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# Introducing Online Learning at a Small College through a Faculty Learning Community

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## Abstract

As online learning in higher education continues to grow, the diversity of institutions offering such options also grows. However, small private institutions have been the slowest to adopt online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2006). The challenge for the smaller institution is often the lack of technological resources and support for faculty. The demand for online learning requires that smaller institutions find creative ways to successfully introduce online learning options. This paper examines the use of a Faculty Learning Community to introduce online learning at a small college and shares the outcomes of the process.

## Introduction

The availability of online course options in higher education continues to grow in response to student demand for the convenience and autonomy in learning that online courses provide (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Nearly all types of higher learning institutions offer some online courses, with both larger and public institutions typically providing the most offerings. In contrast, small, private four-year institutions are least likely to offer online course options (Allen & Seaman, 2006).

Intuitively, it makes sense that larger institutions have more online course offerings. Larger institutions see more diverse learning needs from their student populations leading to a higher demand for online course offerings. Additionally, when compared to smaller schools, larger ones will likely have more technological and other resources to ease the introduction of online courses. Essentially, faculty interested in designing online learning options at smaller institutions may lack the means to do so. Further, reluctance for smaller institutions to enter the world of online learning often goes beyond technological capabilities and student demands. Smaller institutions tend to have strongly held cultural beliefs that create barriers to the introduction of online learning. When a college has institutional practices geared toward traditional approaches to learning, adopting online learning presents a challenge (Davis & Fill, 2007).

A small liberal arts college located in the Midwest took a unique approach to overcome the

challenge of introducing online education. The College administration determined that the need to remain competitive and meet students' needs required they consider online course offerings. To support faculty in this pursuit, the College established a Faculty Learning Community to lead campus efforts in designing online course offerings. This paper will explore the College's use of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) to introduce online learning and summarize the outcomes of this initiative.

### **Online Course Development using a Faculty Learning Community**

The College's early entry into online learning involved three individual faculty members who developed the first online courses at the College independently. However, the faculty who developed the courses suggested that more formal professional development and ongoing support were needed in order to offer further online courses (Martyn, 2003). As the College began exploring online course delivery options, a grant became available to support the development of an FLC to provide a structure in which to introduce faculty to the concept of online learning at the College.

The use of FLC's for faculty development is a growing practice (Richlin & Essington, 2004). An FLC can be defined as a "cross-disciplinary faculty group of five or more members engaging in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, interdisciplinary, the scholarship of teaching and learning and community building" (Cox, 2002, p. 14). FLC's can be cohort-based or topic-based (Cox, 2004). Cohort-based FLC's bring together a group of faculty with similar developmental needs, such as junior faculty members. Topic-based FLC's address a particular campus teaching and learning need.

In the case of this College, the topic of online learning was a good fit for an FLC. With the grant support, the College established the FLC and titled their project "Creating Engaging Experiences Online." A team of administrators and technology experts selected eight members from a group of faculty applicants. The FLC members were from a variety of disciplines including Business, Education, English, Health and Physical Education, Music, and Sociology. All members were paid a stipend to participate in the FLC and offer an online course. Part of the stipend was paid after the initial FLC meetings, and the remainder was paid after each individual's course was offered.

College administrators assigned staff to the FLC including a group facilitator and a technology professional to move the group forward. Group objectives were set and the eight faculty members selected were required to meet every other week over the course of an academic year. The following sections discuss the staffing support, the direction for the online model provided by college administration, the group objectives, and the process the group used to redesign the courses.

#### *Staff Support*

A group facilitator plays an important role in an FLC by acting as the group coordinator, champion, and energizer (Petroni & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2004). For this College, the facilitator coordinated the group by scheduling the meetings, setting the agenda for each meeting, and working with the administration to ensure the courses would be offered and that the courses met all college academic requirements. The group's facilitator, a faculty

member with experience in designing an online course, was an advocate for change, challenging the group to think beyond their past experiences to approach course development from a new perspective. Finally, the facilitator strived to facilitate a collegial environment that encouraged group support and decision-making thus ensuring progress toward goals.

The group worked with a senior technology professional who met regularly with the group to provide a variety of resources which included recommending readings, technology demonstrations, and meetings with individual faculty members for training and technological assistance. Because technological expertise was not a requirement for inclusion within the group, the members came with varying levels of ability. Some required basic course management system training while others received training in more advanced technological opportunities such as developing podcasts.

### *The Online Learning Model at the College*

The FLC's introduction of online learning would establish a framework for the development of future online courses at the College, thereby increasing the importance of the acceptance of these online courses. Prior to creating the FLC, college administrators considered how to offer online learning options that were in line with the College's mission of providing a personalized approach to education. This was the basis for emphasizing two important components; that courses be hybrid in nature and each contain an experiential learning component.

First, the courses would be hybrid. That is, the courses would have a face-to-face component where the course instructor has an at least one initial meeting with the class all together at a designated time. This decision was made with the first online course offerings at the school as noted by the faculty who developed them, "facing a college culture that was averse to distance learning, the team developed the hybrid online model to ensure the college's mission, *a quality education with a personal touch*, would be upheld" (Martyn, 2003, p. 18).

Second, the courses would include an experiential learning component. Experiential learning engages students in personalized learning by providing them with opportunities to go beyond the classroom setting to apply theory to real-life practice. The direct, personal encounter of experiential learning supports the learning process more than a typical case study or other representation of the real-world (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). Because experiential learning is emphasized throughout the curriculum at the College, incorporating it into the online learning experience was an important way to maintain continuity with the rest of the College's curriculum.

These two components, hybrid course delivery and an experiential learning opportunity, provided the basic framework to allow members of the FLC to move forward with developing their own individual courses, and defining specific parameters for future online course development and delivery.

### *Group Objectives*

Prior to forming the FLC, the group facilitator worked with college administration to establish clear objectives for the group. These objectives would serve to direct the group's

actions and also to evaluate the success of the FLC initiative. The objectives of the FLC were to:

1. Understand best practices in both hybrid online learning and experiential learning.
2. Develop a common institutional vision for hybrid courses at the College.
3. Redesign and offer eight courses that exemplify best practices in hybrid online learning and experiential learning.
4. Assess the effect of this delivery method on student learning within each course.
5. Convey outcomes to both on and off campus constituents.
6. Sustain connections made among members of the FLC including being supportive of each other beyond the scheduled timeline of the FLC.
7. Be proponents of distance learning at the College by serving as facilitators or mentors to other colleagues interested in this type of learning.

### *Course Development*

All courses were developed within the Blackboard Course Management System. The potential hybrid courses were all courses currently or previously taught by the FLC members. Therefore, each member was charged with redesigning a course to fit the specified model.

During the course development process, the group met every two weeks for one academic year. FLC group members read materials and studied the nature of hybrid courses and experiential learning while completing assignments related to the redesign of their courses. These assignments were shared and discussed at each session.

The first assignment for group members was to redefine course objectives for each course and to determine the course organization (e.g. chapters, modules, units, etc) as illustrated in the example in Table One. These two areas, when integrated, were the foundation from which all course content and supportive activities were developed. The course objectives were student-centered statements about what the student would be able to do upon successful completion of the course. Assignments, resources, and supportive learning activities reflected each of these objectives. Decisions on course organization could be time driven (how many weeks allotted for the course), text/resource driven (number of texts/resources that were integrated and how these resources may be logically presented for optimum learning), or a combination of these two.

Table 1  
*Example: Outline of Course Objectives as Aligned within the Module Activities*

<b>Week No.</b>	<b>Course Objectives</b>	<b>Course Organization</b>	<b>Course Activities</b>
1	Introduction to the hybrid course	In person session	Introduction activities Group building activities Intro to the technology
2	1 Students will be able to explain or describe historical origins of special education including the role of parents, other leaders,	Module 1: History of special education	Video: Real Lives Chapter 1: Hallahan & Kauffman Timeline building Power Point Highlights

professional organizations, and milestone legal and philosophical development. Students will be able to explain or describe forces impacting special education, including how these forces relate to current laws, and to individualized educational planning.		& topic based Group Discussion Boards
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The next assignment for the group was to determine the learning activities that would support the course objectives (an example is presented in Table Two). The FLC determined to present information, encourage discussion, collaboration, assimilation, and application of content; faculty would use five different types of content/learning activities:

Text Reading/Presentations—These were assigned readings from texts, web sources, and pre-recorded lecture presentations, as well as faculty-prepared PowerPoint presentations.

Discussion/Collaboration—Through blogs, discussion boards, chat rooms, and wikis, students could engage in sharing information and ideas about content in formal and informal settings as well as collaborate on group projects as assigned.

Audio/Video/Links—Uploaded videos, PowerPoints, and audio resources would be made available to students to enhance content and provide audio/visual presentation of content for potential discussion and reflection. Also, faculty incorporated links to websites in content areas for enhancement of general learning and they gave specific assignments that prompted students to search for appropriate links for inclusion as assigned.

Activities/Research—Written assignments for submission that included requests for specific information as well as reflections on other learning activities might be included in this category. Assignments submitted via assignment links, Digital Dropbox, or e-mail might be individually considered by the faculty member or shared with other students as faculty deemed appropriate and supportive of the content learning area.

Experiential Activity—This piece was a “capstone” for some courses and for others an on-going process. These may be in the form of in-the-field observations, interviews, or other fieldwork.

Table 2  
*Example: Learning Activities*

Course Objective	Course Content				
	Text Readings/	Discussion/ Collaboration	Audio/Video/Links	Activities/Research	Engagement Activity

	Presentations				
<i>Ex. Defining Human Capital   The students will be able to describe the theory of Human Capital and provide examples from case study organizations</i>	<i>Human Capital, Why People Invest Davenport, pages 1-63</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Video on HC in organizations today Links to HCI institute readings.</i>	<i>Defining HC in your own organization – what do you see?</i>	

The final two steps for most course redesigns were to (a) develop the agendas for the in-class, face-to-face meetings, and (b) create an “advance assignment” which students were to complete (and produce some product) prior to the first face-to-face class meeting. The advance assignment prepared students to fully participate in the first and often only class meeting by familiarizing the students with specific aspects of the course material.

Following the redesign of the courses, the FLC continued to meet and provide support to each other as faculty began delivering their courses. This support included giving feedback about course delivery, assisting with establishing course management practices, and problem-solving student related issues.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Progress**

As the FLC moved through the process of course redesign and implementation, individual faculty encountered barriers, found certain additions and deletions as well as made necessary adaptations to the five learning activities for their specific subject areas. Some members needed to adapt their own mindset regarding the materials and implementation of the redesigned course. As online learning was new to the faculty, the group needed to carefully consider how current materials would be used by the students without the guiding hand of an instructor in the room. The group had to take into account all of the possible stumbling blocks that may be encountered as the student engaged with the materials in the course.

While the group worked on the courses across the year, time still created a considerable challenge. The re-design of a traditionally delivered course to the hybrid format required more than simply posting materials on a Blackboard site. Materials needed to be revised, expanded or created to accommodate a learner who is not present in the classroom. For example, many FLC members already had PowerPoint slides that were used within the traditional delivery format. However, simply posting the slides in the hybrid course site was insufficient. The use of PowerPoint slides entailed first determining if this was the most effective delivery method for this type of course. If this was the case, both a revision of the content and in many cases the addition of verbal commentary to the slideshow was necessary. With time as an issue, the task often resulted in both the creation of a script and a considerable amount of time spent recording. Many members found that despite being

knowledgeable about the slide content, a script was necessary to stay on track and to ensure a consistent and higher quality output.

An additional issue, again related to time, was management of the course during implementation. Some members were still working on modules as the course began. Given the amount of time needed to manage the course, the additional pressure of completing a module in time for the next sequence was daunting to some. For others, management of the course during implementation was simply a matter of being new and different. Some members were still getting used to using technology such as discussion boards, blogs and wikis. Thus, monitoring and responding to those sites was a new experience.

Further issues tended to be student related. Attendance at the first face-to-face class session was mandatory. Despite this requirement, a student would inevitably miss the session and still request admittance to the course. During the first session, explanation of course requirements included demonstration and practice of the technologies used within the body of the course. However, students would still run into technical issues often related to their own computer equipment at home. These issues were typically easier to accommodate. Yet, many students would tend to work on their courses at odd times of the night, running into a technical glitch unrelated to their own equipment that would have to wait until morning to be resolved. Also, some students were not prepared for the rigor of the hybrid course. Completion and submission of assignments became an issue for students who might have been expecting a greater degree of flexibility and easy material.

As individual FLC members faced these challenges, they called upon other group members for guidance and support. Each shared ideas and experiences that helped the group successfully develop and offer each course despite challenges. The presence of committed colleagues focused on helping each other succeed helped each faculty member overcome the barriers to course implementation that they may not have been able to overcome on their own.

## **Outcomes**

The course development process led the FLC to establish “best practices” for the future development of hybrid courses at the College. These guidelines were provided to the College’s faculty governance body to support decision-making related to offering hybrid courses. The general recommended parameters follow.

1. Enrollment is limited to 16 students and should not exceed 20.
2. Each course will have a face-to-face orientation session the first day of class that familiarizes students with course content, engages students in community-building experiences and provides a basic orientation to online learning course procedures for those new to this type of learning.
3. On the last day of class, students will attend a face-to-face final examination that also provides opportunity for closure and discussion/resolution of any problems encountered.
4. Each course should have the following elements:
  - a. A significant experiential learning component that has the following elements: planning, reflection, and evaluation.
  - b. Use of the discussion board or other online methods to facilitate collaboration among students.
  - c. Extensive use of audio/visual media to enhance student learning.

- d. Multiple methods of assessing student learning.
- e. A required major project or paper.

In addition to identifying the course development and delivery standards, the FLC also wrote guidelines for faculty who plan to develop and offer hybrid courses at the College. These guidelines follow:

1. **Course preparation.** Instructor should have a majority (preferably all) of the course prepared and available on Blackboard prior to the start of the course. Course management is time consuming; therefore, having the course prepared in advance will allow the instructor to focus on course facilitation during the course delivery.
2. **Communication expectations.** The instructor should set expectations on his or her responsiveness to e-mail or telephone communications with the students during the course orientation and should follow these expectations. Due to the lack of face-to-face contact, students will feel more connected to the course if the instructor responds in a timely manner. The instructor should set expectations that he or she can realistically commit to, however, our recommendation is a return e-mail or telephone call within 24 hours.
3. **Feedback to students.** Instructors must be prepared to provide detailed written feedback to students on assignments. Detailed written feedback is necessary to ensure student learning as the instructor cannot provide face-to-face feedback. We suggest using assignment rubrics for grading to make providing detailed feedback less time consuming.

Similarly, given that the students and the instructor do not have much contact time (compared to a traditional class and classroom setting) it is important to establish and encourage a “community of learners,” which will be enhanced through course content as well as technology tools. The goal of the hybrid course is to maintain the students’ involvement with the material, the instructor, and each other. To facilitate this involvement, the following assignment and activity examples are suggested for faculty developing hybrid courses:

1. Include some group work assignments, in which designated small groups of students work online to solve a problem or show applicability if a situation based on, for example, a posted news article. Technology tools make it possible to establish private group discussion areas in which members of the group must collaborate to co-author and submit a paper.
2. On the first day of class, photograph each member of the class, then post the photos in a created “People” button on Blackboard, including individual names and e-mail addresses. During the course, classmates can “visually” reference the other students with whom they are communicating.
3. Include a “Course Q&A” button of Blackboard, so that questions posed by students to the instructor can be answered and read by all members of the class. Interestingly, students often end up answering each other’s questions.
4. Include assignments where group discussion is required. For example, instead of simply posting a video to be viewed, students may be grouped to engage in a discussion of the video.

Finally, the FLC developed a course rubric to capture the students’ evaluation of the courses to ensure that the courses contained the characteristics that the FLC determined were important. The FLC utilized materials and evaluation prototypes from “Quality

Matters” ([www.qualitymatters.org](http://www.qualitymatters.org)), a non-profit organization focused on ensuring quality in online education, to develop the rubric. Table Three provides the rubric along with the results from the first four course offerings generated by FLC members. While this rubric does not provide evidence of student learning, it does emphasize the course characteristics that the FLC determined would ensure student learning.

Table 3  
*Student Evaluations of Initial Course Offerings*

Course Evaluation Question	*Avg.	Mode	Median	SD
Syllabus is complete and detailed; a printable version of the syllabus is included. A detailed schedule of activities is provided.	4.98	5	5	0.182
Learning objectives are clearly stated for the course, learning units/modules and for each course assignment or activity; all objectives are observable and/or measurable	4.73	5	5	0.520
Course content follows a logical sequence. Each learning unit or module begins with an introduction and includes an instructional activity.	4.56	5	5	0.621
All assignments and activities include detailed, clear instructions and student expectations; assignments are to be submitted via Blackboard, discussion area or Assignments area	4.62	5	5	0.628
Detailed instructor contact information is present; an introductory announcement is in place. Instructor and students correspond through the discussion board or other online method.	4.68	5	5	0.520
Instructor posts regularly during the term; instructor makes use of the discussion board, blogs, wikis or other collaborative tools.	4.68	5	5	0.595
Students use the discussion board regularly during the term to post thoughts, opinions or questions; students are encouraged to reflect on and reply to classmates' posts	4.37	5	5	0.935
The orientation session was a valuable use of time. It met the objectives of familiarizing student with the course and providing students with the opportunity to introduce themselves and interact with other class members.	4.62	5	5	0.718
Instructor provides timely and frequent feedback on tests, projects, etc. to help students improve.	4.30	5	4	0.996
All course content is credible; all sources clearly identified; all required copyright permissions are in place	4.63	5	5	0.603
Presentation of course content is clear, straight-forward and well-written; no typos or grammar problems found	4.68	5	5	0.595
A variety of resources are identified (e.g. digital librarian, electronic textbook resources, external links, etc.) and are easy to access; clear instructions are included for all resources	4.58	5	5	0.546
Navigation is easy to follow and consistent; alternative ways of navigating the site are available	4.65	5	5	0.606

All links work; all images display correctly; all media files work; clear technical instructions are provided; technical support contact information is clear	4.26	4	4	0.827
All hardware, software, and plug-in requirements for the course are specified	4.50	5	5	0.860
Audio and video elements are instructionally appropriate and enhance student learning; Large files are accompanied by a file size statement	4.50	5	5	0.621
Students are required to participate in an experiential (learning by doing) activity.	4.62	5	5	0.534
In addition to testing, students are required to complete a major project, papers, or other assignments; students may be required to keep a portfolio or learning log	4.72	5	5	0.504
More than one assessment technique (exams, projects, etc.) is used to evaluate student progress.	4.60	5	5	0.595
Based on your experience in this course, you would take another course in hybrid format at B-W.	4.14	5	5	1.214

\*based on a 5 point scale

## Discussion and Implications

The use of an FLC to introduce online learning at the College was effective for several reasons. Faculty acceptance and the time and effort required to teach online courses may put significant limits on how rapidly online programs may grow (Allen & Seaman, 2007). The use of the FLC was key to the adoption of online learning at the College because it helped individual faculty to develop courses, and also helped establish a framework for online learning on campus. Beyond course development and faculty training, FLC's are a vehicle for both institutional and personal change (Petroni & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2004). In this case, the group was not only charged with developing their own courses, but also with developing guidelines for other faculty to use in future course development.

FLC members also committed themselves to provide mentoring to other faculty interested in developing online courses. For example, one FLC member agreed to facilitate a second FLC that is working on developing hybrid courses for another group of faculty. The FLC member will share the outcomes from the first FLC and work with the new FLC members to further the development of hybrid courses on campus. As the College's interest in offering online courses increases, this initial FLC will continue to mentor and provide guidance to faculty new to the online course development process.

FLC's operate in such a way that they encourage faculty collaboration across disciplines (Cox, 2004). In this case, faculty acceptance of online learning was encouraged as faculty from different disciplines were engaged in a dynamic and supportive environment to learn and share about developing effective online courses. Research has demonstrated that collaboration in developing online learning is particularly important to faculty who are new to online learning. Working with colleagues can help overcome feelings of self-doubt and loss of confidence in working with this challenging new teaching medium (Davis & Fill, 2007).

The structure and facilitation of the FLC were important to ensure that the initiative was

successful. FLC's tend to be more effective if the FLC members are interested in and committed to the project, and if administrators are supportive (Shulman, Cox & Richlin, 2004). In this case, FLC participants were required to demonstrate their interest in participating through an application process. Further, college administration demonstrated their commitment to the group through providing additional funding support and complete technical support including the assignment of a technology staff member to the FLC.

For the individual faculty members that participated in the FLC, the dynamic of the group coupled with the technical support allowed each to move forward more confidently with course development. Research has suggested that faculty need such support in developing online courses because it is time consuming and often requires more effort than developing traditional courses (Tallent-Runnels et. al, 2006). The success of this FLC supports the research cited demonstrating the benefit of providing members with the technical support and course development training.

The FLC employed an effective and systematic approach to introduce online learning gradually into the College. The FLC provided the necessary support to individual faculty and created a group of champions for the adoption of online learning across the campus. The result of the FLC efforts was a hybrid model of online learning that will allow for future online course development at the College.

## **Conclusion**

Initial response to the hybrid courses from students at the College has been positive. In fact, in a post-course survey of students who completed the first offering of the courses, 76% either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they would take another hybrid course at the College. This finding is consistent with previous research that has shown that students with positive online learning experiences often wish to pursue further courses online (Tallent-Runnels et al, 2006). The College plans to continue offering the courses developed by the FLC and is working with faculty to identify other potential courses for redesigning into the hybrid format.

Interest in online learning will continue to grow as more and more students experience online courses (Brown & Corkill, 2007). Growth influenced by the student's experience is a key issue institutions should be prepared for as they begin exploring online options. As more students enroll in courses, they may find that the demand within the institution will grow beyond current offerings. Therefore, institutions must remain pro-active in preparing faculty to teach online courses.

Through the establishment of a Faculty Learning Community, the College was able to successfully introduce online learning without abandoning the "personal touch" to education that is the College's foundation. While the initiative is still in its infancy, the process described here allowed faculty across the College to build consensus on the design and use of online learning regardless of discipline. In addition to the role the FLC members played in actually developing the hybrid courses, they are expected to serve as mentors to other faculty interested in developing a hybrid course. Through this commitment, the availability of online learning options at this small college will likely continue to grow.

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