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# The Evolution of Peer Driven Training for Teaching Online Courses

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## Introduction

Online courses at Bergen Community College (BCC) began in the late 1990's with an imperative from the college President to develop online courses. Senior faculty members who dared to experiment with this new mode of teaching had to learn how to design a course and how to use WebCT, a new course management system, on their own. As these faculty leaders (and those that followed) learned the painful lessons through trial and error, it became obvious that something more was necessary. WebCT training was conducted through faculty office visits so colleagues could share the burden of learning the system. The next step was a series of group workshops on how to use the tools in WebCT, designed and delivered by those same senior faculty members. After seeing a presentation about professional development at the League of Innovations conference, the faculty leadership was responsible for the creation of what would become The Online Professor Program (TOPP). TOPP, a vision of sustained professional development in both the technology and the pedagogy, was designed by faculty for those faculty members who wished to teach online. Support and encouragement was provided by the administration in the person of the Vice President of Technology and Information Services.

Although it started as an experiment, TOPP has grown into a program that has officially trained over 50 faculty members in the introductory and now required TOPP Level 1 program. Another 10 to 15 were impacted by the initial TOPP workshop offerings before compensation was arranged. TOPP covers three distinct levels, with Level 1 required of any professor who wishes to teach online or partially online (hybrid) courses at BCC. TOPP Level 2 continues the development during the first semester of teaching online, and after the second semester of teaching online a professor can go on to TOPP Level 3, based on the WebCT Exemplary Course Project. TOPP's three levels provide continuous professional development from novice to professional levels, supporting faculty beyond just the initial transition to the online classroom.

Not only are faculty who complete these training programs compensated, but the TOPP Team faculty who run the program for the Center for Instructional Technology and Distance Learning (CIT) are compensated for designing and leading it. The TOPP Team includes faculty members from the Arts and Communication, English and Business departments. Since the summer of 2005, TOPP has added both instructional and administrative support from the CIT Coordinator and an in-house Instructional Designer, both active TOPP Team members. These individuals

bring instructional design experience that augments the ability of the TOPP Team to effectively design and deliver a quality training program.

## **Faculty Professional Development**

As Online Distance Learning (ODL) emerges from the academic fringe and into the mainstream of higher education, colleges struggle with the impact of both the technological and pedagogical change on faculty. Recent studies and literature reviews regarding faculty participation in distance learning refer to the lack of institutional support and faculty training as barriers to expansion (e.g. Bower and Hardy, 2004, Hinson and LaPrarie, 2005, Schifter, 2000, Thompson, 2003). Training faculty to utilize technology, to understand appropriate pedagogy and the methods to design online courses are all considered a part of the institutional support issue (e.g. Abel, 2005, Fetzner, 2003, Boettcher and Conrad, 2004, Palloff and Pratt, 1999). The administration at BCC and the faculty union representation played a critical role in the development of the first distance learning memorandum of agreement on professional development and compensation. Without both sides coming together in a professional manner, a program of the depth, breadth and reputation of TOPP would not be possible.

Designing the best possible professional development program required that there be strong ties to the research on best practices and online pedagogy. Transitioning from a traditional classroom to the online classroom is a substantial shift to make, changing pedagogical approach, moving from the transmission method of teaching and learning to a more interactive student-centered one, and integrating technology into the teaching process (Bennett and Lockyer, 2004). The greatest difficulty involved in TOPP Level 1 is the concept of appropriate curriculum design, the pedagogy of teaching online, which very few faculty members have experience with.

When researching the basis for a high quality Online Distance Learning (ODL) faculty training program, the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) is one of the first resources mentioned. This document serves as the thread that ties the best practices and pedagogy piece of TOPP together. The follow-up article on Implementing the Seven Principles (Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996) specifically speaks to the application of technology, and relates examples of how technologies can be applied to leverage the power of the seven principles. Each TOPP Level 1 learning module has strong ties to the seven principles in the resources, assignments, discussions, assessments and in the modeling of behaviors by the TOPP facilitators.

Historically, TOPP Level 1 had been a face-to-face training program. It was an intensive challenging period of two to three weeks where faculty supported one another as they absorbed best practices in teaching online, applied the Seven Principles of Good Undergraduate Education, learned the principles of basic instructional design, and how to function within the WebCT Campus Edition course management system. At the end of the workshop series faculty built their course materials before submitting their course to a final review. During development several TOPP Team members were available for one-on-one assistance.

Each time TOPP Level 1 is offered, the participants' file end-of-training evaluations which are used to further refine the program. Teaching faculty respect the views of their TOPP trainers, for these are colleagues, known practitioners, considered experts in their own field, and may have something of substance to say with regards to their experiences in online teaching and learning: "Having colleagues with whom to share ideas, strategies, frustrations, and information can play a

key role in facilitating growth and developing new approaches to shared instructional tasks and problems” (Reilly, 2005, ¶ 4).

## **Rebuilding TOPP and Planning for Growth**

Over 110 online course sections are now taught in each of the fall and spring semesters, with an additional 70 sections offered over the summer terms. This number is expanding by about 10 percent a year, yet the institution is interested in a rapid increase to meet an expected leap in the college population. When the CIT was asked how it could support triple the number of online course sections currently offered, which also meant triple the trained faculty over the next several years, the faculty who run the TOPP program and the staff of CIT who support distance learning efforts were asked to take a hard look at how TOPP could evolve into a more flexible program that would scale.

In the winter of 2005, while the ODL Tactical Plan was being developed, the TOPP Team of faculty and staff researched the possibilities. If TOPP was to scale to meet potential demand and triple the output of trained faculty in a given year, the program needed to be reevaluated. The task was to tear TOPP down to its original elements, establish competencies for each module, and offer a more flexible balance of online and in-person opportunities to complete the program. In June of 2005, TOPP Level 1 was offered with several changes including a skill assessment utilized to identify faculty needs before the workshops began, a rebuilt and expanded set of resources (by module) in WebCT, an expanded use of rubrics throughout, including an overall rubric that faculty could refer to and the trainers would use to evaluate the course design. Two specific changes were a result of previous evaluations and observations made by the TOPP faculty team. The program kickoff included an immersion of the faculty into an online course module at the very beginning, to model for them what it is like for their students. A course sharing showcase was revised to greater highlight an opportunity for faculty to present their course at two distinct stages to the TOPP team and to their colleagues for feedback and idea exchange.

The initial two-week online module in which faculty were asked to function as students was very well received. Beginning with an online module also helped faculty appreciate the experience of building a learning community. Faculty members' basic computer skills were assessed so that they could seek the assistance they needed to successfully complete the program. While an overall evaluation and sign off of each faculty member's course had been conducted each year, the rubric used for this evaluation was reconsidered along with two other known models of excellence: The Quality Matters Peer Course Review Rubric (2003) and the California State University at Chico's Rubric for Online Instruction (2003). The resulting new TOPP Level 1 rubric not only reflected the best combination of all three, but is customized to the TOPP Team's expectations for faculty developing their first online course in TOPP Level 1.

In the next phase of redeveloping TOPP Level 1, based on feedback from both participants and the TOPP Team, the length of the program was extended in order to more realistically spread out the tremendous amount of work that is expected in this process. It also allows faculty the time to absorb and reflect upon the learning that takes place. Instead of an intense two to three weeks, the experience is extended over four months with milestones for faculty to meet the skills requirements. Faculty who are more advanced can pass competencies and skip some face-to-face workshops by providing to any member of the TOPP Team the proof (in their WebCT course shell) that they have met the competency. This moves the program to a more flexible approach and allows the TOPP Team to personalize attention to those who need it and not require all

members to move lock step in the workshops. However, the program, which for now resembles a hybrid course, contains four online modules that everyone must participate in over the spring semester during specified timeframes. While the team needs to offer more flexibility regarding in-person workshop requirements, the forced participation in the online portion helps to promote a community of learners who will get to know one another and contribute to each other's education.

The online modules assist faculty to work through the theory while the readings, activities and discussion work help to scaffold the skills of the participant while modeling an effective online course. For the first time, TOPP Level 1 has adopted an official text, *Teaching Online* by Ko and Rossen (2004). Utilizing portions of the textbook to accentuate and enhance activities is another way to model effective practices. Through these practices, TOPP Team members will enable their colleagues to see the real possibilities (and pitfalls) that exist for vibrant learning communities while expressing authentic course experiences that their fellow faculty members appreciate. Expectations of support once the training has ended must also be clearly communicated to faculty ahead of time. Why would faculty put themselves in a position of great vulnerability if they had to do it alone?

### **TOPP Level 1 – Spring 2006**

In February, TOPP Level 1 began with an in-person orientation where the TOPP Team was introduced to the participants, and expectations for the program were clearly communicated. Over a four month period, faculty engaged in four online modules, with each lasting between 10 and 20 days. The Online Student, Planning, Organization and Learning Modules, Assessment and Communication Options, and Thinking Like a Designer all challenged the TOPP Level 1 participants to take assigned readings and homework assignments, grasp the important concepts in each module, describe how they would apply what they've learned through discussion and complete a set of exercises that served as competencies.

Specific technological competencies had to be met by the end of May, when the intense building of the courses would begin. By this point each faculty member should have a skeleton of how their course would be mapped, with goals and objectives read for their course and each of their learning units. Workshops both during the spring semester and in the first two weeks of June provided (for those who needed it) an introduction to how faculty utilize specific tools in WebCT during a given semester, along with hands-on training in the actual building of course materials.

At the end of June a presentation/review day was held so faculty could present their course shells to date, and have the opportunity to see each other's work along with an explanation of the choices each faculty member made in the building of their course shells. This course sharing presentation continues to be the highlight of the program. In mid July a final presentation is made to colleagues and to the TOPP Team. The outcome of this review is the final evaluation by the TOPP Coordinator who makes the final decision whether a course is ready for the Fall semester. Following each of these presentations or reviews, an email is sent to the participant with the combined comments of the TOPP Team members, highlighting both the strengths of the course and the areas that still need improvement. Where possible, positive reinforcement is stressed and examples of best practices are used to suggest paths of improvement.

### **TOPP Levels 2 and 3**

In the first semester of teaching online, faculty members can elect to take TOPP Level 2. Though faculty are compensated for taking TOPP Level 2, not every faculty member chooses to take it (but most do). TOPP Level 2 consists of regular workshops during the semester where the faculty members meet as a group with a single TOPP Trainer, who leads the group through discussion of their issues while teaching their first time online. Faculty in this workshop series continue to enhance their courses through more advanced use of the WebCT toolset and incorporating things like streaming video clips as ways to introduce learning units and interactive study-aids to expand self testing options or drill and practice opportunities.

In the third semester of teaching an online course, faculty can elect to take TOPP Level 3, the last of the three levels of ongoing professional development. Faculty is compensated to meet with a TOPP Trainer to elevate their course to the level similar to that required by the [WebCT Exemplary Course Project](#) (n.d.). In comparison to TOPP Level 2, a small percentage of faculty sign up for this third level of training. In the case of both Level 2 and 3, TOPP Trainers work with faculty to encourage greater interaction in the courses and the enhancement of the shift from a teacher centered to a student centered learning environment through the use of the Course Management System.

## **Conclusion**

By modeling the effective practices of community building, and preparing faculty to engage in a collaborative, student-centered environment, the activities in TOPP Level 1 serve as a form of scaffolding, building trust and skills so faculty can feel confident to operate in this new type of learning atmosphere. It is an essential part of the training design process (Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves, 2003).

Peer driven training at BCC, while considered successful, continues to refine itself in order to become more flexible for current faculty who are taking TOPP Level 1 now, and to set the stage for those who may wish to in the future. TOPP Level 1 is in the midst of a continuum between the totally face-to-face training program that was initially developed, to the fully online option to come in the near future. Along the way, no option of TOPP is eliminated, but all possibilities become available to the individual, giving all faculty members the opportunity to personalize the program as they need to, without forcing a lock step approach in training for the entire group. Whether or not the ODL program growth at BCC occurs over the next few years, the CIT and the TOPP Team will be prepared to take on the challenge.

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