehrmann’s (1996), identification and application of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education within electronic learning spaces, exploring the ways in which the principles of good teaching manifest themselves online. Finally, Monske, also a doctoral candidate and online course designer writing a dissertation on the assessment of online courses, explores the material and social in which a “learning community” such as ours can flourish.

In co-authoring this article, we utilize narrative as a research methodology to tell a story of faculty development needs in technology and pedagogy. Validating the use of narrative in this way, Mortensen and Kirsch (1996) note the need to recognize “that there are many forms of qualitative research: Oral histories, narrative inquiry…observational descriptive narratives…and more” (p. xi). Our voices go beyond mere anecdote,
However, rather, our voices as educational technology specialists, graduate students, and faculty work together to address the logistical and institutional constraints upon successful faculty development in technology, and also the ways in which teaching and learning communities in the area of technology and pedagogy should extend to academic units to foster discipline-specific discussions of how best practices can and should transfer from the face-to-face classroom to the fully online classroom. Although much of the literature on faculty learning communities stresses the benefits of getting out of disciplinary silos (Hansen, 2004), it is vital that the collaborative, purposeful aspects of learning communities be replicated within academic units, especially those who not only may suffer from a lack of shared goals and lack of morale but also may result in a lack of mentoring and professional development opportunities for their own graduate students. According to Wenger (2000) successful communities of practice flourish because of their shared interest and shared need to gain knowledge. Forceful implementation, such as the reverse mentoring mandates which Greengard (2002) discusses as successful in business communities, has a different shared purpose. This again draws attention to the differing models and their useful adaptation by academic units. Finally, we conclude with suggested unit guidelines for implementing technology assistance programs, including the need for departmental support in reconfiguring various support structures to sustain the program by providing faculty and graduate students an incentive to participate and better foster technology-based learning communities within the academic units where such professional development is greatly needed.

Table 1. Author roles and findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty 1: Kristine Blair</td>
<td>Associate Professor of English; former Associate Director of Faculty Development Unit; educational technology specialist</td>
<td>Learning community models when extended to academic units enhance the impact of faculty development in teaching with technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty 2: Deborah Alvarez</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of English and Integrated Language Arts; expertise in teaching methodology and pedagogy</td>
<td>Benefits of team-development and reverse mentoring in the development of online courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Student 1: Amie Wolf</td>
<td>Doctoral candidate Rhetoric and Writing; expertise in teaching literature and composition; online course development</td>
<td>Principles of effective instruction in traditional settings (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) can be implemented in online instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Student 2: Elizabeth Monske</td>
<td>Doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Writing; expertise in assessment and technical communication</td>
<td>Faculty members may still maintain traditional power relationships and teacher-student hierarchies with graduate student mentors</td>
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</tbody>
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Kris Blair: Building A Learning Community

During my two years as faculty associate/associate director of my university’s Center for Teaching, Learning & Technology, I developed over twenty-five technology and pedagogy workshops for faculty and graduate student instructors, including several institutes. As a faculty member with educational technology and faculty development expertise, I knew that what faculty and graduate student instructors needed was a self-paced, yet extended opportunity to experiment with course management tools such as Blackboard, the web-based teaching tool in place on our campus and on many campuses in the United States. All too many workshops focused on the technological skills set (how to post a syllabus in Blackboard; how to create a discussion forum; how to create a test) as opposed to the pedagogical and curricular context and were often paced too quickly for participants to understand either the technological or the pedagogical possibilities. For that reason, in summer 2002 I developed and delivered a fully online course titled “Online Learning for English Educators,” a six-week summer offering that addressed such topics as why teach online, virtual classroom management, assessment of online learning, copyright and intellectual property online. My own philosophy of online teaching includes the belief that before teaching online, instructors should have the opportunity to be students online to understand learning styles, motivation, alternative delivery and assessment strategies necessary for course and student success. In addition, as someone charged with preparing future faculty in our doctoral program in Rhetoric to teach in electronic environments, I felt that our students needed a course that addressed the vast bodies of literature outside of English studies and computers-mediated communication that informed online learning, including distance education, faculty development, and assessment.
As the first group of nine students enrolled in the course, I realized our department would have an eager cadre of instructional design student specialists who could both assist in our online course development needs and expand their understanding of faculty roles and rewards with technology. Thus, in the spring and summer of 2003, we plunged in with a pilot group of four graduate students assigned to four faculty in a team-development model of course design that in which I encouraged the faculty to be more than just content development experts and the students to be more than just technical support. Rather, what I hoped would evolve was a learning community model in which both the individual teams and the entire group could share ideas about best practices in teaching and the ways that through the students’ experiences online that those practices might successfully manifest themselves. Such a model is consistent with Milt Cox’s (2001) nationally recognized efforts at Miami University of Ohio to bridge faculty and student learning communities and to create more supportive and sustainable professional development models for faculty at all levels, going beyond the traditional one-shot workshop model. At the same time, however, we have adopted this model to provide a discipline-specific model that in a department as large as English is needed. Yet, as our narratives suggest, there were certainly as many constraints as there were possibilities in implementing and sustaining this consulting and learning community model.

**Deborah Alvarez and Amie Wolf: When Collaboration Works**

**Deborah’s Story, Part I**

As a beginner in any new enterprise, there are those moments of genuine success followed by the realization that to continue the enterprise will require much more depth of thought and skill than one possesses. When I agreed to teach my first online course, I believed that I had a solid pedagogical framework, which I adjusted to meet student diversity and content material. When I tried to convert my pedagogical framework to an online environment, I accepted that it would require adjustments and rethinking, but I had yet to discover that my computer skills were inadequate to convert a face-to-face classroom curriculum to an online environment. In addition, it required that I rethink the pedagogical strategies that I had come to rely upon within this new classroom space.

My first realization was that using computer technology is not just for the production of teaching materials; it is delivery and production of content matter within the classroom pedagogy. Second, if the pedagogical tools we use are not situated into a learning context for teacher and student, then the application and knowledge making possibilities of any technology was moot.

In the following sections, Amie and I parallel our alternating narratives using Chickering and Gammon (1987) as contact points for each section. This exchange was necessary because in the next semester, I needed to be able to model technology use in a secondary language arts classroom as well as use technology as a teaching and assessment tool in the methods course. In particular, I would soon have to have eportfolios included in my methods classes as part of the English language arts curricular requirements and as product for assessment of 2004 NCATE requirements.

What I was not able to conceive in the beginning was how the relationship a teacher builds and models in a classroom could be created in an online environment with the same degree of connection and demonstration of teaching principles. In order to do this, I needed dialogue and explanation about the Blackboard electronic course management system at our institution and how best to utilize and manipulate its features for a specific online course. That required a discussion with someone who could do two things: first, teach me the computer skills I needed to effectively manage an online course; second, have a dialectical discussion on the pedagogical strategies for teaching an online course as it differs from the F2F course.

**Amie’s Story, Part 1**

Dr. Alvarez is known for being a very hands-on professor in her traditional courses. She frequently conferences with students outside the classroom and takes time during seminars and class sessions to give individualized attention to students. Thus, I knew that in consulting with her, she would want to continue these habits in the online environment, but something else occurred which interrupted this first step. Dr. Alvarez was not as computer literate and experienced as I thought she would be. So, my initial meetings with her were question and answer sessions about computer programs, Blackboard and web making possibilities. Once I had answered these questions, and showed her the ways to access information, she relaxed enough to begin learning about online teaching.
These initial sessions were Q and A about computers using links, websites, messaging beyond email and other more sophisticated search engines and information accessibilities. She wanted to know how to operate these before getting into Blackboard and online learning. Once I realized this, I suggested that we meet several times and have a particular agenda for each meeting. After each meeting, Dr. Alvarez was to practice with the new information and see what she could learn about its limits and possibilities.

When we finally passed these initial computer instructional meetings, I wanted to use the seven principles for good teaching practice (Chickering and Gamson 1987) to help her transform English 609, The Teaching of Literature, from a traditional face-to-face course into an online course. It seemed a natural transition to use the first principle discussed by Chickering and Gamson, “Encourages contacts between students and faculty” (p. 4), to guide our actual discussion about converting to the online course. (Dr. Alvarez was not aware that our sessions were in any way guided by a set of principles.)

Using the first principle, I encouraged Dr. Alvarez to make herself as available to students as she felt necessary for the material and the course. She interpreted this in the following ways: she checked her email frequently and set times for virtual office hours. Dr. Alvarez also made available appointments, which extended the opportunity to students unable to “meet” with her during the virtual office hours.

Deborah’s Story, Part 2

In answering my questions about the operation of the online Blackboard system, more general concepts like .html or pdf, basic functioning of chat rooms, loading external links and creating the readings for students using a scanner, Amie guided me through the process of building the class in modules and then creating four modules to directly parallel the themes and content of the F2F course. I needed to know how to use peripheral equipment like scanning and making documents into pdf files. I know that Amie wanted to get to the course on Blackboard, but I kept stopping her when I did not know how I would have the same information and materials ready for students to access. Specifically, I did not understand things like how a “discussion” could really be held online. This involved not only showing me the system to enter a discussion, but how to make sure the discussion would imitate a dialogic exchange of ideas: How does the discussion board work so that students can read each other’s ideas? What about my ability to comment or enter the discussion, save it and make these discussion available through the class?

It seemed as we entered into the practical nature of the course delivery that I had more strategic computer technology questions which I had to understand in order to understand the pedagogical capabilities of the Blackboard system as well as designing pedagogical strategies for online learning. This exchange would mean that the F2F Teaching of Literature could not be directly placed in an online system. The very nature of the two delivery systems required that the concepts from the F2F course stay the same, but have a different series of strategies for students to follow in order to learn the concepts. The knowledge I gained here applied to not only increased computer skills but to the actual building of knowledge in alternate delivery systems.

Amie’s Story, Part 2

The second principle discussed by Chickering and Gamson (1987) is “Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students” (p. 4). In order to preserve this interaction between students Dr. Alvarez included a group project in the course. Additionally, we created two types of discussion board threads: one set of threads required students to simply respond to Dr. Alvarez’s statements or answer her questions. In the other set, students were to post their responses and then reciprocate to any response they received. To build more depth of processing for the course concepts, Dr. Alvarez also had the students post certain assignments and invited response and comment. By creating these types of exchanges, Dr. Alvarez and I were still working with the first principle of encouraging contact between student and faculty well beyond just office hours and open synchronous discussions; she wanted contacts to exist within the learning process as it unfolded in each task. In addition, we were adding a level of complexity to the structure of the delivery that also reflected the second principle.

Deborah’s Story, Part 3

The second way in which Amie facilitated a more sophisticated use of the Blackboard system was to design the sequence for the course content. Specifically, I would tell her what I wanted them to do or what I was thinking
would work on Blackboard from what I had learned of the computer program and capabilities. Then, she would offer various strategies with the online options, lore from her experiences with online courses, and other points of delivery for me to consider. In one instance, I wanted to be flexible about delivery of assignment and the method of delivery. Amie quickly and confidently provided me with caveats about students leaving online courses because they were not required to do specific tasks in strict time frames; that some students considered an online course an opportunity to glide through required material easily and never really engage or make themselves known. These changed my thinking about what to require in assignments and when to require them from a loose structure to a more strategic and consistent set of course readings, discussions and assignments.

Amie’s Story, Part 3

In order to maintain the level of active learning in an online course, Dr. Alvarez wanted to develop a teaching relationship that had been part of her pedagogical philosophy. The separation and distance created in the online environment made it difficult to conceptualize how this relationship would be maintained; for example, a reading assignment which required students to write a lesson plan, and then actually present the lesson plan to class peers. In the online environment, this became a group exchange. She substituted teaching practice with online group exchanges and specific tasks for communicating with each other. This strategy corresponds to Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) third principle, “Uses active learning techniques” (p. 5). In these types of tasks, she was able to transfer one kind of active learning into another venue for active learning and still feel that she maintained instructional integrity.

Deborah’s Story, Part 4

It seemed with each pedagogical consideration for the course’s concepts, there was another computer consideration, which required me to rethink how to use the machine and the Blackboard to facilitate the learning of concepts about the teaching of literature. With each process, question or development in the conversion process, Amie and I only would load the preliminary course materials, questions, instructions into the shell, and then rearrange, edit and revise within the preliminary materials. One of the best features of this system of mentoring was to have Amie in the same room, telling me what steps to take, and making me do them on the computer several times until it seemed to her that I had learned the system well enough to function independently.

At some points, Amie built certain structures for me: the modules, the discussion folders, and did the arrangement of colors and backgrounds. Eventually, I was more skilled with the basics in Blackboard, and then she showed me how to change these items myself.

Amie’s Story, Part 4

Timing always seemed to be a concern for Dr. Alvarez. She did not easily grasp the necessity for time requirements. In planning the syllabus for the online version of the course initially, Dr. Alvarez was not planning to give concrete dates, times and manners in which work was to be turned in for every assignment, even though she never have unscheduled completion dates within her face to face courses. After minimal discussion, even minor assignments had due dates, with specified times and how they should be turned in. This forced students to be accountable for their work and avoided the end of the semester pile up that often happens to many teachers. These discussions allowed me to implement the fourth and fifth principles discussed in Chickering and Gamson (1987); “Give prompt feedback” and “Emphasizes time on task” (p. 5).

Deborah’s Story, Part 5

After the course had finished, I talked to a student who had been in the online course. She told me that she had had reservations because how does someone “teach” about teaching without the F2F modeling and spontaneous discussion that the classroom offers. She told me that she considered herself a shy student and easily influenced by the remarks of others, especially because she often disagreed or had very different perspectives about quality and effective teaching methods for literature. Then, she related that she actually learned a great deal more online because the focused inquiry/heuristic lead discussions reverberated far more deeply in her thinking because she was not surrounded by the classroom exchanges. This illustrated to me that the movement from the F2F
pedagogy to online pedagogy has to be conceptually different, but can be strategically equal. In another sense, the student comments validated the pedagogical design of the course as Amie and I constructed it. I know that without this mentoring the course would not have been as effective.

Amie’s Story, Part 5

The sixth principle discussed in Chickering and Gamson (1987) is “Communicates high expectations” (p. 5). The nature of taking a course that normally meets three hours each week for fifteen weeks and turning it into a course non-meeting online course for six to eight weeks makes high expectations unavoidable. Dr. Alvarez and I agreed that not only did the goals and expectations of the course need to remain as high as they were in the face-to-face version, but also that they needed to be spelled out for the students explicitly in the syllabus so that there would be no surprises. This produced a tightly sequenced series of readings, assignments, discussions and alternate online exchanges, which meant that Dr. Alvarez was doing everything possible to create a challenging online course about teaching.

When I agreed to work with Dr. Alvarez, I was nervous because we had never built a true professor-student relationship, yet I expected the relationship to be very businesslike and very task oriented. However, as we began meeting with greater frequency guided by specific goals, our working relationship became much friendlier than I had expected. Dr. Alvarez treated me as an equal. In respect to creating a learning community, she also asked my opinion about how to divide the material into modules and whether assignments or discussion board questions were clear. Our relationship, which began as professor-graduate student or professor-technical advisor, became one of colleagues sharing expertise and ideas as well as learning together in this community. This is a situated example of Wenger’s community of practice—shared expertise and ideas.

The seventh principle discussed in Chickering and Gamson (1987) is “Respects diverse talents and ways of learning” (p. 6). If nothing else, this learning community of two within the broader learning community of the whole project proved to be an example of the respect for diverse learning in ways that neither of us had anticipated. Overall, we found this system for learning requires a support and mentoring relationship that complements the learners experience and expertise while allowing the learner to embrace being a novice; in this case, however, the professor was the novice and the graduate student held the expertise.

Elizabeth Monske—When Collaboration Fails

Before this DLL project, I had been a student in Dr. Blair’s ENG 780: Online Learning for English Educators course, and I was working on my dissertation, which dealt with assessment issues in online writing environments. In early Fall 2002, I was paired with a second year faculty member who was teaching an online literary theory course. She had taught other literary material using a televised format; however, she had never taught online before or utilized Blackboard beyond checking her roster, and she was not comfortable with more sophisticated levels of technology. I discovered this during our first face-to-face meeting.

When the spring semester began, we set up another meeting to begin our discussions. In the first session, we discussed how to use the basics of Blackboard for her course and its audience, mostly non-residential teachers seeking their Masters’ degrees. Before our second meeting, she sent me a sample syllabus from the course. When the 2nd meeting occurred, we discussed how her syllabus activities could take place online and what types of assignments could work for the audience and the environment. It was after the second meeting when scheduling future meetings signaled problems.

After sending many emails about potential meetings and queries about technology assistance, we did not meet again until the Director of the Continuing Education called for a progress meeting on her course, and whether the course would be online a couple of weeks ahead of time in order for registered students to check over the course. The course was not online ahead of time, which was frustrating to me because of my efforts to meet with her and assist in the development of the online course. The ultimate responsibility for the course was hers; at this point the cancelled appointments, missed meeting dates and other avoidance tactics made me see that this was not a working collaboration as the DLL project had envisioned. In reflection, I realized that she did not actually embrace or engage my role as mentor. Even though we did not meet or interact as I had hoped, at the end of the summer course, the faculty member thanked me for helping and informed me that she is using Blackboard for her other courses. As part of the digital language and literacy learning community, I was able to collaborate with other groups, reinforcing the community atmosphere and learning to handle a difficult situation.
Implications

Based on our different experiences, we found that there were obstacles to pairing graduate students with faculty members, based on traditional power relationships in which faculty assume supervisory roles with students. Yet in order to learn, faculty must be willing to confront and disrupt these hierarchical structures in order to optimize their relationship and access to assistance for their online course creation. Another obstacle was faculty workload; faculty needed to plan their course almost seven months in advance on top of their duties for the semester. In addition to these obstacles, technological literacy levels proved equally problematic. Mid-career and senior faculty may have lower technological literacies than their pre-tenure counterparts. The importance of learning this early is to have the needed technological support available and the planning time in place. In our case, faculty and graduate students were placed together nine months before the summer course was to begin. This allowed for both parties to engage in conversation and knowledge sharing. In addition to faculty resources, because the graduate students have multiple responsibilities, it is important that all have available support in terms of resources. Because of the discipline specific training graduate students received through the ENG 780 Online Learning course, we were fortunate enough to have various knowledge of the course management tools available for teaching with Blackboard, not only what they were but also how to use them. This structure allowed us to decide on how subject material could be handled in digestible chunks for those involved in the class, thereby increasing our effectiveness as trainers.

This pilot training program also demonstrated that it is important to have faculty, departmental and administrative support. The administrative support for the DLL was provided by IDEAL in the form of professional development funds to our faculty, which they received in part to plan the course and the rest when they were finished teaching. As for departmental support, their role is twofold: to assist faculty and graduate students. In terms of faculty support, departments need to support the changes in evaluations and other traditional forms of assessment. For example, within our department, an ad-hoc technology committee revised our course evaluation to include online design and delivery formats, implementing a reward structure for teaching improvement that faculty development specialists often claim is vital for buy-in. For graduate students, the English Department supported a course available by independent study titled Online Course Design, a title that would appear on their academic transcript. In order for the faculty to accept this type of program and support the community effort, they need to know how their teaching will benefit. In our case, the knowledge gained in the process of this project provided the ability to integrate technological and curricular experience within their traditional classrooms.

After having been through our first phase of our pilot training program, a plan to assess our efforts is a necessary next step. Through our creation of Digital Language and Literacy, we have been able to avoid two factors, as mentioned by R.T. Bothel (2002): unrealistic appraisal of the potential of online education and computer skills bias and other limitations of online delivery (p. 99). From a traditional assessment approach, we were able to interview the graduate students and faculty members (including Deborah and Amie) involved about the benefits and disadvantages of such a initiative, as well as what could help those going through training in the future. Through the interviews, we found that barriers can still exist between the graduate student and faculty members who maintain hierarchical structure, which may lead to awkwardness and an inability conduct needs assessments and share skills. Despite problems with pair dynamics and faculty commitment, our reconstructed final course evaluation provided us with valuable information for assessment of our project. We were initially quite optimistic and found our optimism to be well-founded from the student responses, who praised student-teacher interaction, ease of access to information, and clarity of expectations.

Moreover, through presenting at conferences, and co-authoring publications such as this, we are provided with outlets that allow us to reflect upon our experiences. An important part of this process involved asking the question: What advice would we give to instructional designers and online educators? With this question in mind, we have developed the following recommendations from our graduate student and faculty experiences:

1. Determine what a faculty member wants to accomplish pedagogically and technologically. One method includes both formal and informal needs assessment. Our graduate student consultants conducted initial interviews with all faculty participants to determine technological knowledge and attitudes toward technology, similar to the one-to-one consultation model used in faculty development units.

2. Discuss which aspects of faculty buy-in, teaching philosophy, etc. are necessary to make online teaching successful. As Chickering and Gamson’s and Chickering and Ehrmann’s work suggest, faculty must be committed to active learning from the start, moving away from teacher-centered approaches despite their status as standard delivery models.

3. Assess technological literacy, not only of the faculty but of the graduate students as well. Part of this may be accomplished through a professional development plan, a document or outline of where the faculty
member is at with their technological literacy, where they feel they need to be in order to develop as online educators, and how they plan to get there.

4. Determine which models of technological training better ensure that faculty can work independently when they need to. As we have mentioned, faculty need multiple models and multiple points of access for improving technological literacy, including traditional group workshops, office tutorials with consultants, or online training modules.

5. Learn from mistakes. Just as faculty revise pedagogical materials and strategies in face-to-face environments, so too should they reconsider presentation, communication and assessment strategies, based on both formative and summative assessment by students, as well as on the assessment of student performance in online environments.

6. Admit deficiencies. Although the teacher’s admission of lack of knowledge may be considered risky, it has found to benefit students through shared responsibility for student success. Many technologically savvy students can be tapped to be virtual assistants and resources in a “buddy-system” like structure.

7. Evaluate University resources (financial, technological, etc.) to determine what technical and instructional support is available. Faculty development centers, for instance, frequently provide a range of technological training models to fit faculty schedules and workloads.

8. Provide incentives for faculty that include opportunities to present the results of their online teaching efforts and receive assurances that these teaching innovations will factor into tenure, promotion, and merit. These might include both campus wide and discipline specific discussion of the faculty workload issues associated with online education.

9. Ensure sustainability by making sure that faculty are both using the technology in other courses and constantly asking questions about technology and pedagogical effects. While we support and encourage team development models, at some point faculty “go it alone” and should be able to make decisions about digital tools that best match curriculum and pedagogy once their initial project is complete.

We have moved into a second year with Digital Language and Literacy. Within our University, we have faculty technology training and online resources help available; however, these resources have not been discipline specific, a factor that would help faculty members on a more consistent basis and provide graduate students with faculty development and instructional design opportunities. Frantz, et al.’s recent discussion (2005) of the role of faculty development units presumes centralization of technology-based teaching initiatives within teaching and learning centers, despite the admitted limitations of centers to meet all client needs in light of academic budget cuts. And despite Sorcinelli’s (2002) ten principles of good practice for the development of teaching and learning centers that include both faculty ownership and collaborative systems of support, the benefits of unit-specific instructional development in technology continues to receive less attention in faculty development scholarship. Although much of the current literature on learning communities presume a more university-centered interdisciplinary approach, one significant implication of our study is the need for and ability to rely on learning community models to invigorate department meetings, curricular planning, and pedagogical work (Cox and Richlin, 2004, p. 6). Despite continuing staffing constraints on the ability to offer online courses, our Department of English had both the highest number of online courses and the highest enrollment numbers for summer 2004. Thus not only has the Digital Language and Literacy Community provided an in-house teaching and learning community that is necessary for graduate student professional development, it has filled a gap from a faculty standpoint as well, allowing them to see graduate students as both colleagues and mentors in a way that is consistent with Greengard’s discussion of reverse mentoring and Wenger’s communities of practice.

References


