Creating Virtual Communities to Support Online Instructors

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The proliferation of distance learning in higher education creates the need for new communication venues to support online faculty. Although, many published research texts provide adequate suggestions and recommendations promoting good techniques for online moderators, the research does not adequately address the unique and temporally sensitive needs of faculty members. The purpose of this workshop is to explore the aspects involved in the Art Institute Online’s effort in building a faculty lounge to support the social, developmental, and communication needs of a geographically separated university. The seminar examines the steps required to identify and establish goals; the logistics of building a faculty support area; and ideas to ensure faculty participation once the lounge is operational.

Introduction

Instructors who teach online courses are often isolated geographically from one another and from their hosting institution. The term “university” implies a community of learners and facilitators who contribute to the body of knowledge. On-ground institutions enjoy the ubiquitous exchange of ideas in commonplace venues such as hall conversations, faculty lounge coffee discussions, lunch meetings and paper memos delivered in attendance folders or posted on bulletin boards. It is a challenge for online institutions to provide meaningful communication to serve the same purpose.

How does an online school bring geographically dispersed faculty members together to inform, elicit and inspire educators to improve performance? Many online education resources focus on the student experience and curriculum materials for delivery of the course. When faculty accept the role of online facilitator, a host of new challenges ensue, including a change in instructional style, increased preparation time, and reduced interpersonal contact with students (Milheim, 2001). Failure to provide the basics in faculty interaction and support results in a host of undesirable consequences, including: social isolation; missing the big picture about how the university is structured; overlooked policies, deadlines, calendars and training opportunities; and the omission of shared knowledge and experience among faculty about their field and teaching in the online classroom.

The kinds of experience faculty members can share with one another include online teaching tips, classroom experiences, and anecdotal lessons learned about unique encounters in class. In addition, participants experience consequential value in social contact and peer relationships through online work. The institution that recognizes these needs and provides adequate resources to meet them stands to dramatically improve faculty life and the quality of classroom instruction.

The Art Institute Online (AIO), a virtual university affiliated with the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, offers degree programs in Graphic Design and Multimedia/Web along with a host of general studies courses to support on-ground Art Institute schools across the country. Students complete each course entirely online through asynchronous web communication with faculty and fellow students dispersed throughout the US. Currently, over 100 adjunct faculty members serve as facilitators for AIO. In each 6-week session, students participate in class discussion a minimum of 5 out of 7 days. Faculty members are expected to check course discussions and answer questions within 24 hours.

In addition to philosophical support by the institution, developers will require a coherent approach to develop an interactive web-based faculty support resource. Those steps entail how to identify and establish the goals and benefits of a properly implemented faculty lounge; a focus on the technology, personnel, and information resources; and ways to encourage participation and utilization of the tools provided.
Current research in online faculty resources tends to focus on suggestions and recommendations that faculty members receive training and orientation about distance education, instructional technology and online facilitation. Short (2000) and Howell (2001) describe a framework for training and development which promotes learning for students with different learning styles. Finding out what kind of learner the students are can help to provide direction as to how online coursework should proceed during the term. Williams (2001) and Howell (2001) describe the importance of online discussion as a powerful tool for development, and recommend evaluating the difference in discussion-based learning against traditional lecture-based methods. The need for online faculty support materials and services is well-established by Howell (2001) who mentions studies that suggest the more time people spend online, the greater likelihood they will develop symptoms of loneliness and depression. Cagle (2001) also mention the need for a dose of education theory in addition to technology application training when conducting faculty development activities. Lan found that the more administration provided technology and instructional support to faculty members, the greater their likelihood to become motivated and develop positive attitudes toward the learning environment (2001). Lee (2001) also showed that faculty motivation, commitment and satisfaction were greater when facilitators received instructional support for their distance education courses. Finally, Yucht (2001) describe the results of an institution’s successful efforts to build an online teacher lounge, where teachers can discuss personal and professional topics that shape the life of the classroom instructor. These studies support the notion that online faculty resources are warranted, encouraged, and supported, but do not provide ample evidence of successful implementation.

Establishing the Goals

The rationale for developing and implementing a faculty lounge should stem from a set of problems or needs the organization identifies. These problems can begin with general descriptions, such as “We need to increase communication between online faculty members, because they are isolated from each other, and from us.” A more specific set of problems help refine the required inclusions in the toolset, such as, “We cannot easily disseminate reference information such as job descriptions, referral forms, and contact information” or “The faculty need to follow a process for pre-reviewing their courses and letting us know any content or technical difficulties prior to the first day of class.” The kinds of problems that the faculty lounge addresses do not all need to be extant. The solution may proactively deal with issues before they arise.

For AIO, the reasons to initiate a project to support online faculty began early in the program development. After starting up in 1999, the school experienced rapid growth, both in student numbers, faculty members to teach them, and support personnel to develop, write and deliver curriculum. As with any dynamic organization, the need to communicate to all parties is highly important, but traditional means were not available. Moreover, AIO’s operational model represents a major change from the system to which most faculty are accustomed. For instance, some students attend AIO courses exclusively, gaining their degree entirely online. Many other students are “hybrid” students, attending on-ground courses at one of 11 schools currently participating in the project.

Finally, to manage, administer and direct students at a distance requires ongoing training and support. All AIO instructors undergo an initial 6-week training course using the same platform students encounter. Once instructors gain the initial orientation and begin teaching in the online environment, it is important to continue to offer additional training in advanced facilitator skills.

Before undertaking a project that imparts widespread change for communication across the university, it is important to sit down with stakeholders and identify the goals. With targets identified, the project can move forward with the understanding that development is a process. As a living resource, it can be modified, extended, and improved. Although specific content topics will vary from one organization to the next, the general goals will likely include similar goals as those discussed in the next section.

Goals of the AIO Faculty Lounge

The Art Institute Online’s (AIO) education team members initially identified the following objectives that the online faculty lounge should address:

- Increase communication with and among online faculty members.
These goals were established with the understanding that as the faculty lounge grows, additional benefits and objectives will arise. A key design criterion is to create an architecture that is flexible enough to support future modifications. For this reason, the faculty lounge is a dynamic endeavor with no fixed end-result. Instead, the faculty lounge can grow to incorporate the needs of users and the hosting organization. Like some online courses, the faculty lounge should take on a life of its own, providing users with a rich, interactive environment.

**Identify the Potential Benefits**

Answer the question, “And what would that do for us (the faculty, the students, the courses, the administration, etc.)?” How will we know when we have been successful? Following are a list of ways to measure whether the faculty lounge project has achieved its stated outcomes:

- Faculty will report that they feel a greater sense of community;
- Faculty members find answers in the lounge spending less time searching for information;
- Administrators receive fewer phone calls and emails asking for repetitive information;
- Facilitators engage in faculty-driven professional development by sharing practical ideas for classroom management and problem-solving;
- Faculty members are able to cite example of techniques or approaches they have learned in the faculty lounge, techniques which improve their experience and the experience of the students;
- The quality of education improves as measured by student participation, discussions, and student surveys;
- Administrators communicate with the faculty in timely and effective manner.

These outcomes help build the vision for what the online faculty lounge can be and can accomplish. This knowledge inspires the passion and provides motivation for the starting, continuing, and improving the resource.

**Building the Faculty Lounge**

The practical steps involved in creating the online faculty lounge will vary depending on the technology resources available. The university may have extensive forums and discussion areas developed in-house, or they may rely on third-party products such as Blackboard or WebCT to create a suitable architecture for online lounge hosting within the delivery environment. These tools may significantly differ from those the students experience in the online delivery platform.

The first step is to identify the technology available on the hosting system. Most of the goals stated for the AIO faculty lounge can be addressed with web pages and a threaded discussion forum. AIO used the Intralearn platform, hosted by Embanet to deliver both online classes and host the faculty lounge. In this way, faculty members experience the delivery mechanism from the role of student and participant, rather than facilitator only. Moreover, the interface is one to which participants are accustomed, and does not require conversion from or to another system. The link to the faculty lounge can be easily placed in the same area the faculty uses to access their courses. If additional technologies are needed to meet the objectives, such as chat-room, white-board discussion, voice and/or video, those resources should be identified and mobilized from the start of the project. The next step in this project is to ask the following questions: who will conduct ongoing coordination for site content and faculty lounge resources, and who holds the initial static information to be included on the site? The role of the coordinator is important, and the responsibilities may not be readily apparent.

**The Coordinator**

Without a coordinator to drive participation and content, a virtual space will sit virtually unused. Regardless of the quality of the content, worthy intentions and adequate resources available, someone must be responsible to build, design, and post new content. Moreover, the coordinator must check in and administer the forum like a classroom, by welcoming newcomers, asking for meaningful input, and blackholing the participants to dive into their areas of expertise to benefit
The coordinator should help create regular interaction opportunities for faculty members in order to facilitate sharing of ideas and building a culture of online participation.

Conclusion

Creating any substantive project requires setting and achieving a host of smaller goals that support a main purpose. Building an online faculty lounge is ultimately about helping instructors to improve instructional and learning performance in the classroom. Ongoing development and support will continue for many months. Underlying the purpose of the faculty lounge is the implied social contract that stimulates participants to improve and grow as a result of peer accountability. The commitment to improve is a joint responsibility, shared by administrators and faculty members alike. The faculty lounge is a support system and set of practices to help establish and achieve a more fully realized sense of the term “University”.

References


Biographical Sketches

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http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/
Wayne Batchelder has worked as an adjunct instructor for The Art Institute Online since its inception. He has taught for the Art Institute of Dallas since 1997, and has served as webmaster, curriculum developer and committee chair in several disciplines. Wayne has owned and operated a website design and delivery boutique Studiotech for several years and brings his experience as a designer and business person to the education environment. Wayne has presented at two previous Conferences on Distance Teaching and Learning.