Stakeholder Summary
OCAD pilot examines cross-disciplinary development of online learning

Capitalizing on the diverse range of experience and knowledge of its faculty, OCAD University launched a program to bring faculty from different disciplines in its School of Design together to develop online learning resources. A new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) found that while this collaboration did expose faculty members to new teaching strategies and techniques, the online resources were met with a mixed response from students and instructors. The authors argue that for the process to be more successful there should be clear guidelines for development of online resources and how they are integrated with in-class learning.

Project Description

Cross-Disciplinary Collaborative Course Design: Successes and Challenges from an Implementation at OCAD University examined the process and results of faculty from five of the six program areas in the Faculty of Design working collaboratively to develop online modules for third- and fourth-year professional practice courses in the winter 2014 term. These courses are designed to give students skills and techniques to be successful in their professional careers after graduation. Topics include starting a business, intellectual property and project management. Instructors were free to include as many or as few of the nine modules as they liked in their curriculum in any way they saw fit. Faculty involved in the creation of the online modules were surveyed during and after course development, course instructors were interviewed while teaching the courses and students were given a questionnaire mid-way through the course.

Findings

Faculty members noted the process of collaborating with their colleagues was similar to both how designers work in the professional world and how they ask their students to engage in group projects. They also felt that the process of developing online content helped them rethink how their in-class teaching was structured and how students receive and process information. However, their unfamiliarity with the process and technologies created many challenges to developing content and may have diminished the quality of the modules.

Use of the online resources was inconsistent, with some courses including multiple modules and others using only one of the modules. Integration of the online components with in-class materials was also inconsistent, with some courses having module completion account for a significant portion of the course grade. One reason for the inconsistent use was the lack of instructor controls for quality, which some instructors flagged as "inferior." Complaints were made about spelling and grammar errors as well as online quiz components that did not align with the content of the module.

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Student responses to the online modules were quite mixed, although courses that integrated fewer modules tended to be met with more positive responses. The courses that integrated the modules closely with the in-class experience and were strongly incentivized were also reviewed positively. However, students also had concerns about the quality of the modules, with some noting they were not sophisticated enough and were "a little too common sense."

Preconceived notions around online learning also posed a challenge to successful development and use of the modules, both for faculty and students. Many faculty had concerns about the institutional move towards online resources and perceived them solely as cost-saving measures. Although OCAD University has an e-learning strategy, none of the participants in the study was aware of it, despite many expressing a desire for a more sustained and philosophical institutional approach to online learning. Students in hybrid classes using the modules also questioned if they were getting "value for money" by having only two hours per week of in-class learning.

These findings are in line with a recent HEQCO report on technology-enhanced instruction. That report cautioned that new digital tools should be rooted in specific learning goals and that faculty and students are more likely to be successful with new technologies if they are given proper training and time to become familiar with them.

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