Learning Technologies in Higher Education: Supporting Transformative Practice

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This paper presents a summary of an evaluation study (2000 - 2002) on a faculty professional development initiative called the Partnership Program. The program paid for faculty release time to develop technology-enhanced instructional projects supported by an instructional development and evaluation team. The program was evaluated in the context of faculty instructional transformation and was designed to assess the program's impact on their core values, and models of teaching practices; Department's and Faculties' acceptance and support of learning technologies; the context in which they are evaluated for innovative instructional practice; and the influence of a Centre for faculty professional development on the university's learning culture. Outcomes for the study include an evaluation of and recommendations for programming for faculty professional development and support and models for peer review and evaluation of innovative instructional practices.

Introduction

One of the guiding questions for the Partnership Program study is: does faculty member’s involvement in the collaborative design of an e-learning course (or object) influence their understanding, and subsequent application of, instructional theory and practice?

Context

The Partnership Program study used quantitative and qualitative methodologies and primarily addressed change on an individual and institutional level. For this paper, the focus will be on changes in beliefs/attitudes and practices occurring at an individual level. A total of 16 faculty members/Partners, out of a pool of 50, participated in this study. Half the Partners were Associate Professors, a quarter were full professors. Only 12.5% were Assistant Professors. The demographic characteristics are interesting and warrant future study.

Description of Partnership Program

Beginning in 1995 and ending in 2000, the Partnership Program provided an opportunity for 50 faculty members to develop technology-enhanced instructional products such as online courses, and learning objects/models of instruction. Faculty instructional time was purchased over one term and, with the support of an instructional development and evaluation team (Academic Technologies for Learning or ATL), faculty members participated in collaborative instructional development projects.

Findings

Within the Partnership Program study, two models to guide the vision and practice of ATL emerged. These different models carried different implications for the focus of engagement between faculty members and instructional development staff. One model contained a strong pedagogical and research orientation to use the design process and end product to create an innovative teaching and learning environment. Some participants aligned with this orientation also included transformative faculty development as a part of this model. The other model contained a strong technological orientation to demonstrate the capabilities of the technologies within different disciplinary areas and to promote the use of technology.

ATL staff self-reported their alignment with one or both of these models. Staff who aligned with a pedagogical orientation talked in interviews about sorting through pedagogical issues and changing instructors’ attitudes towards teaching and learning, bringing people, “on board slowly, gradually in a developmental approach rather than the commercialization and production model.” They also described the process as looking “...at the curriculum and content and [attempting] to extend faculty awareness of the needs of the students and how technology can be used to enhance their learning.”
ATL staff who aligned with a technological orientation placed an emphasis on graphic or website development, the promotion of technology use, and training faculty to use the technological tools themselves. Staff noted that they hoped the faculty would “leave with an appreciation of the time and effort it takes to do some of these [graphics, audio...] things.” One staff member described a success story in which a professor “wanted to use PowerPoint and ran into every problem possible and she still went back and did it again.”

In this context, staff perceived their role to include developing graphics, coaching faculty to become more comfortable with technology, and promoting the use of technology. One instructional development staff member described how “the Production Studio had two roles: firstly, to do development for Partners...and secondly, to train faculty...” to use technological tools. Another staff member also noted that “ATL fostered the learning ecosystem and has influenced the University in a positive way” suggesting that ATL has contributed to the university through the introduction and support of innovative technologies to the campus.

Partners who worked and formed a relationship with ATL staff with a pedagogical orientation were more likely to change their pedagogical views on teaching and learning practices. One Partner commented on how she

Another Partner stated how he was grateful for the advice on the pedagogical aspects of on-line learning or alternative delivery... I spend time with my students explaining the technology, how it works and why I’ve chosen to use it to make sure that they feel comfortable... They need to have good pedagogical reasoning...

Partners who aligned with this orientation tended to report changes in their teaching philosophy and practice through inclusion of technology in their teaching.

Partners who worked and formed a relationship with ATL staff who hold a technological orientation, however, were less likely to change their pedagogical views on teaching but gained an appreciation for technology, stating that “basically my philosophy has not changed, but for convenience sake I think technology should be used.”

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the orientation of instructional development staff in a collaborative instructional development environment impacts the likelihood of a transformative professional development experience. The data suggests that alignment between faculty and instructional development staff with a pedagogical orientation is more likely to result in changes in beliefs/attitudes and teaching practices. Further research is needed to explore how the alignment and/or non-alignment of orientation between faculty and instructional development staff impacts their relationship and the outcomes of a collaborative development process.