
A Strategy for Building Community and Knowledge Management

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Background

The University of Virginia's School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS), serves a broad, ethnically diverse and talented community of over 15,000 adult students each year. The SCPS mission is to facilitate lifetime learning by providing educational opportunities of the highest quality so that learners can achieve their personal and professional goals. This mission will be accomplished by developing and delivering University educational programs of the highest quality at times and in places consistent with the needs and interests of our learners.

The School for Continuing and Professional Studies operates seven regional academic centers throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. Annually, more than 100 resident and 500 adjunct faculty teach with SCPS, and nearly 16,000 adult students enroll in University of Virginia programs offered by SCPS via its academic centers. For their online courses offerings, SCPS serves between 100 and 150 adjunct faculty and close to 3,000 students annually. Online course offerings range from education, accounting, engineering, physics, procurement and contracting, web-design and development, to philosophy.

In 2005, the school transitioned from offering online courses through multiple Learning Management System (LMS) platforms, externally administered, to a single platform, the Blackboard LMS, internally administered within the School. As a result, several key components needed to be addressed to ensure a successful transition from multiple to a single, internally administrated Blackboard LMS, including how to provide faculty and students access to appropriate training and support resources, as well as how to foster a sense of community.

Method

To determine how to most effectively create and maintain quality support and training as well as

to facilitate an online teaching and learning community, SCPS conducted a needs assessment to identify constituency needs. Needs are defined as gaps which have been identified and that exist between the current conditions and the ideal conditions for goal achievement (Kemp, Morrissey & Ross, 1996). Conducting a needs assessment serves as a tool to isolate needs and then select an appropriate solution (Kaufman & English 1979; Kaufman, Rojas, & Mayer, 1993).

Information for the needs assessment was collated from responses to an online survey which was developed using the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey, and which was emailed to online instructors (n=85) at the start of the Fall 2005 semester. Instructor responses were kept confidential and their individual identities were not recorded. In addition to the survey, technical support records, individual feedback from instructors, as well as interviews with the SCPS Director of Instructional Design and Blackboard Administrator, who provide training and technical, administrative, and pedagogical support for the SCPS online learning community, were examined. (The response rate for the survey was for instructors 34%).

Results

The results of the needs assessment indicated that SCPS online instructors' focus was on technical and administrative aspects of learning to use Blackboard. Instructors also indicated that there was a lack of community and, therefore, no mechanisms for easily sharing ideas and resources, recognizing a job well done or addressing common, perhaps unarticulated concerns. Nor, was there a venue for showcasing innovative or effective instructional solutions using Blackboard. For performance feedback, instructors relied on students' course evaluations at the end of the term – or complaints from students during the course. Finally, no incentive mechanisms existed intrinsically or externally to excel, although it can be assumed that for most instructors this motivation is an intrinsic, individual goal.

Conclusion: An e-Solution

To address both the online instructors' training and affective needs, SCPS made the decision to develop an online monthly newsletter. An online newsletter format was chosen because this format has the ability to quickly deliver information to large, geographically dispersed audiences (Van Horne & Myrick, 2001). The goal has been to keep the newsletter simple, elegant and appropriately succinct in order to keep readers engaged rather than overwhelmed with information.

The contents of the newsletter include a) a brief exploration into a specific Blackboard feature b) an illustration of how a member of the online instructional community utilizes that particular feature within Blackboard in a course c) an introduction of a new Blackboard feature or d) a discussion of topical issues that require additional feedback and guidance from the SCPS Blackboard Team. Topics are determined based on frequently asked technical support questions and from ongoing feedback from online surveys which are regularly sent out at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester to gauge the instructor's interest and ability in specific Blackboard tools and pedagogical approaches.

Implementation This newsletter was originally designed with the help of the SCPS Design and Production department and created as an HTML template, using the web authoring tool, Macromedia Dreamweaver. The Blackboard Team then customizes and populates this template with content. The newsletters are sent out monthly via Microsoft Outlook to all SCPS instructors

who are teaching or who have taught using Blackboard. The newsletter is embedded directly into the page of the e-mail.

First Edition The purpose of SCPS's first edition of the online newsletter, titled Chalk Talk (Appendix A), was to introduce the newsletter's concept as well as acquaint instructors with the Blackboard Team. The newsletter featured a photo and description of the staff, their job responsibilities, and summarized that these were the people behind the Help Desk phone call and the technical support emails. The newsletter highlighted the other support services available to instructors and that the newsletter would be sent to them monthly. The newsletter also directed the instructors to try a brainteaser a question that quizzed them on a particular Blackboard functionality. Instructors had the ability to reply via e-mail and the first response received by the Blackboard Team containing the correct answer was deemed the winner and that instructor sent an SCPS t-shirt as a prize.

Initial Feedback This method for encouraging interaction proved successful. Within minutes of sending out the initial newsletter, two instructors responded to the brainteaser. Several others used the “tell us how we're doing” feature to express encouragement and enthusiasm over receiving the newsletter.

The newsletter sent out the following month featured an interview with the instructor who correctly answered the initial aforementioned brainteaser by describing how she used the Course Statistics function in Blackboard to track student participation in the forums. (Appendix B) The newsletter included a photograph of the instructor along with screen captures showing how to access and use Course Statistics. SCPS also added an additional resource provided by the instructor with tips for encouraging student participation in the Blackboard forums. Because the instructor was so well versed in using Blackboard, particularly in facilitating student discussion, SCPS arranged a live one-hour chat session, led by the “winning” instructor, to share and discuss her online experiences with others in the online instructor community.

With the immediate success of the newsletter, SCPS decided to circulate a similar newsletter to online students, providing an initial printed-out version in the registration packet given to new students who might not yet have access to Uva email accounts and thus would not yet be able to receive the e-mailed version. Subsequent editions are then sent out during the semester via e-mail, following the same process as the instructor version. Content and approach are similar to the newsletter for instructors, with the intention of developing the students' confidence and facility in using Blackboard, and improving their online learning experience by participating with a community of fellow learners. (Appendix C)

In addition, SCPS has sent out Special editions of the newsletter at strategic points throughout the year. The start of the Spring 2006 semester included a Special Registration Edition for both student and instructors, to remind instructors to request their Blackboard course shells prior to the beginning of the semester and to encourage students to check that their registration has been successfully processed.

Summary

Based on continued feedback, SCPS is confident that thus far, the online newsletter Chalk Talk, has been the most effective mechanism by which to facilitate the following:

Instructors:

- Make instructors aware of what their colleagues are creating online
- Share best practices with a monthly feature article and showcase examples and success stories
- Encourage and facilitate dialog among instructors
- Keep instructors informed of changes in policy or remind them of current policy
- Introduce new Blackboard features and tools
- Inform instructor of upcoming internal and outside training opportunities
- Answer questions
- Connect instructors to teaching resources
- Recognize a job well done

Students:

- Inform students of how and where to obtain essential login and administrative information
- Share top tips for being a successful learner with a monthly feature article and showcase examples and success stories
- Encourage and facilitate dialog among students
- Introduce new Blackboard features and tools
- Answer questions
- Connect students to support resources
- Recognize a job well done

The broader value of the Chalk Talk evolutionary process is found in the support examples and practices that have resulted from developing and distributing this online newsletter. These types of resources are readily transferable to a variety of educational settings based on the examples which have been created and can be easily re-created to benefit other institutions and organizations. To further help guide other institutions who may be interested in creating an online newsletter, SCPS has created a step by step guide for creating an online newsletter, *Is an e-Newsletter Right for You?*, which any institution can easily adapt for individual use. (Appendix D)

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