

A Community of Practice: Promoting Effective Practices in Teaching Blended Courses

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Two descriptors: blended learning, community of practice

Abstract

Blended learning continues to be on the rise in higher education. Research shows that faculty needs professional development and support to successfully develop and teach blended courses. This article will share how a community of practice supported faculty for effective practices in blended courses and what lessons learned for future implementation. All colleagues passionate for student success in blended learning can learn and enlighten their own practice.

Introduction

Blended learning, drawing from best practices in both online and face-to-face learning, is on the rise at colleges and universities. *Campus Technology* conducted its first “Teaching with Technology” survey in 2016, and 71% of faculty respondents reported using a mix of online and face-to-face environments to teach. The New Media Consortium Horizon Report (2017) has identified blended learning design as a top trend to drive technology adoption in higher education.

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) is the largest public educational institution in Virginia and the second-largest community college in the United States. Because of the busy traffic issue due to its location in the nation’s capital metro area with six campuses, the institution has an increasing need for blended courses. While the college offers a three-week online course multiple times per semester to prepare faculty for teaching blended courses, there are no other continuing programs to support faculty when they are teaching blended courses in the real world. After each session of the online course is offered in the college, feedback is collected from faculty participants regarding their learning experience and suggestions for future improvement of this training program.

Although the feedback is generally very positive, a number of faculty indicated that some continued support after the online course is necessary if possible. The authors of this article, guided by the blending with purpose model (Picciano, 2009), developed a series of face-to-face seminars to continue support for faculty on one of NOVA’s six campuses in collaboration with NOVA Online that offers the online course college wide and Woodbridge Campus on which the onsite seminars were offered. This collaborative initiative in Spring 2018 intended to promote effective practices in teaching blended courses through a community of practice.

Literature Review

Blended learning is the “thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The Online Learning Consortium defines blended courses as courses that integrate online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner, where a portion of face-to-face time is replaced by online activity. Allen and Seaman (2016) categorized traditional teaching as having 0% of content delivered online and blended teaching as having 30-79% of content delivered online, but the definition appears to be broad and vague. Researchers recognized benefits of a broadly structured definition of blended learning since it allows institutions to adapt and use the term as they see fit and develop ownership of it (Sharpe, et al., 2006, p. 17). Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal (2004) argued that “blended

learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment, rather than a ratio of delivery modalities” (p. 3).

Blended learning provides students increased access to higher education because of its convenience, less seat time, and flexible schedule. Researches have also shown that blended learning can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Dziuban, Hartman, Cavanagh, & Moskal, 2011) as well as students’ satisfactions (Martinez-Caro & Campuzano-Bolarin, 2011). For faculty who have never taught online, blended courses can be challenging to design and teach as they need to develop new technological and pedagogical skills for this teaching modality. Research shows that professional development is crucial to prepare and support faculty to teach blended courses (Owens, 2012). Faculty must have the technological skills to design and maintain the online portions of blended courses. They also must have pedagogical skills needed for instructional methods unique to blended learning (Korr, Derwin, Greene, & Sokoloff, 2012).

Picciano (2009) identifies a blending with purpose model composed of six components: content, social /emotional, dialectic/questioning, collaboration/student generated content, reflection, and synthesis/ evaluation. Content is the primary driver of teaching and there are many ways in which content can be delivered and presented in a blended course. The model also indicates that teaching is not always just about learning content or a skill but is also about supporting students socially and emotionally. Dialectic /questioning is an important activity allowing faculty to probe what students know and help them construct their own knowledge. Collaborative learning, incorporating reflection, can be a powerful pedagogical strategy. The last element is synthesizing, evaluating and assessing learning. Although not every course needs to require students for group work and not every course should rely entirely on reflective activities, Picciano (2009) stated that the six components of the model should blend together in an integrated manner that appears as seamless as possible for students in a blended course. The learning objectives of a course should drive the activities and approaches of the model.

Picciano’s blending with purpose model guided the design and development of four conversational seminars on effective practices in blended courses, with a focus on an overview of blended learning and the seminars, developing and blending content, developing and blending interaction and collaboration, and developing and blending assignments and assessment for each session respectively. The sessions are open to all faculty on Woodbridge Campus, with a preference to faculty who have completed the college’s online training program and who have already taught blended courses in the real world.

A Community of Practice

The initial concept of community of practice originated from “Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation” (Wenger & Lave, 1991). Wenger and Lave think learning is “increasing participation in communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49). In his groundbreaking book, “Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity,” Wenger (1998) expanded the idea of community of practice, articulating how social resources shape people’s learning trajectories and their professional identity. Wenger thinks a community of practice is formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor. It refers to a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly with each other. The practice of a community is dynamic and involves learning from everyone.

Henri and Pudelko (2008) classified four levels of communities considering the strength of a group’s social bonds and the extent of its intentionality: communities of interest, goal oriented communities, a learner’s community, and communities of practice. Communities of interest generate knowledge solely for individual use. Goal-oriented communities, driven by external forces, carry out particular tasks within a specific timeframe. A learner’s community relies on the instructor for guidance and it generates both individual and shared products. Communities of practice are organized around professionals. The community members perform similar activities and use strong social bonds and high levels of intentionality to extend and improve their practices by generating and building a shared knowledge.

Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat (2011) presented the concept of value creation as a way to describe and assess social learning in a community of practice. The value is created as a result of community members’ activities and interactions with others. They defined five different cycles of value creation generated within a community of practice: immediate value, potential value, applied value, realized value, and reframed value. Immediate value refers to learning that is put to use immediately to solve a problem. Potential value refers to benefits related to shared knowledge and skills that can be realized at some time in the future. Applied value refers to application of shared knowledge and skills to new contexts. Realized value refers to knowledge and skills gained through a community of

practice made a difference in their ability to achieve important goals. Reframed value refers to the identification and definition of new criteria for success.

Data Collection and Analysis

The seminars were offered during the spring semester in 2018. Unfortunately, one of the buildings had flood emergency at the beginning of the semester. The campus was closed for one week, and almost 800 courses were moved and re-scheduled for the rest of the semester. While everyone was dealing with emergency, the seminar attendance rate was dropped. With all the efforts put into the initiative, three seminars were offered to cover all the planned content.

A total of ten faculty attended the three different seminars. Since each time had different faculty participants, we interviewed four faculty members who have participated in all the sessions. They are all female faculty, but they teach four different subjects and all of them have teaching experiences in blended courses. The interviews were scheduled right after the end of the spring semester in 2018. Each interview lasted for one hour in a quiet study room and a set of same questions were given to each of the four faculty members to answer. Further questions and comments occurred during the interview conversation. Four interviews were recorded with Speechy App for later transcription. It took about four hours to transcribe each recorded interview.

A brief summary of interview data is presented in the following table:

Themes	Faculty A	Faculty B	Faculty C	Faculty D
Faculty background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She teaches art history courses. • She has been teaching blended courses since the college started offering. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She teaches English courses as an adjunct faculty. • She has been teaching blended courses since 2011. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She teaches math courses. • She has been teaching blended courses since 2012. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She teaches chemistry courses. • She has been teaching blended courses since 2004. • She is the first faculty to start teaching chemistry blended courses.
Insights about blended learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She thinks most students like blended courses. • “Obviously less time in the classroom is attractive because they would rather be there for less time.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She likes blended learning and thinks it’s great for marine students. • She is concerned about not giving enough instruction in blended courses and feels insecure when not in the classroom engaging with students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She thinks that blended learning is absolutely necessary but it’s not for everyone. • Blended courses increase more online components for students working on themselves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She thinks engagement is a lot better with the required online or out-of-classroom learning component. • There is a little bit more preparation in blended courses compared with face-to-face courses.
Reasons for attending seminars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpful to know what other professors are doing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawn to the seminars because of the insecurities that she felt about her blended classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To find some new ideas for teaching. • To know what new emerging technology available for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To learn something new, in particular, about technology tools.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To improve her class for the students to make their English experience better. 	implementing into her teaching.	
What they have learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EdPuzzle Backward design approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology tools – the ways she can make it more interactive with students. The online lecture component Backward design approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New concepts New technologies Conversations with colleagues to discuss challenges and strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some really useful materials from the presentations Learning different perspectives from people in different disciplines Changed former perspective about science teaching
What not working for the seminars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Just a little too heavy on theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wishing more is done with the tools Trying to tailor things working for each disciplines is very difficult. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She wanted to know specific math hybrid courses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A little bit more hands-on probably needed for some sessions.
Whether seminars have met expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learned a lot Networking A lot of tools Theory part is helpful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It works through introducing new concepts and new technology as well as discussing the challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absolutely. It's actually way beyond that.
What else do you expect to learn or suggestions you have	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The same kind of interchange of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More technology tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Published new ideas and specific courses in the discipline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She is eager to set up more similar sessions more people can get involved in because it's going to help everyone grow

Discussion and Conclusion

Our observation of faculty's engagement in the conversation during the seminars and the interview data showed a very positive experience for faculty participants in general. All faculty have extensive experience in teaching blended courses, but they still think peer learning through conversational seminars is helpful. All of them want to learn what other professors are doing and what new ideas and new technology tools available to enhance their teaching. One faculty also shared her feeling of insecurity about teaching blended courses and expected to learn more through the seminars. The lessons we learned include 1) importance of community building; 2) incorporating both

design and technology components into the professional development program; and 3) balancing theory and practice with an emphasis on providing concrete examples from different disciplines.

All faculty interviewees liked the conversational seminars and the peer learning opportunity through networking with others and community building. Their learning include new pedagogical ideas such as different methods about assessment, new technology tools such as EdPuzzle, discussions on challenges and issues along with social networking with other faculty.

When asked whether the seminars have met their expectations,

Faculty D said:

“Absolutely. It’s actually way beyond that. I did not anticipate in learning much when I first came in. I didn’t anticipate but I did get more out of it.”

Faculty B said:

“I definitely learned a lot. One of my goals was definitely to network and that was 100% succeed. I definitely gained a lot of tools. The seminar was trying to tell us to do more interaction, and what it really shined was when you were showing us how to do this like the EdPuzzle tool.”

Faculty C indicated importance of peer learning and community building:

“I’m not sure why my other colleagues didn’t show on the seminars. We don’t have enough conversation with each other. Everyone is doing on our own. Nobody knows what others are doing. That’s the missing part.”

When developing the seminars, we tried to incorporate both design and technology into the sessions.

Faculty’s feedback showed the need of both components with a special favor on backward design approach and EdPuzzle as a technology tool.

Faculty A remarked:

“Hong mentioned that working backwards, like thinking about what you want them to know, develop assessment, and then build your lectures around that. I would do it in the other way so yeah that was just like something that stuck in my head ever since, that just makes sense and I never thought about it before.”

Faculty B commented:

“During the seminar, we discussed that thinking backwards, looking at the outcomes first, and then go backwards to identify content and design the activities, that’s very helpful.”

Faculty B also shared her wish for sharing more technology tools and Faculty D would prefer some hands-on work for some sessions.

Faculty C summarized her learning:

“Overview part is absolutely mandatory to help think about what components are important for hybrid, and then technology. The most important conversation with colleagues.”

While all faculty interviewees think theory is necessary, they shared a need to learn from practice through publication and concrete examples.

Faculty B remarked:

“In the beginning, theory part is helpful. It was interesting and it did make me think about things in a different way.”

Faculty A indicated a little too heavy on theory while Faculty C shared her wish to learn more through specific examples:

“I especially want to know specific math hybrid courses. Not just how people teach math hybrid in general, I would like to know something published and presented some new ideas.”

Interview data showed that it is important to make a proper balance between theory and practice with a focus on providing concrete examples from different disciplines.

In summary, the social bond among the faculty participants appeared to be strong and the extent of intentionality of the conversational seminars was high, which resulted in a community of practice (Henri & Pudenko, 2003). Although the interview data indicated that none of the faculty participants have tried the new ideas and new tools in their teaching right after the spring semester, the data showed that they are going to try the new knowledge and skills in the future semesters and the seminars also made a difference in their ability to teach blended courses. The seminars did not seem to have created immediate value and applied value, but they appeared to have created potential value and realized value through the community of practice (Dziuban, Hartman, Cavanagh, & Moskal, 2011). This collaborative initiative to promote effective practices in blended courses through a community of practice proves to be helpful and effective although faculty participation is not very high. Faculty feedback is also encouraging and constructive. The lessons we learned from our initial effort will lead to better planned sessions for our faculty through a community of practice in the future.

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