Faculty Development: Measuring Unintended Consequences of Individual Participation in a Community of Practice

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of outcomes associated with self-directed learners' participation in a Community of Practice (CoP) for faculty teaching in an online environment. The research examines how faculty members perceive their involvement impacts their teaching.

Introduction

A Community of Practice (CoP) is formed when a group of people share an interest related to work, leisure, or the business of life, and they increase their knowledge through the process of sharing information and serving as resources for one another. Learning may be the impetus for coming together, or it may be a chance outcome. The group is distinguished from other types of groups by its member's commitment to a shared topic or endeavor and the knowledge-building that comes from regular interaction (Wenger, 1998). Members of a CoP share their expertise, solve problems, and discuss and develop innovative practices. Often they co-construct tools and a common language to help them do their jobs better, and their collective knowledge sets them apart from others (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

CoP's are characterized by the domain, the community, and the practice. The domain is the area of interest or inquiry, and the shared practice that distinguishes members of the group from others groups. The community refers to the relationships that are formed that facilitate and promote collaborative learning, and the sharing of information and knowledge. The practice refers to collections of resources, knowledge, and ways of doing things and solving problems. It is the shared repertoire that advances practice.

Faculty Development

Faculty development programs should address technology, content, and pedagogy while providing a community of support for faculty who teach online (Baran & Correia, 2014). Faculty members teaching online courses are looking for informal experiences that cover more than technical use of the course management system (Taylor & McQuiggan, 2008). Teaching online can be an isolating experience and often results in an increased workload. Communities of practice that include faculty, instructional designers, librarians, and other academic support staff create opportunities for social learning, working collaboratively, and sharing best practices (Howell, et al., 2004).

Methods

A design-based research approach was used in this study. Design-based research brings researchers and practitioners together in the design of educational interventions used to generate theory and improve practice (Plomp & Nieveen, 2007; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). It is an iterative process that includes at least three phases: research, prototyping, and assessment

(Plomp, 2007). This study is based on guidelines developed using the ADDIE model (analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate) as a framework for the design-based research process (Bond & Lockee, 2014).

During the analysis phase of the study, a survey was administered to the University of Arkansas faculty who teach online. Results of the survey were used, along with institutional goals and an evaluation of current offerings, to conduct a gap analysis. In the second phase of the study, online faculty will be asked to participate in a community of practice designed to share knowledge and report best practices related to online pedagogical challenges. Data collection methods will include observational field notes taken during community of practice meetings and virtual communication, face-to-face interviews with participants, and an online focus group. The results will be documented throughout the process and used in refining the design of the community of practice to mitigate risks to the success of the community.

Roundtable Discussion

The purpose of this roundtable discussion will be to describe the study and share findings from the first phase of research with the group. Participants will be asked to engage in scholarly debate about issues surrounding communities of practice and their design, including how these communities might be structured (formally? informally?) to enhance participation and quality, and how best to measure unintended consequences of involvement. This is exploratory research, so participants will be encouraged to consider how findings might inform adult educators and those who work with faculty development initiatives.

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