

TILC: An Innovative Learning Community Leading Educational Change

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Abstract

Say goodbye to working in isolation and hello to technology integration through innovative learning communities, both online and face-to-face. This presentation described and reflected on the organic and innovative processes that evolved during the creation and formative growth of an online professional learning community (PLC) in the context of higher education; the TILC (Technology Integration Learning Community). The TILC emerged and thrived in the context of budgetary constraints that limited the number of face-to-face faculty retreats and funds for professional development and conference attendance.

The goals of our TILC are to promote change, foster collaboration, and lead the way for integrating technology among a group of faculty.

Introduction

In the context of institutional budgetary constraints that limited formal professional development opportunities, the Technology Integration Learning Community (TILC) emerged to link geographically dispersed faculty with the purpose of integrating technology to engage online students. This presentation traced the development and evolution of the TILC, described its achievements, and shared lessons learned. Presenters offered strategies to foster success and promote transfer in the online learning environment.

Leading Educational Change

This self-initiated and independently coordinated learning community critically adapted the main foundations of theory crafted by experts in PLCs (see Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Easton, 2011; Martin-Kniep, 2004) and the foundations of andragogy (see Knowles, 1990; Linderman, 1961), to become a forum for professional development, technology integration and collaborative reflection to promote change in teaching and learning. Definitions of Professional Learning communities agree on PLCs as teams of educators who meet regularly to collaborate, learn, and improve teaching and learning. PLCs adopt a culture of collaboration that promotes data analysis, risk taking, and reflection. As a model of professional development, PLCs meet the qualities of effective professional development (Fogarty and Pete, 2007): they are job embedded, sustained, collegial, results-oriented, and practical. As a consequence, the work of PLCs can have real impact on students learning and on the institutions where they work. Because the context of the TILC is a College of Education in which most of the courses are teaching online, this PLC developed online. Its work is ongoing and it has been evolved for years in a collegial manner, based on the needs for collegial interaction, camaraderie, and professional development. The desired results that this learning community focus on are the improvement of learning through members and students' engagement. The members of the TILC reflect on the concepts and theories that support our practice. However, what we learn during our meetings is practical and is transferred into our courses.

Based on Knowles' findings of andragogy or adult learning theory (Knowles, 1973), the TILC offers its members control on their learning, immediate utility of the knowledge and skills learned, a focus on issues that interest us, opportunities to anticipate and discuss the use of what is learned, expectations to improve faculty members' performance as instructors and as designers, the ability to maximize the access to resources, opportunities to collaborate in a respectful and informal environment, and access to information that is appropriately paced.

Members of the PLC control the content addressed during the meetings by proposing and selecting what they want to learn and how they want to do it. Usually, one of the members of the PLC gives a brief presentation on a learning tool or strategy and leads a workshop for everyone to learn how to use it. In addition, the team discusses strategies for immediate integration. Every term faculty members share their experiences implementing one of the tools or strategies learned during the previous term.

Change for this team involves promoting engagement through integration of newer technologies that foster an environment of innovation and productivity for the students in our courses. Members of the TILC lead change by teaching each other how to use innovative tools and technologies, and discussing how to integrate these tools and technologies into our courses. Change is analyzed to evaluate our own learning and progression within our learning community.

History of our PLC

Our TILC emerged as a result of a Blue Sky focus group to brainstorm how to enhance student engagement at the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education (FCE) at Nova Southeastern University (NSU). We decided to pilot an iPad initiative with full support from administration, with the goal of integrating more technology into our courses. In 2012, we piloted the initiative with a small Master's in Athletic Administration program, taught the program faculty how to use the iPads, recommended a number of helpful apps, and challenged them to integrate mobile learning into their curriculum. Upon completion of the pilot, we evaluated our efforts to determine what worked (i.e., collaboration, administrative support) and what did not work (i.e., lack of accountability, limited training; Lacey, Gunter, & Reeves, 2014).

The need for additional training evolved into the development of an online learning community of eight NSU faculty members to promote technology integration during the Fall of 2013. At first our learning community focused on mobile learning, where each faculty member was responsible for learning about and teaching the rest of the learning community about certain mobile learning applications. We posted app reviews on a Wiki, but instead of just reviewing the app, we went a step beyond to discuss how we could integrate them into our courses. It was the integration ideas that really made our learning community unique. During the next couple of years, we evolved into a true technology integration learning community based on a collaborative training approach, where everyone was responsible for their own learning. We meet monthly to learn about new tools or technologies and always end the training with a discussion of how to integrate our newfound knowledge into our courses. To hold each other accountable we challenge each member of the TILC to integrate at least one new tool/technology into their courses each semester.

To guide our trainings, we developed the TILC Instructional Framework incorporating the social, collaborative, and evaluative components of our learning community (Please see Reeves et al., 2015 for a discussion on the framework).

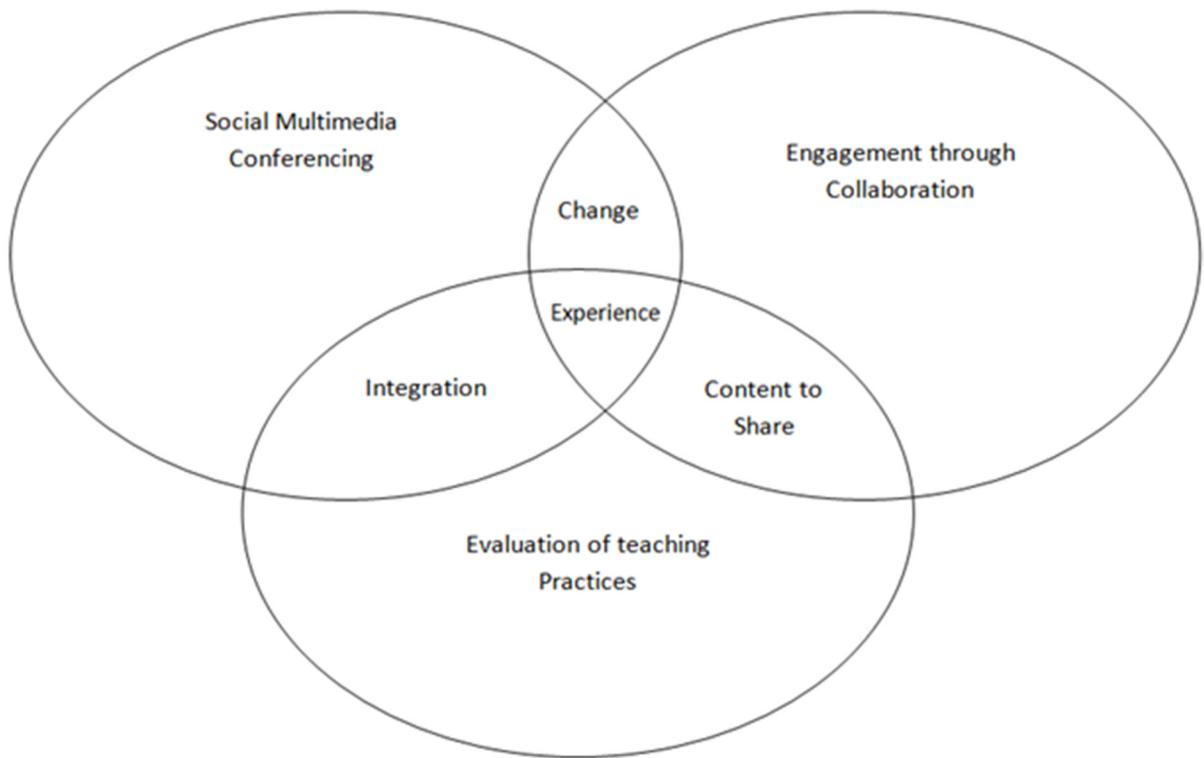


Figure 1. TILC Instructional Framework

Best Practices

Best practices for our TILC include defining clear and common goals, using a common communication platform, leading change by teaching each other, promoting transfer by discussing integration ideas, and holding each other accountable by challenging each member to integrate one new tool or technique into our courses each semester.

The goals of our TILC are to increase student and faculty engagement and promote integration of technology into our courses. We use a common video communication platform so that every member of the learning community feels a sense of connection. Although the members of our TILC are geographically dispersed, we do not feel as if we are working in isolation. Activities and training sessions are developed as a collaborative group, rather than thrust upon the community by the administration. This sense of community and collaboration is a key pillar to our learning community's effectiveness.

We hold monthly meetings where one member of our TILC leads change by teaching the other members about a new innovative tool and technique. Giving members the opportunity to teach each other creates a sense of engagement, responsibility, and accountability that benefits the community. In addition, offering the choice to teach or discuss a specific tool addresses two of the characteristics of the adult learner: the need to (a) control our learning and (b) focus on issues that concern us (Knowles, 1990). At the end of each meeting we promote transfer by discussing how to integrate these ideas into our classes. Regardless of skill level, group members help each other in an authentic way to move the group forward as a social community. Finally, we hold each other accountable by challenging each member to integrate one new tool or technique into our courses each semester.

The members of our TILC share, implement, and reflect on user-friendly and free technology tools that are easy to access not only for us, but also for our students. This is fundamental to our learning community: keeping it simple and practical. The members of our TILC have employed leadership skills by coaching colleagues during faculty retreats; at meetings; and local, state, and international conferences.

The presentation targeted K-12 educators and higher education professors and administrators who want to lead change by engaging students through the integration of technology. This presentation offered recommendations to establish a successful learning community related to any content area or interest. Modeling the ways in which this learning community interacts, we had traditional presenters (in the assigned conference location) and presenters at a

distance via video. This presentation reflected on best practices for design, recruitment, and sustainability of a learning community. We also shared with the audience lessons learned, our instructional framework, and tips for promoting transfer in the online learning environment.

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