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Impact of an ePortfolio Faculty Learning Community on Course Design and Student Learning: A Progress Report on a Case Study

Devshikha Bose
Boise State University

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Devshikha Bose
Boise State University
United States
devshikhabose@boisestate.edu

The purpose of this paper is to present a progress report on a case study which documents faculty perceptions regarding the impact of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) on the pedagogical applications of ePortfolios in course design. The study will also document faculty perceptions on how changes made/planned to course design as a result of participation in the FLC may impact student learning. A post-completion electronic survey and a focus group meeting will be used to collect data from nine research participants. Initial observations made by FLC facilitators are reported and implications for future iterations of a similar FLC are discussed.

Keywords: faculty learning community; ePortfolios; electronic portfolios; course design; faculty professional development; student learning; case study; progress report.

Introduction

Learning communities have been used to facilitate both student and faculty development (Buch, Johnson, Fitzgerald, & Bonilla, 2013; Kozlowski, Holmes, & Hampton, 2014). Faculty learning communities (FLCs) have been found to enable and support ongoing conversations about teaching and learning in a nurturing environment (Lisagor, Augustin, Lucero-Liu, & Efrat, 2013; McDonald & Star, 2014). Such conversations may allow faculty members to discuss, plan, experiment, and share their teaching and learning experiences with their peers, leading to reflection and engagement with pedagogic theories (McDonald & Star, 2014). Additionally, it can help build cultural sensitivity, such that faculty are able to better appreciate the nuances of working with a diverse student body and build diverse cultural contexts in their course materials (Lisagor, Augustin, Lucero-Liu, & Efrat, 2013). On a larger scale, an FLC can be a vehicle for organizational change, wherein there exists a sense of urgency to find solutions to a problem over a period of time, facilitated by the presence of powerful groups of people or campus leaders who are willing to take risks and successfully create short-term wins and rewards as signifiers of success (Desrochers, 2013).

Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to document faculty perceptions regarding the impact of a FLC on the pedagogical applications of ePortfolios in course design. The study will also document faculty perceptions on how changes made/planned to course design as a result of participation in the FLC may impact student learning. This investigation is valuable since certain studies in the past have shown that though participation in an FLC can result in shifts in perceptions and changes in certain aspects of teaching, these changes may not be enough to impact practice in the short term (Nadelson, Shadle, & Hettinger, 2013).

Research Question(s)

1. What are faculty perceptions regarding the impact of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) on the pedagogical applications of ePortfolios in course design, as measured by an anonymous electronic survey?

2. What are faculty perceptions of impact on student learning, as a result of the pedagogical applications of ePortfolios in course design, as measured by an anonymous electronic survey?

3. What are faculty perceptions regarding the impact of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) on the pedagogical applications of ePortfolios in course design, as reported through a qualitative analysis of a focus group meeting?

4. What are faculty perceptions of impact on student learning, as a result of the pedagogical applications of ePortfolios in course design, as reported through a qualitative analysis of a focus group meeting?

It is anticipated that after participation in the FLC, faculty will report an increase in knowledge about the pedagogical uses of ePortfolios in instruction and the potential application of ePortfolios in course design. Also, faculty will report a perceived positive impact on student learning, as a result of changes in course design after participation in the FLC. As such, this study has the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Participation in the FLC will increase faculty knowledge about the pedagogical uses of ePortfolios in instruction and the potential application of ePortfolios in course design.

Hypothesis 2: Faculty will report a positive impact on student learning, as a result of actual or planned changes in course design after participation in the FLC.

Sample

Call for applications to participate in this FLC was made in Fall 2015 with the intention of forming the semester long FLC in Spring 2016. Seventeen faculty members applied and ten were selected to participate, based on the quality of the application. Participants come from various disciplines, which includes Multidisciplinary Studies, Kinesiology, Nursing, Communication, University Foundational Studies Program, Business, English, Art, Physics, and Applied Science Program. They have adjunct, tenure-track, and full professor appointments. Nine out of the ten faculty participating in the FLC agreed to participate in the study. All faculty participating in the FLC will be given a stipend (to be used for future professional development costs) of $300 upon fulfilling the completion requirements of this FLC. Participation in the research study is voluntary and faculty will not be given any additional compensation for it.

Method and Data Collection

Faculty members participating in the ePortfolio FLC, have attended four webinars (each an hour long) and will have attended four cohort meetings (each an hour long) during the course of Spring 2016. Attending these webinars and meetings are part of completing the requirements of participating in the FLC, and have to be undertaken irrespective of participation in the research study. After the end of the last cohort meeting, those FLC members (9 out of the 10, have agreed to participate in the research) who agree to participate in the study, will be sent an email (containing a link to a qualtrics.com based survey) asking them to complete a post-completion electronic survey. They will also be asked to participate in a focus group meeting. This meeting will take place in a secure campus meeting room. The focus group meeting will be audio recorded using a mobile device. The data collected will be de-identified, summarized and analyzed for reporting.

Faculty Learning Community Completion Requirements

The FLC activities include attending four webinars and four cohort meetings. All eight meetings were/are to be held at an on campus meeting room. In order to fulfill the requirements of completing the FLC, faculty are required to attend at least three out of the four webinars, as well as at least three out of the four cohort meetings. Faculty can

participate either in person or electronically via Google+ Hangouts/Skype etc. Participation as a group is expected so as to promote peer discussion, active and group-based learning.

Webinars

The institutional ePortfolio platform used at Boise State University where this research was conducted is *Digication*. When contacted for support, *Digication* agreed to provide custom webinars which would discuss various pedagogical and technical aspects of using the software. These webinar meetings were held every second Friday of the month during the Spring 2016 semester. In order to determine the topics which might be useful for the FLC participants, they were sent an informal survey to assess needs. Based on the input from the survey, it was determined that the four webinar sessions would include the following topics - transitioning from a physical to electronic portfolios; ePortfolios for supporting social pedagogy and using ePortfolios for assessment management. The first three webinars were pre-recorded and delivered asynchronously. The fourth webinar was a live Q & A session where faculty asked various technical and pedagogical questions to a representative from *Digication*. All four webinar sessions were attended by faculty at an on campus location, and was facilitated by two instructional designers one of which is the researcher. A short discussion pertaining to the topic of the day followed the webinar.

Cohort Meetings

The FLC met for an hour every last Friday of the month (a total of 4 meetings in Spring 2016) as a cohort. These meetings were facilitated by two Instructional Design Consultants (IDCs) from the IDEA (Instructional Design and Educational Assessment) shop, which is a subsidiary of the Center of Teaching and Learning. One of the IDCs is the researcher for this study. During these meetings, FLC participants discussed and elaborated on the topic/content of that month's webinar. They shared experiences, asked questions, reflected, demonstrated examples of ePortfolios, found solutions to each other's ePortfolio related problems, and exchanged ideas on how to improve/change their course design and assessment practices using ePortfolios. While the webinars mostly focused on *Digication* based ePortfolios, the cohort meeting discussions were about the pedagogical implications of ePortfolios in general. At the time of writing this paper, all four webinars were delivered while three out of the four cohort meetings were completed.

Facilitator observation report

The discussions at cohort meetings and following the webinars were facilitated by two IDCs. Certain observations were made during the course of these meetings. Even though the facilitators moderated the conversation, there were certain members of the FLC who were not adequately engaged and made little contribution to the conversation. There were others who were consistent in their participation asking questions, sharing experiences and information. The facilitators used active learning engagement techniques like think, pair and share, group discussions and report outs, in order to engage all members of the FLC. At the time of writing this paper, some members of the FLC did not finish the completion requirements, in that they did not attend three out of the four webinars.

Implications for future iterations of the Faculty Learning Community

At the time of writing this paper, all four webinars were delivered while only three out of the four intended cohort meetings were completed. The electronic survey and the focus group meeting were not yet conducted and therefore data is not available for reporting. Based on the observations made by the facilitators, including the researcher, certain remarks can be made, which may have implications for professional developers planning to facilitate similar faculty learning communities. One or more of the following additions or alterations will be made to future iterations of the FLC:

- Future FLCs will have a Blackboard course or a Google Site where participants can meet asynchronously to find peer support through discussions and access to shared resources. This would be a common online forum where faculty could connect with each other between meetings (Desrochers, 2013).

- ePortfolio Subject Matter Experts and experienced faculty users will be invited to cohort meetings to share their expertise (Desrochers, 2013).
- Faculty would be required to submit after completing the FLC meetings, a concrete final product in the form of a - revised syllabus, lesson plans, or summary of planned changes in course design etc. (Desrochers, 2013).
- FLC facilitators will be interviewed in order to gather more rich data on professional developer experiences from a facilitator's perspective (Desrochers, 2013).
- Faculty will be encouraged to do more show and tell demonstrations/sharing of student portfolios during cohort meetings.
- Faculty will maintain a teaching log or pedagogical diary of reflections on their teaching and students' learning, perceptions about their practice, as well as general ideas about pedagogy (Nadelson, Shadle, & Hettinger, 2013).
- Faculty will be asked to provide details on how they plan to share their learning (gained at the FLC) with the wider campus community.
- Faculty will be asked to develop their own ePortfolio.
- Asynchronous online versions of this FLC will be designed so as to include distant faculty.
- Future studies will have a pre-survey to gather faculty perceptions prior to attending the FLC.
- Faculty will be encouraged to mentor a colleague interested in the topic (Lisagor, Augustin, Lucero-Liu, & Efrat, 2013).

Conclusion

This paper provides an initial progress report on a case study, which documents faculty perceptions regarding the impact of a FLC on the pedagogical applications of ePortfolios and how that impacts student learning. At the time of writing this paper, data collection using an electronic survey and a focus group meeting had not yet been completed. However, initial observations made by FLC facilitators are reported and implications for future iterations of a similar FLC are discussed. This might be useful for professional developers planning to facilitate a similar FLC in their institution.

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