

TRANSFORMING TO BLENDED LEARNING USING EXPERIENTIAL ONLINE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For colleges and universities across the world, a key response to the pandemic has been to shift learning to online environments. Unfortunately, given the nearly instantaneous requirement for change, many faculty had little preparation time to devote to develop effective online courses or create organized blended learning experiences (Brooks & Grajek, 2020). As did so many institutions across the world, the academic institution discussed in this article, Clarence Fitzroy Bryant College (CFBC), a comprehensive, educational organization serving residents of St. Kitts / Nevis and the West Indies, faced this complex situation. Because of Covid-19, CFBC faculty had to complete their courses during Spring 2020 using either blended, hybrid, or fully online approaches. While challenging, this forced transition did lead to some positive reflection and, in particular, an elevated appreciation by both CFBC faculty and administrators of the potential to effectively incorporate online components into multiple instructional settings, thus creating more enhanced and accessible learning opportunities in the region.

As part of their forward-looking approach, the leadership at CFBC recognized an opportunity to continue the momentum of providing faculty with suitable paths for enhanced development of their web-enhanced or online learning course opportunities. In this regard, CFBC is taking the initiative to provide a charter for significant ongoing support and professional development of faculty, not only due to the pandemic, but also to sustain and enhance learning for their students. This organizational challenge prompted a collaborative discussion between administrative faculty at CFBC and a faculty member of the Adult Education Program at Auburn University (AU), USA. These discussions led to the development of a common research project aimed at the creation of a broad-based faculty development program. This article outlines our approach to the creation of this program using an experiential learning framework and model by Kolb (1984) with the goal of increasing the development of faculty online skills. We describe our design and the specific steps we are using to implement the model, along with recommendations and assessment approaches to support a sustainable, blended learning curricula for the institution. In this article, blended learning includes the concept of hybrid learning, or a mix of face-to-face and online elements. Our hope is that the process can be replicated by other institutions and become a model for transition.

OBJECTIVES AND INITIAL APPROACH

The goal of this project is to establish a systematic, online, and effective faculty development program to support learning with technologies in both blended and online environments. Our initial activities involved multiple email communications between Dr. Moyia Roytham (MR), Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs at CFBC, and the authors. The emails outlined needs for CFBC in terms of sustaining faculty and learning in the immediate

timeframe due to the pandemic (March and April 2020). After the semester was completed in May, a videoconference meeting between MR, LAC and other key leaders of CFBC was held. During this meeting, the need for a two-part approach was identified for CFBC going forward. Part 1 was the need for a short-term suite of options that could be implemented for the coming semester, Fall 2020. Part 2 was outlined to focus on the long-term strategy of continuing faculty development and development of a centralized plan for online learning. For both parts, Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model (KELM) was selected as the guiding philosophy to ensure continuity throughout the programs, and to provide a lifelong learning focus for the organization. With this approach, we propose to develop a faculty development program that will focus on effective teaching strategies that engage students, and promote learning in both blended and online environments. KELM will guide training on effective instructional methods by utilizing simulated field experiences, reflection, and peer-to-peer learning. Using the KELM approach emphasizes critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork skills in learning. The goal is to equip faculty with the skills needed to fully engage students in the blended learning environment, and prepare students to enter the complex workforce of the 21st century.

METHODS

Short-term Strategy

For the Fall 2020 semester, CFBC's leadership are faced with both uncertainty about potential Covid-19 impacts and a compressed timeframe to create a training program for both faculty and students. Therefore, for the short-term, a decision was made to primarily focus on supporting and individually assisting faculty as they continue to transition their existing face-to-face offerings, with minimal organizational changes. Discussions about, and review of, multiple instructional technologies were held to determine how courses might best be enhanced with minimal impact on faculty preparation. Ultimately, driven by existing faculty experiences and availability, the Google Classroom[®] and Moodle[®] platforms were put forward as the most suitable technologies for immediate use, the primary reasons being that CFBC faculty are familiar with these tools, they require minimal support, and the resources are immediately available. Further discussions regarding the choice of an institutional-wide Learning Management System (LMS) are planned as part of the long-term strategy once broader faculty input can be obtained on technology preferences, experiences, and perceptions, along with cost and time considerations.

Long-term Strategy

Going forward, the plan is to identify and implement the core components that will allow successful deployment of blended courses throughout CFBC's curricula. A core requirement voiced by CFBC was that the final product must integrate administrative functions (enrollment, record keeping, grade transfer, etc.) with accessible instructional technology and effective faculty development under one scalable program. To meet these goals, a working group has been organized. Responsibilities being addressed by this team include creation of a Strategic Plan, selection of a LMS, coordination with the Office of Technology to deploy the LMS and merge backend management functions, and creation of training instruments for a faculty development program. These activities will be facilitated by on-campus meetings among CFBC participants, video conferencing, emails, and Google Shared Drive, using communication and interaction tools that are widely accessible.

Faculty Development Program

While creation of a cohesive online program for CFBC is the ultimate goal of this project, the remainder of this article will focus on steps being taken to meet the Faculty Development objective, which we assisted with during the pandemic closure of CFBC, and continue to assist with as part of the long-term strategy. This component best aligns with the expertise of the authors who are leading this portion of the project. As discussed in the Introduction, work toward this objective is being guided by the KELM concept (Figure 1).

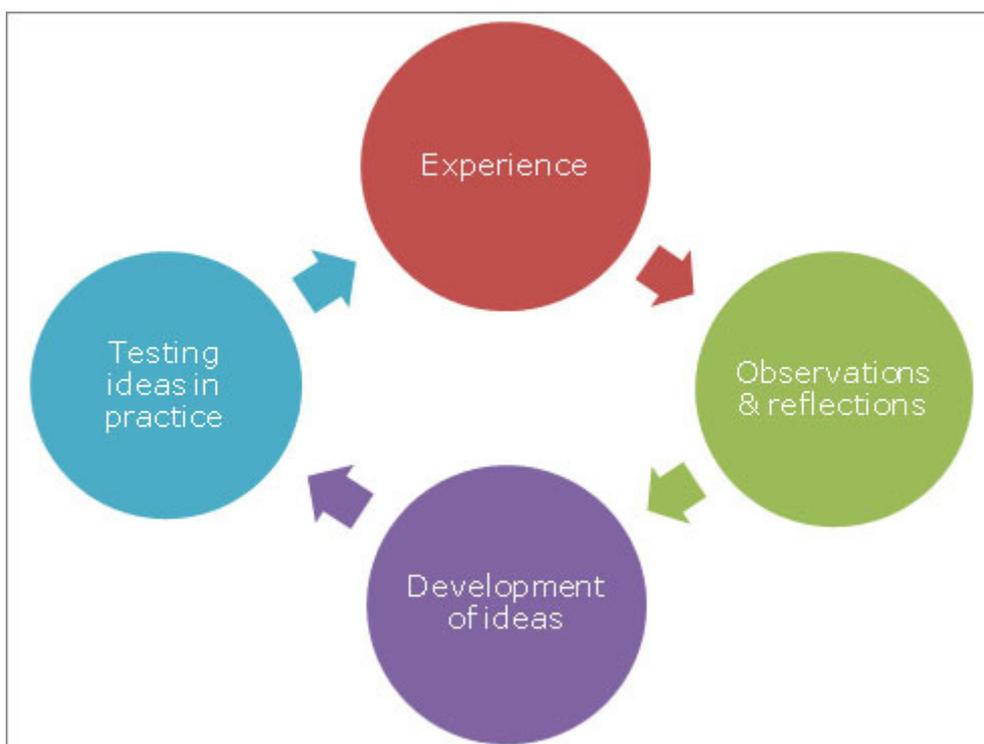


Figure 1: Illustrations of the key components of the KELM concept, based on Kolb's *Experiential Learning Process* (1984)

Central elements of KELM are that learning is continuous, experience is necessary for learning, learning is a dynamic process, and the role of the teacher is as a facilitator or guide (Kolb, 1984). The transition from a teacher-centered role, common in the face-to-face classroom, to a learner-centered online facilitator can be challenging for many faculty or instructors (Ko & Rossen, 2017). Therefore, guidance to assist this transition must be included in any faculty development program.

An essential step in initiating any new program is information gathering. To help establish a baseline for this project, a SWOT-based survey (de los Santos & Zanca, 2018) is being designed and will be distributed to all CFBC instructors. The purpose of this survey is to provide the team with a solid understanding of the existing attitudes, interest, and capabilities held by the faculty as a whole. Understandingly, introduction of any new instructional modality into an established system results in anxiety and pushback. Introduction of online components, in particular, tends to be a polarizing subject with opinions typically ranging from outright dismissal to enthusiastic early adapters (Ní Shé et al., 2019). Informed insight into the intra-institutional situation is critical for establishing the

direction for faculty development. Interestingly, while seasoned faculty are at times the most reluctant to move away from the traditional face-to-face lecture format, they are often better prepared for the facilitator role than less experienced but enthusiastic colleagues (Martin *et al.*, 2019). This dichotomy is likely the result of senior faculty often having faced instructional situations best served by alternate modalities, such as the Socratic method, reflective learning, and/or “active” learning.

A second use of the SWOT analysis will be to identify CFBC faculty already actively engaged in blended instruction. From this group we will work to identify users who will be willing to share their insights, both positive and cautionary, as part of the faculty development program. In our program, not only will these individuals be approached to offer input but they will also be asked to serve as peer mentors. Faculty with existing experience in the process can be critical to fostering acceptance of change among their peers (Martin *et al.*, 2019). Our ultimate goal is to form a vibrant **Community of Practice (COP)** (Wenger, 1998) among faculty at CFBC to develop ongoing professional development and shared experiences across teaching and learning. Hopefully, these peer mentors will be encouraged to take the initial leadership roles in this COP and support the faculty and instructors across the college.

Our next step will be to solicit syllabi and course materials from interested faculty. These materials will allow the team to look for commonalities across instructional approaches, as well as provide an understanding of required content. This information will be used as a blueprint for the creation of templates for course syllabi and LMS components. We will be employing *backwards* design techniques, where one starts with the end or desired results and then builds the curriculum from that goal (Hughes *et al.*, 2016). This approach will allow us to maximize a design that focuses on the learner. Use of pre-designed course templates helps standardize the students’ experience and reduces the time needed to orient students to different courses. This can be particularly important in blended courses where student issues with technology can be a high demand element of faculty workloads (Ko & Rossen, 2017).

In designing courses for CFBC, we believe there are several major focal points that should be considered in the process. First, following KELM, *learner interactivity* is the central feature. Instructional elements that are being incorporated into the blended experience to support experiential learning include problem-solving exercises, case studies, group projects, online discussions, and project-based assignments. These activities will be designed to allow the students to draw from their own experiences while contributing to collaborative outcomes. Second, to prepare students for in-class portions of the course, links to subject related outside readings and online resources will be included in the LMS. A standard technique we employ is to assign two students as moderators for each week’s online discussion. The students are permitted to choose from a list of topics from which they research articles, provide outlines, and lead discussion. These discussions can be synchronous or asynchronous. Both approaches can be effective with asynchronous discussions providing additional scheduling flexibility and time for students to research and think about their responses. Third, for higher level courses, the course outlines will include an Annotated Bibliography assignment. An additional online element that we will propose to faculty to include is the **ePortfolio**. ePortfolios provide a platform for students to display their academic training, practice reflective writing, demonstrate technology skills, and establish a professional identity outside of social media (Chen *et al.*, 2012). Strong ePortfolios that include multi-course components can open career opportunities, especially in technical training curricula.

Achieving the above goals for the learner requires faculty cooperation, training, and preparation. Thus, a faculty development program with clear goals and readily deployable information is essential. Using online instructional videos, mini-lectures, and templated LMS examples, we hope to provide faculty with not only useful information but also direct practice with the technologies they will employ in their courses. Based on our collective decades of online course design experience, we hope to cover most of the major challenges faced by faculty leading blended courses. Topics will include maximizing student engagement, collaborative learning approaches and pitfalls, development of effective experiential and application based assignments, online test creation, setting assignment timelines, and user-friendly LMS design. Other areas that will be examined relate to assessment and faculty-student interaction. Anonymous peer review and assessment can be a valuable tool in terms of both training students to think critically and making effective use of faculty time (Wanner & Palmer, 2018). Online rubrics that permit peer grading are standard features of most LMS. Rubrics not only provide assessment but as importantly can serve as assignment guides.

Finally, suggestions for time management is an important part of any development program. When first exposed, many faculty discover that the online portion of a blended course can be significantly more time consuming than traditional lectures. Students interact with online materials 24/7 and often expect instructor responses to be instantaneous. In our program, we will be including suggestions on how to meet student expectations and provide timely guidance without over-burdening the instructor. Instructions on how to set up online calendars and technology for virtual instructor / student meetings will be available in our program. For multiple reasons, in blended courses, one or two students may monopolize the instructor's time. Meeting the needs of these students, dealing with procrastination, and issues of academic honesty are areas that require special attention in the online environment for any faculty or instructor (Ko & Rossen, 2017).

Teaching and Program Evaluation

CFBC has a solid record of accomplishment in terms of student course evaluations. In addition to using the standard course evaluations, we hope to incorporate a more robust Peer Review process for faculty that is formative in nature and supports the lifelong learning process for faculty members. It will also provide a vehicle for mentorship in academe and be part of the COP. As part of the program, we hope to have the faculty develop their own ePortfolios.

DISCUSSION

The core objective of any higher education institution should be to transition students from passive learners to life-long seekers of knowledge. To highlight the unique role of higher education in this process and to distinguish the process involved, we have previously coined the term **Chuoagogy** (Cordie & Wooten, 2018). The mission statement of CFBC, which includes - *“To foster the development of responsible self-sufficient citizens ... and which prepare students to make lifelong contributions to their communities”* exemplifies this view. Ensuring that all instances where online components are employed in the CFBC curriculum faithfully serve to further these goals has been paramount in developing this project.

While the addition of blended elements to existing courses can be a complex undertaking, the rewards for the student learner and the faculty member can be many. When done correctly, traditional courses can be enhanced with online learner-centered experiences.

In-class times can be used to concentrate on problem areas and/or topics needing specialized presentation.

This project is being designed to ensure that CFBC faculty are fully prepared to meet the challenges of leading the implementation of additional blended offerings. Understanding that some teachers struggle with online approaches and that all faculty can benefit from access to instructional support, CFBC is taking positive steps to address these needs. By creating a COP for CFBC that involves both the home institutions and global connections, we hope to create a robust and sustainable model for faculty and professional development.

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