

Utilizing a Faculty Learning Community to Support Collaborative Online Course Development

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Miami University was founded in 1809 and was the 10th public university in the United States. Miami was named for the indigenous people who originally inhabited the area now known as the Miami Valley. Today, Miami is a residential university with a focus on teaching undergraduates. A liberal education core complements the more specialized studies of the majors. Miami enrolls 14,488 undergraduates and 1,812 graduate students on the Oxford campus. Miami offers the bachelor's degree in over 100 areas of study and the master's degree in more than 50 areas; Miami also offers a number of doctoral degrees.

In 1966, Miami University Middletown became the first regional campus in the state of Ohio. Miami University Hamilton was founded just two years later. This year, Miami added a third regional campus in West Chester, the Voice of America Learning Center. The Middletown campus currently enrolls just under 2000 students and the Hamilton campus has approximately 2800. Both campuses offer a variety of certificate programs and associate degrees. In addition, the regional campuses offer three bachelor's degrees not available on the Oxford campus. Graduate degrees in education and business are also available on Miami's regional campuses.

Within a 1 hour drive from Middletown, there are approximately 32 Ohio institutions of higher learning – many of which offer online courses and degrees. In addition, we have seen University of Phoenix and Indiana Wesleyan (both with online programs) build physical campuses less than 15 minutes away. Facing increasing competition, Miami's regional campuses have experimented with a variety of options making a college education more accessible to students (e.g., courses that meet in evenings, only on Saturdays, run for half a term, etc...)

Despite increasing competition, Miami has been hesitant to explore online teaching and learning. Many of our faculty question whether students can be sufficiently engaged and are doubtful that

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courses encouraging critical thinking could be designed. Others simply found “online” a poor “fit” with our “traditional”, public ivy image.

At the same time, Miami’s regional campuses were facing issues in trying to provide accessible services to our own students. Increasingly we find our students struggling to balance school with work, family and personal issues. Our nursing students are excellent examples. Many nursing students are “non-traditional” with an increasing number from the “sandwich generation” – having both young children and aging parents to care for. In addition, most begin working full time once they earn their associate’s degree. Trying to juggle the demands of child care, aging parents and a full time job are difficult enough without being pressured by employers to take courses to finish a BSN.

Consequently, the regional campuses decided nursing would be Miami’s first fully online program slated for development.

Unfortunately, most nursing faculty had NO interest in teaching online. The faculty were concerned about the time commitments of both developing and teaching online courses and questioned if online courses foster the kind of connections they felt with their students.

Our solution to this problem was twofold. First, we surveyed students regarding their attitudes about online courses. The positive responses to this survey helped convince some nursing faculty to pursue online options. However, many of the faculty were still hesitant.

Prior to this point Miami followed a fairly standard course development model. Individual faculty met with an instructional designer who helped them create their online course. Most of the interaction focused on course development and did not address issues related to teaching online courses. There was little, if any, interaction with other faculty developing online courses at the same time.

Because we were developing a program (rather than individual courses) and because the nursing faculty felt strongly that courses should have a similar look and feel, we decided courses had to be developed with some collaboration. Since faculty learning communities (FLCs) have been a part of Miami since 1979 and are very well received, we decided to explore this option for online course development.

We realized that a FLC offered the opportunity to simultaneously discuss and learn about course development and to address broader faculty concerns about online teaching and learning. The collaborative and learning based format of FLCs offered a low risk, high gain opportunity for faculty and developers alike to learn from one another while developing a sense of mastery. One additional advantage of this model was a built in a sense of accountability. Completing online courses in a timely manner is often a problem. However, in an FLC, everyone reported to the group and the group encouraged everyone to reach their goal.

As a whole, our learning community had two goals. First, we wanted to have 6 courses fully developed, peer reviewed, edited and ready to go by the end of the year. Second, we wanted to ensure all online faculty felt confident and prepared for their first semester of online teaching. Our learning community consisted of 11 members. Seven nursing faculty participated in the learning community, six as course developers and one as an experienced online instructor. Each

faculty course developer focused on one course while providing feedback and acting as a peer reviewer for others. The experienced online instructor had taught for 2 years and gave insight into what students were like and what might be problematic in an online course or teaching online. We also included a librarian to address research copyright issues and two instructional designers. The learning community was facilitated by the Center of Online Learning director who also teaches full time in physics.

Ideally the learning community would have met every three weeks. However, scheduling difficulties led us to meet approximately once a month. Each meeting had three parts: project check-in, course development topics and online pedagogy topics. Project check-in allowed us to maintain a timeline and accountability for course development while allowing instructors to work collaboratively on issue that arose in their particular courses. There was a high level of discussion in all meetings. Some of the topics we addressed are included below.

Course Development

- What does a high-quality online course look like?
- Redesigning starting with course objectives.
- Making full use of Blackboard
- Online resources(databases,articles, etc)
- Effective presentation techniques.

Pedagogy

- Creating a sense of community online.
- Engaging online students.
- Time management.
- Assessment techniques.
- Effective online communication.
- Handling academic dishonesty.

Our last learning community meeting showcased the newly developed online courses for the entire nursing department. All nursing faculty were invited to attend a catered lunch. Faculty developers showcased their courses and demonstrated the unique aspects. The faculty developers discussed the learning community and the course creation process. Faculty were then encouraged to volunteer for the second year of the learning community.

Learning community meetings were supplemented by a high level of online communication via email, listserv and an organizational site of the learning community inside our CMS. In addition, each faculty developer met individually on a weekly or bi-weekly basis with an instructional designer to focus on their specific course. Learning community meetings were often informed by topics that emerged from these meetings. Five of the six faculty developers reported that this was just enough time with an instructional designer. One faculty developer reported that more time was needed.

At the end of the first year, learning community members were asked to complete an anonymous survey designed to assess the effectiveness of the learning community in meeting its goals, as well as to assess participants' satisfaction with the learning community. With regard to meeting its goals, the results of the survey indicated that participants agreed that the learning community met all of its goals (See Table 1).

There was also a high level of agreement that the faculty learning community was helpful in educating participants about the process of online course development and expectations for online courses, as well as actually developing an online course (See Table 2).

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Finally, the survey results showed that participants were confident that they could successfully develop and teach online courses (See Table 3).

There are anecdotal signs of success as well. For example, when one faculty developer had to resign from the learning community, another member volunteered to construct the course over the summer break. Ironically, the person who volunteered was the most vocal opponent to online learning when we began. This individual also reported that she almost “felt bad” for students who took her course in the past. Despite her glowing course evaluations from students, she felt the online course development process created a significantly better course.

In addition, faculty requested the learning community be extended an additional year. We were fortunate to receive a grant from the Ohio Learning Network to support this and are currently continuing the learning community to support faculty in their first year of online teaching. This extended learning community is also providing support for in-time and reflective revisions to the online courses based on the experiences teaching.

Our survey did indicate areas we needed to improve in our learning community model. While we attempted to keep the course development on a defined timeline, the amount of additional work expected from nursing faculty (clinicals, etc.) continually required the timeline to be adjusted. Several faculty developers indicated they wished the timeline had been more defined. In addition, while we tried to remain true to the learning community model of a community working together to better understand a topic, there were times the instructional designers needed to assume “expert” roles. While not an issue on its own, some faculty reported that this was confusing when the IDs disagreed.

The main area for improvement was actually outside the learning community. One need that emerged from learning community discussions was an orientation for new students to explain how online courses work, define expectations, address assumptions/myths about online learning, and advising students about how many courses to take. Despite being required to complete this orientation, some students did not realize how rigorous and demanding the online courses would be. This was reflected in some negative course evaluations. For faculty who are used to receiving glowing course evaluations, this was particularly difficult. Although this will change as students take more online courses and become more familiar with expectation, some student misunderstanding is a result of pedagogical difference between online bachelor’s courses and face-to-face associate’s courses.

We are currently in the second year of using this faculty learning community model for course development with nursing faculty. This spring, we began an additional learning community to support online course development for the Business Technologies department. With limited funding, this learning community is abbreviated (meeting for just one term) and learning community members will receive no professional development funds for their participation. This will be a real test to the model.

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Table 1.

| Item | Percentage Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing |
|--|--|
| One of the goals of the Nursing Faculty learning Community was to promote your interest in developing online nursing courses. How effective was the learning community in meeting this goal? | 100% |
| One of the goals of the Nursing Learning Community was to learn how technology can be used to strengthen nursing courses. How effective was the learning community in meeting this goal? | 100% |
| One of the goals of the Nursing Learning Community was to build confidence in developing online nursing courses. How effective was the learning community in meeting this goal? | 100% |

Table 2.

| Item | Percentage Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing |
|--|--|
| The learning community meetings were helpful in educating me about the process of developing an online course. | 60% |
| The learning community meetings were helpful in educating me about the expectations for online courses. | 80% |
| I learned a lot about developing online courses from my participation in this learning community. | 100% |

Table 3.

| Item | Percentage Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing |
|--|--|
| I am confident that I will be successful in building online courses in the future. | 100% |
| I am confident that I will be successful teaching an online course. | 80% |