

Playing it CoOL: Developing the Center of On-line Learning (CoOL) at Miami University

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Background

Miami University likes to position itself as the Ivy League school of the midwest. Miami is steeped in tradition and offers a strong liberal education background for its undergraduates. The largest campus is located in Oxford, Ohio which is approximately 35 miles north of Cincinnati, and has approximately 15,000 undergraduates and 1,400 graduate students. These students tend to be of traditional age and entrance into the University is competitive.

Miami also has 2 regional campuses. They are located within 45 minutes of the Oxford campus. One is in Hamilton, Ohio and the other in Middletown, Ohio. The Middletown campus has just over 2,000 students and Hamilton around 2,500. These students tend to be non-traditional, and are non-resident students. These campuses have open enrollment. The interesting features of this configuration are that the campuses all reside within the same county and region, and they are for the most part financially independent.

At the regional campuses it is possible for the students to get started with the first two years of a four year degree or get a variety of two year associate degrees. Nursing, business and engineering technology offer two year associate degrees. Some students begin in an associates program and change their minds after two years. These students are also often very busy with family, work, and other obligations and often do not finish their degree in two or four years.

Why do we want to be CoOL?

The Middletown campus faced some issues that were only going to get worse rather than better. We have a shortage of parking and classroom space. We have students who miss classes that meet once per week to accommodate work schedules. We stood to lose some quality part-time teachers that had scheduling conflicts with classes. We also had trouble filling summer sections of certain courses.

We decided the solution to many of these issues was to offer more flexible courses online. This would solve space issues, scheduling conflicts, and loss of instructors. An example illustrating how right we were was when we began offering online physics in the summer. In the past we could not offer summer physics because the classes would not fill. Now we offer three sections of Miami Plan physics courses with 40-60 students. There obviously was a need.

CoOL Underground

When we began teaching online, we did so quietly and surreptitiously. In 1999 Dr. Beth Dietz-Uhler taught a Miami Plan Psychology course. She found that her drop rate from her once per week night class was much higher than for her online class. Shortly after that Physics began offering Miami Plan courses as well. The response was very positive. Physics enrollments went way up. We also discovered that many of our summer courses were being taken by Oxford campus students. We were filling a need.

CoOL Emerges

Dr. Dietz Uhler formed an ad hoc group to discuss organizing our online efforts. This group was primarily those faculty that had taught online before and some staff that supported those efforts. We called ourselves CoOL (Center of Online Learning.) In the summer of 2005 we approached Oxford IT services department for funding. They had mentioned online as a part of their strategic plan. We got funding for our first year. This included supported release time for faculty creating online courses as well as marketing and workshop money. Their only request was that we make this a three campus initiative. We agreed and CoOL got much bigger very fast. In the fall of 2005 the Council of Academic Deans (COAD) endorsed the CoOL initiative. We were official.

CoOL Vision

We established our vision and mission and here they are as they currently stand.

The Center of Online Learning is a university, statewide and national leader in developing and supporting high-quality online learning experiences while researching, identifying and disseminating "best practices" for online teaching and learning.

We understand that this is an ambitious vision but vision is just that. It is what we want to achieve in the future.

Our mission is as follows;

The mission of the Center for Online Learning is to develop and offer engaging online courses and experiences that educate and serve the needs of our learners. As such, our mission includes the following primary goals:

- *Support the development of interactive online courses that ensure high-quality educational experiences.*
- *Support the development of online courses in a way that is personally and professionally rewarding to our faculty and staff.*
- *Encourage and facilitate the development of online courses to enhance student access to a Miami University Education.*
- *Promote dialogue and conversation about the pedagogy of online learning.*
- *Expand our presence to have local, national and international dimensions.*

Our mission has two audiences, our students and our faculty. We don't want faculty to have unpleasant experiences teaching online or creating for online. We don't want them to sacrifice. And

we want them to be credited for what they accomplish. Some liken creating an online course to writing a book or articles. It is a creative and challenging endeavor. We think that this is one reason that it is crucial that this is a faculty driven center.

CoOL Structure

CoOL has a director that is a faculty member. Currently the director receives one course reduction per semester. The director is the face of CoOL and is the chair of the advisory team. As CoOL grows this position may become part or full time but the intent is that it remains a faculty based position. The coordinator runs the day to day operation of CoOL. The coordinator manages all of the course creation teams. Currently the coordinator does this job as an addition to her full time position. The advisory team is comprised of other faculty members who have taught online at Miami, a representative of IT services, a representative from the libraries, and the coordinator. This group has been meeting at least once every three weeks. They advise the coordinator and director and help with some of the start up work that is needed. They receive no compensation other than a shirt and some occasional food. Half of the advisory team will be reappointed each year.

Faculty Development

We feel that faculty development is crucial. We have done two workshops to this point. The topic of the first workshop was about what has been done so far. I guess we came out of the closet so to speak. We then did a follow up that was well attended showing how to get started if you want to teach online. We showed a planning grid that we have come up with to help faculty plan their courses. Our next step is to have a short web course on how to teach online. It will be approximately 3 weeks and be offered for the first time this summer. In the future we will have “how to’s” and info on our web site including a monthly podcast with helpful information.

Student Development

We all agree that we cannot ignore the student portion of this equation. We were not as focused on this at the beginning although we see a shift toward this as more courses are developed. Andrea and Beth have developed an online section of the University and the Student. This is a one hour course that can benefit students who are taking or want to take online courses. We also are working on ways in which classes are listed. And of course there are student services that will have to be modified to accommodate online students.

Course Creation

We have adopted a team model for course creation. Each creation team consists of the following members;



- Faculty content expert
- Instructional technologist
- Experienced online instructor
- Librarian
- Technical support personnel as needed

We are especially excited about our course creation team model. We think the team concept is crucial to a good course. The faculty member is critically involved but does not have to worry about the technology so much. The instructional Technologist can assist with both technology and pedagogy. The experienced online instructor can reassure and give good insight in what the faculty member can expect and keeps mistakes from repeating themselves. The librarian can help with resources, and copyright. If learning modules or other more advanced additions are needed, a multimedia creator can be utilized. The faculty content expert receives one course release during creation. The experienced online instructor gets \$500 faculty development money. The librarian and instructional technologist do this as part of their regular duties. In this model the work falls heavily on the faculty member. We currently can support two teams each semester with a pilot running this summer.

Course Creation Planning Grid

This course creation planning grid was originally created by Jean Vanderbeek from the nursing department. She used it to organize her online course. We modified it and it is what we currently give faculty who are beginning to plan their online course. The current design is based on the Quality Matters peer review system created by the University of Maryland. We are adopting this as are quality review system and more information about Quality Matters follows. The planning grid helps a faculty member align their objectives for each of their modules with the planned activities, interactions, and assessments that helps their students attain those objectives. We did a workshop on this grid and the possibilities and ideas for completing the grid.

The grid addresses three areas for attaining the stated objectives: Resources and Materials, Learner Interaction, Assessment and Management. Resources and materials included readings, and any addition resources and materials that deliver content. This could include videos, audio files, animations etc. Learner interactions include interactions the students may have with each other, with the content and with the instructor. This can include a huge variety of things including discussion boards, short essays, blogs, wikis, and activities such as crosswords, word games, and immediate feedback quizzes. The Assessment and Management section includes tests, quizzes and long term projects that the students might be assigned.


CoOL Online Course Planning Grid


Course Title: _____

Course Number: _____

Module Topic: _____

Module Number: _____

Objective(s) and/or Competencies	Resources and Materials		Learner Interaction		Assessment and Measurement	
	Readings (Textbook and Supplemental Readings)	Additional Resources and Materials	Learner Interaction w/ Peers and Instructor	Learner Interaction w/ Content (Activities & Short Term Projects)	Long Term Projects (Broken into Components)	Other Measurement (Quizzes, Tests, Exams)

Quality Matters

Quality Matters is a peer review system for online courses developed by Maryland Online under a FIPSE (U.S. Department Fund For The Improvement of Postsecondary Education) grant. This peer review system is not punitive but prioritizes things that should be in a good online course. Our grid carefully aligns with this to make it easier on the instructor. A team reviews the course including one person outside of the institution. We may due to budget issues have to stay within our institution to begin with. We will be listing the courses that go through this process as CoOL Approved.

Course Content Delivery

We want our students to be able to receive content in a variety of modes. We also want to address their varied learning styles. We think that the availability of more choices will increase their likelihood of receiving the content. Let's face it. Our students come from a multitask world. They can listen to "class" and be texting on their phones at the same time. We have found that we can have faculty members create PowerPoint that are appropriate for online delivery. They can create a "script" in the notes section. They then can record audio for the PowerPoint. After that it is an easy task to produce the multiple formats. If the instructor chooses to record some video as well using a web cam or digital video camera, they can. This can be easily integrated into the multiple formats.

The formats we are considering include mp3, mov, mp4 suitable for playback on a video Ipod and Sony PSP as well as just on the computer. There are multiple ways to produce these formats. I have been using Sony's Vegas Video which has these formats already available for rendering. You can batch render to get multiple formats at once. The mp4 format is slightly different for the Ipod vs. the PSP. If the PowerPoint is saved as jpps then it is an easy task to place it in Vegas Video. If you are interested in just audio podcasts, then a program such as Audacity which is free is what you would want to use.

It is important to include student interaction with the content which at this point cannot really be done with the Ipod or PSP format but the instructor should have some interactive exercises included within the Learning Management System (LMS). We use Blackboard. Another effective delivery format is Flash. We use Articulate to convert PowerPoint to flash based with audio. You can then incorporate interactivity directly into the content. Quizzes can be strategically placed within the presentation and you can require the students get a certain grade before proceeding. To make it simpler for the instructor, if they just give us PowerPoints with audio, we can produce any of these formats fairly simply. We can also use student workers to assist.

CoOL Problems

Our major hurdle as it has always been is budget. We need some money to run an effective program. Our first year was funded by our IT Services in Oxford. This cannot be an ongoing arrangement for a variety of reasons. The Provost of the University is very supportive of this program and we expect future funding through that office. Resources also become an issue as that relates to budget as well as hiring issues. We need to hire more personnel to ramp up our production of online courses. As the program gets bigger, the Director and Coordinator will not be able to perform other jobs. There are also institutional issues. Currently our regional campuses are open enrollment. Our Oxford campus is not. So can our students take an online course originating from Oxford? As it stands now, they cannot. They must be accepted into Oxford first. We also have scheduling, fee, proprietary and other issues to manage as well. You might say we have the cart before the horse but as long as we are facing downhill, it works ok. We have begun and will continue to tackle these issues.

CoOL Future

Our future looks bright and exciting. A steering committee of deans and the Director will be formed to assist with institutional issues and direction. We will continue to increase budget and personnel. We will need to have program, and course assessment. We have the Quality Matters to help with this but need program assessment as well. We have started this process. We also want to continue our faculty development as well as our student development. But for us...it is all CoOL

Resources

Articulate presenter. <http://www.articulate.com/>

CoOL web site. <http://www.muohio.edu/cool/>

Sony Vegas Video. <http://www.sonymediasoftware.com/products/showproduct.asp?pid=965>

Maryland Online - Quality matters. <http://www.qualitymatters.org/>