Digital Campfires: Innovations in Helping Faculty Explore the Online Learning Wildness

Campamentos Digitales: Innovaciones para Ayudar a la Facultad Explorar Aprendizajes no Gobernados Online

Patrick R. Lowenthal
University of Colorado Denver
Denver, CO 80217, USA
patrick.lowenthal@ucdenver.edu

David Thomas
University of Colorado Denver
Denver, CO 80217, USA
david.thomas@ucdenver.edu

Abstract

Institutions of Higher Education find themselves in difficult times where budgets are being cut while the demand for online learning increases year-to-year. While budgets are cut, the cost to design and to develop courses online is increasing. Given this, colleges and universities need to find creative yet effective ways to develop more online courses. The staff at CU Online have found one method to accomplish this - web camp. The following article outlines how one university uses Web Camps throughout the year to not only meet the growing demand for online learning but also improve the quality of courses being developed.

Keywords: Online course development, Faculty development, Professional development, Online course quality, Collaborative course design, Online learning, Enrollment Management

Resumen

Las Instituciones de Educación Superior se encuentran en dificultades cuando se reducen los presupuestos en tanto la demanda para aprendizaje online aumenta año-a-año. Mientras los presupuestos se reducen, el costo de diseñar y desarrollar cursos online está aumentando. Debido a esto, los colleges y universidades necesitan encontrar vías creativas pero efectivas para desarrollar más cursos online. El equipo directivo de CU Online ha encontrado un método para lograr esto—el campo web. El siguiente artículo bosqueja como una universidad utiliza los Campos Web durante todo el año no solo para cumplir con la creciente demanda para recibir educación online sino también para mejorar la calidad de los cursos que se están siendo desarrollados.

Palabras Claves: desarrollo de cursos online, desarrollo de la Facultad, desarrollo profesional, calidad del curso online, diseño de cursos colaborativos, aprendizaje online, Manejo de matrículas.

Introduction

Colleges and universities offer more courses online each year. An estimated 4.6.million students took at least one online course in the fall of 2008—over 600,000 more than during the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2010). And enrollments have been estimated to be increasing anywhere from 9%-33% per year (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006).

At the same time, colleges and universities find themselves in tough times in which they are expected to do more with less; most are cutting their budgets each year (Krupnick, 2008; Lyndsey, 2007; Will, 2003) and more recently they are instituting hiring freezes (Evans, 2008; Go, 2008; Masterson, 2008). Even before these hiring freezes, colleges and universities have relied more and more on adjunct faculty to teach courses (Finder, 2007). This trend will likely continue in these tough economic times. In this climate, colleges and universities must find ways to support faculty--both full time and adjunct--designing and developing online courses. The following paper outlines how we accomplished this at our institution from the trenches through the use of Web Camps.

The Problem

Early on the first online courses were designed, developed, and offered by regular full-time university faculty interested in exploring this new medium (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006). Unfortunately, though, many of these early online courses were simply adaptations of classroom-based courses (Lowenthal & White, 2009). Many colleges and universities still rely on this faculty-driven model to design, develop, and deliver their online courses and programs and given rising budget issues, this is likely to continue.

Bates (1997) characterized this faculty-driven model as the "Lone Ranger and Tonto" approach because of its heavy reliance on individual, lone ranger type, faculty. However, as the demand for entire academic programs offered online has increased—coupled with continued technological innovation— many institutions are realizing that the development and delivery of online education is an increasingly complicated process, requiring both a specialized pedagogy and technological expertise (Lynch, 2005; Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006).

To complicate matters further, developing online courses and programs can be costly; an online course has been estimated to cost anywhere from $5,000 - $60,000 per course (Boettcher, 2004; Davis, 2009; Schiffman, 2005). Despite their cost, fueled by increase demand, institutions must continue to find ways to design, develop, and deliver online courses--which depending on the institutional structure--involves supporting faculty (both full time and adjunct) in one way or another.

A Possible Solution: Web Camp

As online education has moved from the fringes to become an integral part of most college and university' long-term plans (Allen & Seaman, 2006), colleges and universities are adopting new models to support online learning. In the following section we outline a strategy called Web Camp that can be used at institutions that have a centralized or decentralized model of online course development.

One of the authors (Thomas) originally came up with the idea of offering a "Web Camp" in response to a request from Bob Tolsma, assistant vice-chancellor for academic technology, to increase faculty interest in online course development. Tolsma was concerned that lacking clear incentives at our institution to teach online, tenure-line faculty were growing reluctant to take on the extra load of creating and teaching an online course. The solution that emerged was Web Camp, a week-long workshop designed to help faculty develop *new* fully online courses (CU Online, 2006, para 1).

Web Camp originally was offered during the summer to help faculty develop online courses for the upcoming fall semester. The purpose of Web Camp was to find a way to help support and motivate faculty to create *new* online courses. Specifically at our university, there is very little incentive for faculty to teach online--let alone develop new online courses. Like other institutions (see Maguire, 2005), teaching online and course development in general at our university are not given much weight in tenure and promotion decisions. But at the same time, our online enrollments continue to grow and each semester more students sit on wait lists because there are not enough online courses and sections available.

Over time and largely due to the overall success of Web Camp, Thomas realized that there was a need to offer faculty a similar type of support to develop spring semester courses--which gave rise to Winter Web Camp.

While Summer Web Camp and Winter Web Camp both focus on helping faculty design and develop online courses, they each go about it in different ways. In the following, we briefly describe each one.

Summer Web Camp

Summer Web Camp began in 2006 as a joint partnership between CU Online and the Center for Faculty Development. Since its inception, Summer Web Camp has been structured as an opportunity to help faculty design new courses online.

Recognizing some barriers to the creation of new online courses--specifically, lack of time, lack of skills, and lack of monetary support--the Web Camp format was designed to concentrate a skill-building experience in a compressed time period coupled with a stipend and other incentives to attend. More

specifically, faculty are given a stipend to attend Summer Web Camp to help compensate them for designing and developing a new online course. They also receive other things such as a themed camp T-shirt, university paraphernalia, books about online learning, catered breakfasts and lunches, software and hardware, and an end-of-camp recognition luncheon.

Because of limited space and funds, not all faculty can attend Summer Web Camp. In order to attend, faculty must complete an application outlining the new course he or she is planning to develop as well as secure college dean and department chair signatures indicating that the course is expected to be offered within the upcoming academic year. Further, faculty are asked to complete 50% of their new course during the week of Web Camp.

Structure of Summer Web Camp

Summer Web Camp is a weeklong with a normal day running from 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. The day begins with breakfast followed by morning workshops. After the workshops, faculty have lunch and take part in afternoon workshops. The workshops blend short lectures and demonstrations with significant blocks of time for camp participants to practice skills and techniques and work on developing their actual course. In fact, this is one of the key ways that Summer Web Camp differs from other faculty development activities we offer at our University. Workshop content focuses not only on specific tools (e.g., how to use a particular feature of our course management system) but also on tips and best practices for online teaching and learning (e.g., different ways to use class discussions, hold office hours, and assess student learning). We have found that peer support and dialogue between faculty participants has improved not only the overall Web Camp experience for the participants but also the courses developed.

Benefits of Summer Web Camp

There are many observed benefits to Summer Web Camp. First, the university is able to support (and one might argue possibly even motivate) faculty to develop new online courses that might not be developed otherwise. For instance, since 2006, 55 new courses have been developed as a result of Summer Web Camp (see Table 1). Second, full time and part time faculty from a wide range of the university's schools and colleges take part in Web Camp. Third, and reflecting best practices, faculty avoid the drawbacks of designing courses in isolation (Hencmann, 2004). Summer Web Camp provides faculty an opportunity to talk to other faculty about how to accomplish certain things online, share ideas, and develop a positive camp camaraderie - which is especially important because faculty tend to make assumptions about what can or cannot be done online often based on limited experience teaching online (Wray, Lowenthal, Bates, & Stevens, 2008). For instance when asked about the things they enjoyed the most in Summer Web Camp, faculty pointed out the benefits of working with and talking to others as is illustrated in some of their comments (see Table 2).

Table 1. Number of New Online Courses

	Summer 2006	Summer 2007	Summer 2008	Summer 2009	Total
Number of New Online Courses	15	13	17	10	55

Summer Web Camp has been successful in part because there is an effort to maintain a healthy balance between workshops and lab time as well as fun and work time. But perhaps the best way to appreciate the success of Summer Web Camp is to read some comments faculty have made about web camp. Faculty have explained that

- "'I went into Web Camp pretty much panicked because I had committed to teaching online, and had no idea whatsoever how to go about doing any of it... but Web Camp ... [gave]... me all the tools I need to make my course a success, and I feel quite relieved." (CU Online, 2006)
- "I'm teaching my first online course this summer and while I was a bit nervous about converting to online, Web Camp was exactly what I needed to gain proficiency and confidence to make the class successful" (CU Online, 2006)

Table 2. Faculty Comments about Designing Courses with Others

What is the thing you enjoyed most about Web Camp?

- "Hands on instant support – the group ideas and peer interactions. What a powerful learning experience!"
- "The personality of the class"
- "Colleagues"
- "Collegiality"
- "...having David and others available to help solve problems as the occurred"
- "Meeting others – collaborative learning"
- "support of both David as well as other colleagues"
- "Learning a little about what others do in their classes"
- "Interacting with fellow teachers..."

Lessons Learned from Summer Web Camp

At times there has been a struggle meeting the needs of the diverse group of faculty who attend Summer Web Camp. Faculty who attend Summer Web Camp range from those who have never taught an online course before (and might have very basic computer skills) to those who have taught online for years and possibly even attended more than one web camp. We have learned that it is often helpful to sit beginners next to faculty who have taught online before. It has also been found helpful to have multiple instructors and staff available during the workshops. In fact, during last year's Summer Web Camp, three staff people were available in the workshop room and another one handling the catering. We have also found that some faculty struggle with completing 50% of their course during the week of Summer Web Camp (see Table 3). Finally, while some part time faculty (e.g., those who have their summer's off of work or those who are retired) are attracted, it is primarily full time faculty who attend Summer Web Camp.

Table 3. Percent of Course Faculty Reported Completing in Summer Web Camp

Year	2006	2007	2008
Range	12% - 99%	15% - 80%	4% - 80%
Average	36%	49%	44%
Median	25	60	50
Standard Deviation	26.6	26.4	27.1

Future Directions of Summer Web Camp

Based on faculty's positive feedback coupled with the continual need to offer new courses online, Summer Web Camp has become an annual event. While there are no plans to make any major changes in the way Summer Web Camp is hosted, thought is regularly given to ways to improve the format and/or the workshops. For instance, in the future Summer Web Camp might be offered at other campus locations (note: Our university has two main campuses). Further, while Summer Web Camp is undeniably a success on our campus, it fails to support faculty who want to improve current online courses that they teach. Therefore, in the future, a way might be found to incorporate some type of "remake and remodel" process for faculty who have been teaching a course online for years but want to focus on improving it.

Further, while the current structure of Summer Web Camp is conducive to our campus' decentralized culture, other colleges and universities might find opportunities and/or a need to get other entities involved with web camp. For example, there might be a place for groups such as the library, service

learning, outcomes and assessment to get involved. Further, some institutions - depending on resources - might even want to assign an instructional designer to each faculty member (or a group of them) and/or have the completed courses go through some type of audit or quality control process (e.g., like a Quality Matters evaluation).

Winter Web Camp

While Summer Web Camp was developed to help faculty design and develop online courses for the fall, as mentioned earlier, it was recognized that faculty needed some type of support to design and develop online courses for the spring semester. But rather than simply mirror Summer Web Camp, Winter Web Camp was designed with a different focus and format.

Structure of Winter Web Camp

Whereas Summer Web Camp was designed primarily to attract faculty to design and develop (and ultimately teach) new online courses, Winter Web Camp was specifically designed for veteran faculty who had been teaching in the face-to-face classroom and/or online for years. As a result, Winter Web Camp focuses on more advanced tools and pedagogies in more of a conference structure with predetermined workshops. For instance, Winter Web Camp 2008 had workshops on the following:

- eCollege fundamentals
- Blackboard fundamentals
- Adding video to your course
- Blogs, wiki's, and podcasts
- Student engagement, social presence, and the future of online learning
- 10 tech tools to watch
- Using Google forms for student interaction and data gathering

In addition to the workshops, open lab sessions are also offered where faculty can come in to receive support for anything related to their hybrid or online course.

Further, while Summer Web Camp currently focuses on using eCollege (one of the two course management systems used at our university), Winter Web Camp was designed to be more platform independent (or at least to appeal to users of both course management systems in use at our institution). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Winter Web Camp was designed to attract both full time and adjunct faculty. The face-to-face workshops are simulcasted and recorded (using Adobe Connect Pro) so that faculty can attend as many or as few workshops as their schedule permits. If they miss one session, they can always watch a recording of the workshop later on. (see http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/CUOnline/FacultyResources/additionalResources/wwc/Pages/WWC 2010Recordings.aspx for a list of recordings) This is an important component of Winter Web Camp as faculty often struggle to find the time to attend professional development workshops (Lowenthal, 2008; Wray, et al., 2010).

Benefits of Winter Web Camp

The Winter Web Camp format provides many of the same benefits of the summer format, namely:

- Practice-focused presentations structured to allow for ample individual practice.
- Real time support of experts to troubleshoot problems, coach skills, and brainstorm solutions.
- A collegial environment where an interdisciplinary cohort of faculty share support, ideas and teaching experience.
- A fun event that entices participation to an audience beyond those faculty in course development crisis.

But unlike Summer Web Camp, which is only available to faculty who are developing new online courses and have administrative approval, Winter Web Camp is open to all faculty--whether they teach online, teach hybrid, and/or teach face-to-face courses. As a result, attendance in the 2009 Winter Web Camp workshops ranged from 3 to 25 faculty with a broad range of attendees from across the university; in fact, two different sessions attracted 23 and 25 faculty respectively (which is almost double the attendance of

the typical faculty development workshop held throughout the year at our institution). Further, because faculty who attend Winter Web Camp do not receive a stipend, the overall cost to run it is much less than Summer Web Camp.

Overall, faculty seem to really enjoy Winter Web Camp. The following comments were made by faculty about attending Winter Web Camp:

- "I truly believe you need to offer a wide variety of info and let instructors select those items that impact them. In my mind, you were very successful at this."
- "Because we can pick and choose which sessions to attend, participants can make it relevant for themselves."
- "I always learn something at these camps, and I usually put into practice at least one new idea the very next semester"
- "I love these things; they help me to be a better teacher and they make me think!"
- "Live trainings can be accessed live via the Internet: that's extremely useful to me!"
- "...It was VERY helpful hearing from people online (looking at their comments, sometimes responding to them, etc) and meeting the people who came to the Lab in person."
- "Thanks for offering this in a variety of ways, thus allowing me to participate"
- "... thanks for making the sessions accessible online live!!! As a telecommuter living outside Denver, that's quite useful to me (I wouldn't attend any workshop/session on campus)."
- "I really appreciate the ability to attend these online. I wouldn't have been able to attend this time otherwise. I wish everything you guys put on (such as upcoming sessions) were online; I'd probably go to almost all of them if they were"

Lessons Learned from Winter Web Camp

A variety of lessons have been learned from the Winter Web Camps. Unlike Summer Web Camp, which involves the same core set of faculty in one location throughout the entire week, Winter Web Camp presents additional challenges and opportunities. For instance, perhaps the biggest lesson learned involved simulcasting the workshops. While we have simulcasted workshops for a couple of years with overall success, we specifically ran into a number of audio problems during the 2009 Winter Web Camp. The audio problems stemmed from a host of issues which included being in a new lab, using multiple wireless microphones with conflicting wireless signals, having distance attendees with a variety of broadband connections, to basics things such as successfully teaching a workshop to both a face-to-face audience and an online audience at the same time. For example, presenters often forgot to repeat questions people attending the face-to-face session would ask—thus leaving those attending online in the dark. The majority of faculty who attended the sessions online had something to say about the audio quality throughout the week. For instance, one faculty member stated that

- "...please have the audience comments/questions microphoned so that the online people can hear. Otherwise, much is unnecessarily lost. Also, you might have one session co-leader monitor the chat online, in case a timely question (e.g. of clarification) is posed from someone online."
- Please make sure that the 2nd microphone works. I missed a lot the first day on the basics of eCollege because I could not hear what was being asked in the classroom.

Faculty also commented on the relevance of the topics chosen for each of the workshops. This involved not only the overall topic but also the skill level. One faculty member stated that,

- "most of the session topics weren't relevant or useful to me personally (although I'm glad they're offered for those who can use them). Thus, personally, I'd like some additional (other) topics." I could use more that focuses on using the software's basic features such as exams, discussions, and grade management, which I've found very limiting in many ways (perhaps there are ways to work around at least some of these software limitations I've come up against that a workshop would reveal to me?).

Similarly, two others commented:

- "This camp is great. It would be more helpful if every session walked students through each step. This would be slow, but effective. Everything goes too fast."
- "Great and overwhelming!"

Comments like these illustrate that despite the benefit of simulcasting workshops and enabling faculty at a distance to attend, we need to do a better job of ensuring the best quality audio as possible, ensuring that we have one person dedicated to monitoring questions posted in the chat pod online during the workshops and that we repeat the comments and questions made by those attending face-to-face to help those at a distance not miss a thing.

Future Directions of Winter Web Camp

Compared to Summer Web Camp, Winter Web Camp is still in its infancy. However, while there are many things we can improve on, the basic structure, format, and focus of Winter Web Camp is likely not going to change. We do however plan to continue to strive to remove any barriers for those attending at a distance and find ways to replicate the experience--as best we can--those attending face-to-face have at Winter Web Camp.

Conclusion

Colleges and Universities find themselves in difficult times where budgets are being cut but the demand for online learning increases year-to-year. While budgets are cut, the cost to design and to develop courses online is increasing—largely due to an increased demand for more interactive courses with high-end media. Given this, colleges and universities need to find creative yet effective ways to develop more online courses. We have found one method to accomplish this--web camp. Web camps, coupled with a host of additional workshops and services (see: Lowenthal, Thomas, Thai, & Yuhnke, 2009) throughout the year enable us to provide faculty the support they need to design and develop online courses.

With spring around the corner, there is still time for you to offer your faculty an opportunity to go to Web Camp.

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