

## Leading Online Learning through Collaboration

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution, activities, and benefits of the Faculty Online Teaching and Learning Community at Western Carolina University (WCU). The university itself has become a national leader in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning with its annual [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning](#) Faire (this year drew attendees from 23 different higher education institutions) and with its international referred journal [Mountainrise](#). In addition, WCU has seen rapid growth in online programs as well as the need for faculty preparation for digital instruction. The Faculty Online Teaching and Learning Community represents one strategy for such preparation. The authors review the literature on faculty support for training and professional development for online teaching as well as the literature on faculty learning communities. They describe the grassroots development of*

*the learning community and its development as a formal group. Included are descriptions of the group's involvement in new faculty orientation; the transition to a new course management system; strategies that have evolved from the group such as peer-to-peer feedback; the use of voice technology, and the creation of virtual learning environments; the transfer of the group's experience to other collaborations; and the mentoring and support for untenured faculty in the group.*

## Introduction

I have enjoyed the presentations and interaction in the Learning Community. Because this is a new and growing field, it is useful and enjoyable to have information sharing and in some cases, commiseration with like-minded people (Participant response in Faculty Learning Community on Online Teaching and Learning, Survey, May 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution, activities, and benefits of the Faculty Online Teaching and Learning Community at Western Carolina University. The university itself has become a national leader in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning with its annual [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Faire](#) (this year drew attendees from 23 different higher education institutions) and with its international referred journal [Mountainrise](#). In addition, WCU has seen rapid growth in online programs as well as the need for better faculty preparation for digital instruction. The Faculty Online Teaching and Learning Community represents one strategy for such preparation.

### Review of the Literature

The growth of web-supported instruction and fully online distance education programs is well documented (Ryan et al., 2004; [Hergert, 2003](#); [Schott et al., 2003](#); [Howell et al., 2003](#)). Its continued growth is assured for several reasons, one of which is the continued growth of the technology that supports online instruction. The continued increase in the capacity of the internet and the reduction of barriers with respect to internet access have led to increasing proficiency of the U.S. population in internet skills and the increasing effectiveness and simplicity of Web based teaching tools ([Schott, et al., 2003](#)). For the first time, online distance education programs can be made available in an effective and efficient manner to people who do not have access to the normal classroom/lecture on-campus environment. These people, busy working professionals usually over 30 years of age, are now able to access and complete degree programs in their own time and place ([Hergert, 2003](#)).

The proliferation of online courses in two- and four-year institutions means that increasing pressure has been exerted on faculty to prepare and teach online classes or use web-supported instruction in their conventional campus based courses (Robinson, 2001 in [Hergert, 2003](#)). While some faculty are happy to make the change, many more resist. A number of studies have identified the following reasons for the faculty resistance: lack of standards; threat of fewer jobs through decline in usage of full-time faculty which leads to decline in faculty quality ([IHEP, 2000](#), [NEA, 2000](#) in Maquire, 2005); developing interaction; developing instructional materials ([Rockwell et al., 2000](#)); lack of time - more time required for an on-line course than for a traditional course ([NEA, 2000](#) in [Howell et al., 2003](#)); lack of scholarly respect in areas of promotion and tenure; isolation from students ([Childers et al., 2000](#) in [Howell, 2003](#)); lack of training ([Maguire, 2005](#)); and lack of technical and institutional support ([McLean, 2005](#)).

[Jaffee \(1998\)](#) identified five types of acceptance of new technologies: "innovators" or "techies"; early adaptors" or "visionaries"; "early majority" and the "late majority" and "laggards" (p. 24). He stresses the need to recognize the gap and seize the opportunity to let early adopters lead change efforts. While

many faculty cite the fear of a loss of community in online classes, [Hiltz \(1998\)](#) maintains that the use of technology can create the collaborative atmosphere where students learn from each other (student-to-student learning), facilitated by faculty providing topics, expertise, and working closely with students for group presentations.

A number of methods have been tried over the years to help overcome these areas of resistance particularly those associated with lack of training and lack of technical and institutional support. Such strategies as faculty technology development initiatives, distance learning faculty liaisons, triangulated support approaches, and peer coaching and support represent some of these efforts ([McLean, 2005](#); [Maguire, 2005](#)). Faculty Fellows in the [Coulter Faculty Center](#) at WCU are involved in collaborative research on the scope and quality of online discussions.

Barber, et al (2002) notes that a number of national reports and research demonstrate that the integration of teaching with technology has not kept up with the computer technology now available in most universities. The Faculty Technology Development initiative described by Barber, et al, consisted of faculty members whose goals were to have ongoing dialogue on instructional technology issues, to create a vision of the role of technology in teaching and learning, to inquire into and share what faculty were doing with instructional technology, and to promote and share effective models found. Lessons learned from this initiative included the importance of collegiality, the importance of teams in creating a sense of belonging, and the sharing of some of the important, "state of the art" work that some members were already using in their teaching.

The use of peer support as mentors for instructors is a method of training and support that has been used for many years and in various forms (Schauer et al. 1998 in Covington et al, 2005). Further examples of this type of support are the creation of two distance learning faculty liaisons (Steinitz, 2006, p. 8) who "...help their colleagues navigate the college's course management system and offer advice on principles they have found effective in their online course." [Ellis and Phelps \(2000\)](#) described a staff development project at Southern Cross University to develop online delivery in undergraduate courses. Training included staff development workshops where staff could learn from one another as well as challenge designs and share resources, ideas, and any frustrations experienced. Friday afternoons were set aside for online activity. One example of peer-to-peer collaboration included academic staff helping one another install and learn to create sound files. Within an hour, the staff had created welcome messages for their students, prior to a scheduled development session on sound production.

Babinski, et al, (2001) described the use of facilitators and peers in an online support community. The online support was designed to provide teachers a forum to assist in problem solving with mentors and each other. A survey after the first year found that the project was successful in providing teachers the opportunity to engage in "meaningful professional dialogue and reflection" (Babinski et al, 2001, p.166). More specifically the study found that the support group fostered a sense of community as well as a source of advice. The use of peer coaching for face to face courses and its adaption to online courses is discussed by Tonkin, et al, 2003. The researchers discuss a model of peer observation that includes three phases: a planning conference between instructor and coach prior to actual class observation, an actual online classroom observation and finally, a post-observation meeting in which the instructor and coach meet to debrief. The researchers maintain that this model of pre-observation meeting (which involves two faculty meeting prior to the "observation" to review the lesson objectives), online classroom observation, and post-observation meeting, worked well.

The evolution of the above efforts is described by [Covington, et al. \(2005\)](#). A comprehensive triangulated support approach with administrative support, professional development support, and peer support forming the sides of the triangle was used at North Carolina State University to assist in an urgent transition of traditional courses to online courses. Administrative support came in the form of clear goals, dealing with concerns and professional development. Professional development helped by assessing needs, providing training and evaluating training. Peer support came from experienced faculty members acting as mentors and sharing experiences, coaching and giving contextual support.

The use of peers, mentors, and facilitators in various ways can therefore make a difference in how faculty accept and adapt to online teaching. So the creating of faculty learning communities is a logical development from the lessons of the past. It could be said that the faculty learning community is a cooperative learning experience where "...small groups work together toward a common goal" ([Cooper and Mueck, 1989](#) in Millis, 2006, 4,).

The literature on faculty learning communities serves as a conceptual framework for a discussion of the evolution of this group at Western Carolina University. Milton Cox (2004) defines a faculty learning community as a faculty and staff cross-disciplinary group of around 8-12 who come together for a year-long collaboration for the purpose of enhancing teaching and learning. Participants frequently choose a focus course or project to test innovations or assess student learning. Some groups are cohort based and some are topic based. Through a learning community, teaching (often a private practice) becomes public. Cox maintains that FLC's increase interest, support and the likelihood that faculty will innovate and adopt new methods. Ingram (2005, p.8) describes two goals of the online faculty learning community at Kent State. One, "...to create an environment in which members can consult with each other to improve their online or Web-supported courses." Two, "... to develop a set of procedures and materials that will help faculty new to online learning implement it in their courses...". Ingram (2005) claims that these goals evolved after the group initially tried to address a broad spectrum of online teaching issues which proved to be impossible given members' diverse interests and time constraints. An important question is how does the work of faculty learning communities affect students?

The Documenting Effective Educational Practices project (DEEP), a two year study of 20 four-year colleges and universities with higher than predicted graduation rates and scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement, revealed that one of the most important conditions on these campuses was an intentional focus on institutional improvement. Kuh, et al (2005) in reporting the DEEP study results described the work of Miami University's faculty learning communities. Faculty at this school speak of continual conversations on "what needs to be fixed" and a campus culture focused on collaborations to identify those "fixes."

Participation in Faculty Learning Communities at Western Carolina University often begins with the Summer Institute for Teaching and Learning, a four-day faculty experience organized around focus teams related to teaching and learning and faculty interests. Faculty choose from focus teams on a variety of topics such as online teaching and learning, teaching first year students, course design for significant student learning, active and effective lecturing, technology integration in the classroom, and creating a scholarship of teaching and learning project. These teams are led by faculty who are selected by the director of the Faculty Center and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Leadership Team. Faculty choose one of their own courses on which to focus and work over the week. These focus teams often continue and expand into Faculty Learning Communities in the fall who not only continue this work but often publish and present their group efforts at conferences.

### **The Evolution**

The Faculty Learning Community on Online Teaching and Learning at WCU actually had a grass roots beginning in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations. Faced with the mandate to put the Master of School Administration degree online, faculty in the department led by two professors organized what was then called a WebCT support group. As other faculty in the College of Education began to hear of the experience, they asked to join and the group expanded college-wide. The following May, a member of that group organized and served as the facilitator of a Faculty Focus Team on Online Teaching and Learning for the Coulter Faculty Center's four day Summer Institute for Teaching and Learning. This group of 10 faculty from across the campus represented both experienced users and novices who chose to focus on best practices and to share experiences. The group then became a

Faculty Learning Community in the fall meeting once a month to share and offer effective strategies for enhancing student engagement in the online environment. Activities for 2005-2006 varied around the engagement theme.

It (the FLC) has reinforced my understanding that there are established Best Practices in Online Learning and Teaching that can help a teacher be more efficient and productive in this environment (Participant response in Faculty Learning Community on Online Teaching and Learning, Survey, May 2006)

## **Activities and Benefits**

### New faculty orientation

In August of 2005, the newly formed FLC for Online Teaching and Learning participated in demonstrating to WCU 's new faculty how first year faculty, and those new to WebCT, can get started and use this online resource as they learn to engage students in creating community in an online environment. For most, the transition to a new institution is overwhelming enough. Having to learn a new or different software program can be daunting. The basic premise was that the transition could be smooth if the instructor could begin by taking small steps. As a group we shared our experiences and simple ways to utilize WebCT by goal setting and trying a few new things each semester. It was agreed that some things did not work well, though every attempt was fruitful. In addition, it was emphasized to new faculty that through meetings and collaboration within this group, we have learned from one another and we continue to try new things and expand the comfort zone-

One strategy shared with new faculty in this orientation session was the creation of a student homepage for the online class as a strategy for enhancing engagement. This strategy is one way for students to get to know one another by including information such as their profession, location, hobbies, and interests. They can be also be asked the question "Why are you taking this course?" or "Why have you chosen this major?" This opportunity also allows students to get to know the professor, as many faculty have their own web pages within the university setting that can be linked from the class webpage. One incentive for participation in this activity is to assign points or a grade for completing the homepage. Some students choose to include a picture of themselves, their families or their pet, which can add a topic for comment or discussion in getting to know one another distantly.

### Student peer to peer feedback in an online course

For one session, a group member from educational leadership and foundations described her use of peer of peer feedback. In an undergraduate course in educational foundations, the students are being taught to use evidence in their responses and assignments. One way of doing this in an online environment is through the use of an assignment where students submit their work to another student (first time assigned by professor) and the receiving student must address the criteria for the assignment and identify specific evidence in the student's paper related to the rubric. For the second assignment for which this is done, the student can ask any two peers to provide feedback. Again, the responding student is expected to provide evidence against the specific criteria. The purpose is two-fold: (1) helping education majors to learn the importance for using evidence in assessing student work, and (2) providing another forum for feedback that is not dependent on the professor. It also helps to build community.

### The transition to Vista 4, a new course management system

As Western Carolina University moves from WebCT Campus Edition to Vista 4, the implementation team chose to consult the Online Teaching and Learning Community to get faculty input into the transition. Members of the community met with the WebCT Team Leader and provided input by asking questions

about changes, troubleshooting implementation issues, and offering to be early adopters in the beginning stages of the pilot. Two members of this learning community are serving on the implementation team.

#### Using voice technology to enhance student engagement

One learning community member shared with the group strategies for using [Wimba](#) Voice Tools and video files in online courses. Specifically, she demonstrated the use of the Wimba Voice Board for feedback for students and for general instructions. She described the use of Wimba Voice Boards and Voice Chat for student discussion groups and project work. In addition, she demonstrated the use of real media files created in [Camtasia](#) software. These files feature PowerPoint presentations with the professor's lecture to accompany the slides. She also shared student evaluation data revealing that students perceive voice tools to be one of the most valuable aspects of online course delivery.

#### Virtual environments to enhance learning programs

Faculty in the College of Education and Allied Professions are working together across educational disciplines and with a faculty member in Biology. They are providing professional development for middle school science teachers and their principals to create a virtual school as part of the NC Quest funded project. Other departments represented in our FLC already have such virtual environments including criminology and nursing. At one learning community meeting, the director of the online criminal justice program shared her creation, "Crim City," a virtual city designed for student problem solving in Criminal Justice Courses. Crim City has a city government department, police department, justice department, hospital, fire and rescue department and various other city operations. The purpose is to create a virtual city in which criminal justice students can hunt for offenders, arrest offenders and then follow through the paperwork trail necessary to document the entire process.

The creation of this virtual city was the work of one faculty member who is now opening up Crim City for other faculty members to contribute particularly in areas where she does not have the expertise. For instance, she hopes that health sciences faculty will be interested in developing, in a more detailed way, the hospital area of the city. The process of developing a virtual city has therefore opened the possibility for faculty from other departments to cooperate and coordinate with one another to develop material that will not just benefit one faculty member and course but several faculty and courses across disciplines. A number of members of the faculty learning community were so impressed with the concept of the virtual city that they are investigating the possibilities of virtual realities within their courses and programs. The Summer Institute on Teaching and Learning ([SITL](#)) at Western Carolina University this year provided a four day focus team opportunity for faculty to participate in creating a virtual learning environment specific to their needs. Participants were led by a learning community member in the development of a virtual learning environment specific to their own discipline.

#### Transfer to other collaborations

The possibilities for coordination and cooperation learning community members experience often transfer to other collaborations. In the WCU Master of Project Management Program the cooperation and coordination of faculty (5 full-time, 1 part-time) is essential in developing the course material. The program migrated online in 1998 and material was developed jointly by two faculty members, who, up until that time, taught the program in regular classes. The courses rely heavily on self-education with weekly short concise lesson plans that give an overview of the topic, reading assignments and typically, an individual and/or a team assignment. All assignments are due the following week. Grading with general and individual and/or team feedback is used to reinforce the lessons on a weekly basis. The use of weekly assignments with detailed individual and/or team feedback is different to normal face to face classes in that these classes normally require this kind of assignment only two or three times in a semester. Also, the freedom to post whenever a student has the time and information, makes the quantity of dialogue much greater than traditionally happens in a face to face class.

The program used cohorts of about 25 students and as numbers grew, 2 or 3 cohorts were often taught in the same course. With this growth a concern was to ensure that all students were getting the same or similar exposure to the course material. All faculty in the program can teach all six 6 semester hour courses in the program; therefore, rather than “reinventing the wheel for each course,” faculty decided to use each other’s material for the relevant course. This means that when these courses are set up in WebCT, a template using the material from the last time that course was taught is used regardless of who taught the class. This collaboration allows the faculty to focus more time on the grading and feedback while at the same time ensuring that same-course cohorts are receiving the same material. Minor upgrading is done by individual faculty while major course upgrades are undertaken with faculty jointly sharing the workload. The last major revision of the course was completed 12 months ago and work is now beginning for a major review to incorporate new project management technology into courses.

#### Mentoring and supporting untenured faculty

One of the opportunities afforded by a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) is for tenured faculty to support untenured faculty and also to learn from their more recent educational learning opportunities. The faculty in the Online Teaching and Learning Community are both tenured and untenured and teach across many academic disciplines in the university. Tenured faculty are helping untenured faculty develop presentation proposals, develop research related to their disciplines and online learning, and participate in a forum that provides opportunities for development. Untenured faculty have generally had more recent educational opportunities and often bring both the knowledge acquired in those environments and more current views of online learning. This has been true whether they come to our faculty from terminal degree programs or the workplace. We have found this to be a win-win situation. As one new faculty participant noted,

Participation with faculty in different disciplines and with varied experience with utilizing WebCT has been a very positive experience. Not only did I learn from participating with this group - whether in face-to-face meetings, questions via email, or presentations - I also learned that we all have the same problems and issues in dealing with online learning. Faculty use WebCT in various ways - from fully online courses, web-enhanced courses (this is where the class does not meet the traditional three hours a week), to supplemental usage (such as turning in work, checking assignments, and reviewing materials).

A recent group roundtable presentation with audience participation at WCU’s Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Faire provided a model for cross-disciplinary collaboration. New faculty asked seasoned faculty all with varied backgrounds (nursing, interior design, educational leadership, health sciences and criminal justice) about issues in online teaching. The common thread was-how to get students engaged in learning and not feel the isolation that a traditional class sometimes offers. The more experienced faculty and audience participants offered solutions to the problems the new faculty faced such as recording voice boards and developing a syllabus for an online class.

#### **Conclusion**

My experience has been wonderful, being a part of a group that takes time to share information and teach one another ways of navigating WebCT. Learning a new program can be overwhelming. As a group, and participating in the summer institute, helped me, as a new faculty, jump into using WebCT (Participant response in Faculty Learning Community on Online Teaching and Learning, Survey, May 2006).

Teaching, once a private practice, is becoming more public at Western Carolina University, and Faculty Learning Communities are largely responsible. The campus is undergoing tremendous change and growth in distance education and the integration of technology into instruction. In such an environment, faculty often experience “transition angst.” Our experience as a learning community, however, is that we



now have a group of friends and colleagues across the campus who are there for advice and support. We have given each other permission to be risk-takers and a safe venue to vent our frustrations and ask for assistance. For more information on Faculty Learning Communities at Western Carolina University, visit this [link](#).

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Manuscript received 31 May 2006; revision received 14 Aug 2006.



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