Rapid Online Teaching and Learning (ROTL), Leading with Action During a Worldwide Pandemic

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Abstract

In a rapidly evolving climate wrought with a multitude of challenges and complications, transitioning seated courses to an online format resulted in creative and positive changes which resulted in student success and faculty resilience. This research project was developed by a leadership center at a large land grant university in an effort to create tools and resources for community colleges who requested coaching support during the transition from seated courses to Rapid Online Teaching and Learning (ROTL). Project outcomes included access to one-on-one coaching services between instructional designers and community college faculty, live webinars on topics related to the rapid transition, and the establishment of a host of resources created to provide support.

Introduction

Higher education institutions are adept at developing innovative approaches that identify solutions to challenges. During complex times, historically, institutions of higher education are the source of creating reassurance and teaching students to problem solve during times of disruption (Steiner & Laws, 2006). Covid-19 brought on circumstances for postsecondary institutions that were unprecedented; however, it also brought opportunities to connect with students and one another in unique ways, the chance to collaborate with colleagues, and it provided space to demonstrate compassion. This research project was initiated with funding intended to support the rapid transition from seated to online courses specific to community colleges. University faculty worked remotely to support community college leaders and faculty with instructional videos on resources to best serve students with issues to accessing technology, lessons on how to reduce bandwidth, and share virtual tools to promote communication during times of uncertainty.

Literature Review

Designing an online course takes time (Durak & Ataizi, 2016) that instructors during the COVID-19 shift were not afforded. High-quality online instruction requires the use of up-to-date tools and technologies (Pollacia & McCallister, 2019), peer-review (Shattuck, 2012), engagement (Bartlett, 2017) and the assessment of student learning outcomes as well as institutional commitment (Legon, 2015). Instructors who prepped for the spring 2020 semester to teach in a face-to-face classroom were caught off-guard when instruction transitioned quickly to online delivery methods. The shift to Rapid Online Teaching and Learning (ROTL) did not all for the time or tools needed for high-quality online instruction; however, fierce dedication to their role as an instructor and dedication to

provide the best quality instruction to students as a way to keep student learning progressing forward during this pandemic was evident demonstrated by the number of requests received for support. Instructors embraced this sudden shift, defined as, "Emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances." (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020).

Even before COVID-19, institutions of higher education recognized the fact that while students perform well in compressed online courses, there is a reduction in their performance (Holzweiss, Polnick, & Lunenburg, 2019). Often, students seek online courses because of the flexibility, specifically non-traditional students, for example those who commit to full time employment and who serve as caretakers (Daniel, 2000). It was noted in 2017, that nearly one-third of all college students were enrolled at a minimum, in at least one distance education course (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018).

Study Rationale

This case study was spearheaded by two university faculty in order to examine a program that was organized and put into action for community college leaders and faculty in their transition to ROTL. Understanding the specific types of supports project participants found most helpful may contribute to the knowledge base needed by distance learning administrators to provide resources to faculty who are transitioning from seated courses to online learning in non-pandemic or future crises. Faculty resilience in overcoming barriers can be seen in the types of help requests project participants inquired about. Faculty participation in webinars, live one-on-one coaching, live group coaching, and evaluation feedback were critical ways in further understanding how the project participants were supported during this time.

It is no surprise that when "both curriculum and engagement opportunities are reduced to fit into a shorter time frame and in-person interaction is not possible, the ability for students to master learning outcomes and retain the information long-term may be compromised." (Holzweiss, Polnic, & Lunenburg, 2019, p.302).

Research Questions

The following research questions helped frame the study:

Research Question 1: What does a program look like that helps community colleges navigate through challenges associated with transitioning their seated courses to an online format?

Research Question 2: How can universities and community colleges collaborate in times of disruption?

Methodology

This case study was conducted to examine a large program that was put together quickly to assist community college faculty in transitioning their seated courses to a rapid online learning setting. Hollweck (2015) posits that "...case studies can be used to capture the complexity of a case, including temporal changes, as well as explore the contextual conditions of a case." (p. 109). Data was collected using Google Forms used for project registration, webinar and coaching evaluations, and feedback from coaches and faculty project participants. Analysis was performed by identifying emerging themes in the Google Forms, discussion during webinars, and emails from participants and coaches.

Program Description and Brief Results

The project was initiated by one university faculty member on the leadership team for graduate programs who identified a colleague to partner with to lead the project efforts. Within 24 hours, the two project leaders had identified a team of individuals who were qualified to serve as coaches who would later work one-on-one with community college faculty members who requested support. The two faculty project leads started the project by creating a webinar titled *Quick Course Transition: F2F to Online* and reached out to colleagues to help market the webinar. Webinar attendance led to an anonymous gift from a funder to help move the work forward. The first hire for the project was a project manager whose primary role is to match the needs requests with the appropriate coach. Next, coaches were hired to help provide guidance and hands-on support to community college faculty members in both individual and group coaching virtual settings. Another colleague took responsibility to process the paperwork involved with hiring and paying the coaches.

Webinars

The initial webinar, *Quick Course Transition: F2F to Online,* was offered three times with more than 180 unique individuals in attendance. Following webinars were titled, *Communicating with Students Online* and *E-Advising Guidance for Success*. Webinars ranged from 18-60 minutes in length. After the unfortunate appearance of an unexpected and inappropriate web conference guest, we required registration in a Google Form in order to receive the web conference link. The most recent webinar had over 300 registrants, with registrants from outside of the state. Additional webinars were planned with topics covering demonstrations of online tools for e-advising and mindful course design for student success.

Coaches

Coaches were hired as contract workers who were paid hourly based on their prep and coaching time. Coaches were hired from several different universities around the country and had various learning management system experience and topical backgrounds. Some coaches held pre-scheduled, weekly, and online coaching office hours that were open for drop in help.

By starting with local offerings for support, the services grew to state, then resulted in invitations to present at the national level. Participant responses have indicated that the need for support continues, is valuable in the efforts of faculty to sustain agile learning opportunities for students, and that ROTL is possible with effective support systems in place.

Types of Coaching Help Offered

The Google Form used to create a 'help ticket' directed participants to select one of three forms of help: 1) short-videos tutorials on a specific topic, 2) individual coaching, 3) and/or a live group coaching session.
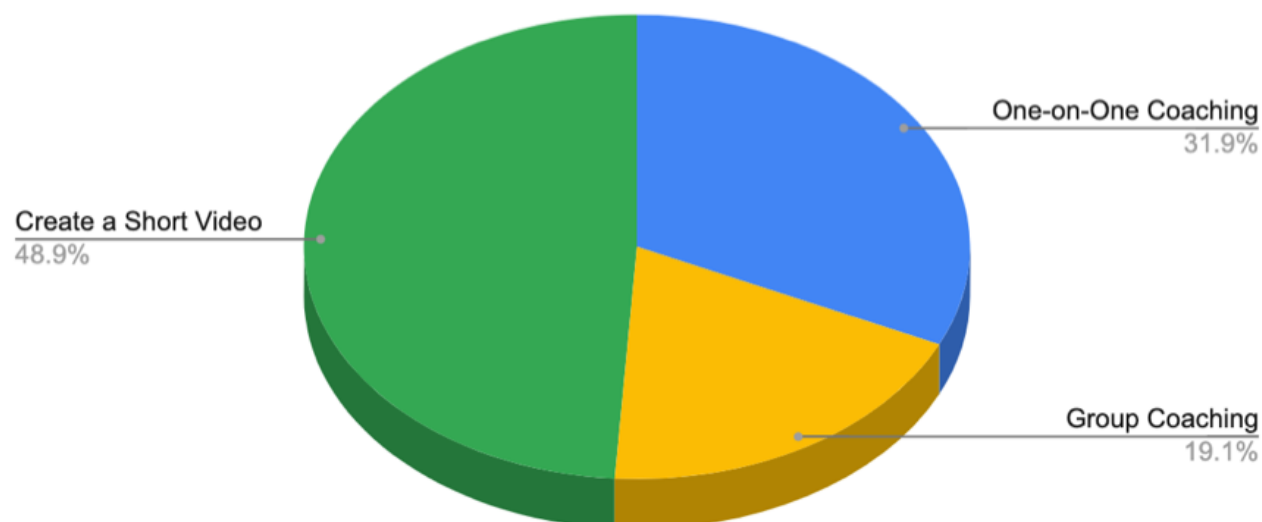
Figure 1. Types of Help Requested: Create a short video, one-on-one coaching, and group coaching

Overall, the most requested type of help requested by the project participants was the creation of a short video (48.9%), then one-on-one coaching (31.9%), and lastly group coaching (19.1%).

Short Video Creation. Short instructional videos were requested to provide a demonstration on small specific things such as how to embed Playposit into Moodle, to more broad requests such as active learning in the online environment, how to revise course assignments, and using Google applications to teach. The video tutorials and above-mentioned webinars led to the creation of a YouTube Channel accessible by anyone who needs support with transitioning.

Table 1. Topics of Short Videos Created

Topics Requested to be Covered in Creation of a Short Video
Moodle / Blackboard ultra
Transitioning seated classes to online classes
Effective Engagement tools
Instructing students who may not have access to computers or internet during this time.
Videoing
Making relative critical thinking activities that can be used in online or traditional sections.
logging hours via google sheets
Curious about applied programs and what others are doing
Active learning in online environment
Need help with Chat feature in Moodle
Video Lectures
Transitioning Content to a Virtual Platform
How to handle lab hours of a course/ Transitioning hands-on labs
How to keep students' attention
How to set up theory part of cosmology program online
Any Anatomy and Physiology topics
Blackboard Collaborate, Zoom, Student Engagement Help Online
Online course development / Moving truck driving curriculum online
ESL and CCR Orientation
Welcoming students to the online environment
Motivate students
How to use zoom; how to make online teaching more interactive
Presentation via online effectively
Teaching technology over technology.
How to use Sketchnotes

Note. List is summarized from Needs Request form faculty submitted to generate a help ticket.

Individual Coaching. Individual coaching session requests led to a quick match with a qualified coach. The coach would reach out to the community college faculty member to set up a time to meet via web conference. Coaching sessions were followed up with an evaluation form. Individual coaching session requests ranged with some examples being: organizing your online course, planning and facilitating quality discussions, and recording effective micro-lectures.

When asked "What would you like covered during your individual coaching session?" most of the responses ranged from help with one specific skill to overarching help needed. Also, some faculty had never taught online and needed help with how to set up a discussion forum while more seasoned online faculty, who hadn't prepared to teach online for that particular semester, knew how to get information online but needed extra hands to get it done quickly. Requests ranged from how to be a host in Zoom to more specifics such as "I am trying to re-create our Tier Tests (3 of them) in Moodle so that our Transition Math students have the option to test at home (via a smarter proctoring service) instead of coming to campus. I have started formatting the test questions in Word, but I could use some help with that, as well as uploading the questions to Moodle, adding pictures to some of the questions, and pooling some of the questions".

A majority of the requests centered around organizing the course, engaging students, working within the learning platform, planning and facilitating quality discussions, recording effective microlectures, and how to send invitations with passwords to class; however, some of the more technical course faculty had challenges outside of the normal online teaching practices as stated by one faculty request, "I use Moodle for the learning portal. This is a Baking and Pastry Arts class. This is typically a hands-on class. I have already worked on it in Moodle. I would say I need help and guidance and best practices since I am not in front of the students while they will be making the assignments. So, think of a food network kind of an environment."

Group Coaching. Group coaching sessions sometimes involved conversations with a department of program faculty such as discussions centered on how to transition a truck driving program to online delivery. Another format of group coaching supported small groups of faculty and administrators in a discussion about ways to implement virtual crucial conversations and how to deal with cheating in online classes.

The review of requests submitted for support in the format of group coaching included several themes. Themes consistently recognized throughout all of the submissions of requests for support included tools and ideas for the development of lab support for courses and how to provide training to faculty and students, how to use zoom, how to transition from seated classes to online delivery of courses, how to transition courses successfully, support for accounting and bookkeeping courses, the management of faculty online presence, engaging students, and managing screen sharing and files.

One group coaching session in particular with community college department heads focused on the communication processes and the request indicated a need for, "discussion of communication in a 'lean' fashion; crucial conversations in a virtual world, making critical decisions for student success when under stress and with uncertain information about future jobs; dealing with cheating in the online classes".

Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Future Research

The project outcomes resulted in the identification of several implications for practice and a call for future research. Teaching online and in person will forever be changed by the way education adapts moving forward.

Implication for Practice #1: Transition from Rapid Shift to Design Principles. Faculty were overwhelmed through the disruption but remained focused on their students' success. As semester roll forward and much of the world remains teaching and learning online, future supports for faculty should be around the transition from emergency placement of content online to a more structured

online course around high-quality online course design principles, such as *Quality Matters* (Gregory, Rockinson-Szapkiw, & Cook, 2020; O'Keefe, Rafferty, Gunder, & Vignare, 2020).

Implication for Practice #2: Professional Development for Faculty. Leadership in higher education settings took time to invest in the professional development of their faculty. Faculty were forced to gain new knowledge and skills related to teaching online. Many institutions identified that one of their greatest needs during the pandemic was to provide resources and training to faculty to support their transition to an online delivery format. Organizations, specifically community colleges, continue to shift their course offerings to an online format.

Implication for Practice #3: Flexibility and Compassion. Recognizing the need for flexibility and compassion was critical throughout the pandemic in the promotion of student success and completion. The moment of enlightenment begs the question, why aren't we flexible and compassionate all the time? Moving forward pandemic after-effects will remain. Students will continue to experience challenges with child-care, losing loved ones, and working from home. Now more than ever is the time to commit to being flexible and sustaining the personal and educational growth of our students with compassion. In addition to supporting students with flexibility and compassion, it will be essential to extend that same empathy to our colleagues and grace to ourselves.

Recommendation for Future Research #1: Consider the Context. This forced transition to Rapid Online Teaching and Learning has stirred eLearning designers to raise their voice in defense of the already existing stigma of online learning (Kizilcec, Davis, & Wang, 2019). Researchers must separate the data during the ROTL semesters due to COVID-19 from the data collected from high-quality online classes that were prepped with the time and mindfulness needed for quality teaching and learning in online environments. Instructors who transitioned to ROTL deserve credit for overcoming fears, spending late nights and early mornings working to shift content into online platforms, and adapting to change so quickly. It is unfair to compare their outcomes to the outcomes of courses that have been rigorously designed over time.

Recommendation for Future Research #2: Student Outcomes. As we move beyond Spring 2020, it will be imperative to examine the impacts for students due to their experiences in Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and beyond. Future research could focus on redefining what contributes to student outcomes, aside from the measures in place prior to COVID-19.

Recommendation for Future Research #3: Impact to Faculty and Staff. Research would be helpful around areas of impact to faculty and staff. For example, examining work/life balance, job loss, mental health challenges, travel and professional development cuts, delays to promotion, and effects to research productivity.

Recommendation for Future Research #4: Institutional Outcomes. Taking into consideration the impact of the institutions' budget, athletics programs, supporting student and faculty access to technology, and training of faculty will be priorities for research moving forward.

Conclusion

Faculty in higher education are resilient and so are the students. Educating college students during a pandemic reveals the commitment of educators and leaders and fosters a future for online teaching and learning that encompasses compassion, empathy, and rigor.

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