Online Instructor Development: A COOL Story

Nick Baker, John Freer, Nobuko Fujita, Alicia Higgison, Mark Lubrick,
Brandon M. Sabourin, Jane Sylvester & Paula M. van Wyk
University of Windsor and St. Clair College

This paper explores the development of a flexible, free, online certificate program built on open educational resources to support instructors transitioning to online and non-traditional teaching modes. The program offers multiple pathways to completion, including recognition of prior learning and immersing participants in the online learning environment. We describe the challenges learners had to overcome to engage in the program and how, in doing so, they were able to embrace constructivist and connectivist approaches. These, in turn, afforded them ongoing connections, broke the mold of preconceptions and myths when preparing to engage future online learners, and shaped their practice through exposure to learning theories and evidence-based practices. In this paper, we explore the initial design of the program through the lens of the program facilitators and learners from the first cohort, and share our collective learning and reflections from this process.

Nous nous penchons ici sur l'élaboration d'un programme de certificat gratuit, souple et basé sur des ressources éducationnelles ouvertes. Offert en ligne, ce programme est conçu pour aider les professeurs à faire la transition vers l'enseignement en ligne et vers des méthodes d'enseignement non traditionnelles. Il existe de nombreuses manières de satisfaire aux exigences du programme, y compris la reconnaissance de l'apprentissage et de l'immersion dans un environnement d'apprentissage en ligne. Dans notre article, nous faisons état des difficultés auxquelles les apprenants ont été confrontés lors de leur participation au programme. Nous montrons comment, en surmontant ces obstacles, ils se sont approprié des approches constructivistes et connectées, lesquelles leur ont permis d'établir des connexions et de déconstruire certains mythes et préjugés au bénéfice des futurs apprenants en ligne, tout en les aidant à façonner leur pratique au moyen de théories de l'apprentissage et de pratiques fondées sur des données probantes. Notre étude examine la conception initiale du programme à partir du point de vue des animateurs et des apprenants de la première cohorte. Nous présentons également les réflexions et les leçons que nous avons tirées, collectivement, de cette expérience.

In post-secondary education, online learning continues to grow at a pace outstripping overall enrolments (Donovan et. al., 2018). In the United States, online enrolments increased by 5% between 2012 to 2016, while overall enrolments declined by almost 4% (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). During the same time period in Canada, online enrolments grew by 40% in universities and 60% in colleges, whereas overall enrolments grew by approximately 2% (Donovan et al. 2018). Nearly 30% of all students enrolled in higher education in the United States are taking at least one online class (Allen & Seaman,

2017), while in Canada the figures are slightly lower at approximately 25% (Donovan et al. 2018).

Whereas demand for online learning is increasing, the lack of professional development for online teaching remains a barrier to adoption at post-secondary institutions (e.g., Donovan et al. 2018; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017; King et al., 2019; Orr, Williams, & Pennington, 2009). It has also been noted that institutional culture, myths, and practices often hold individual faculty back from exploring teaching innovation (Beetham, 2012). Thus, there has been a call for more professional development opportunities in online and technology-enabled curriculum design, which can play an important role in influencing change at the institutional level (Sharpe & Armellini, 2020).

The key for success with online teaching is motivating faculty members to innovate and providing support in the development and teaching of online courses (Orr et al., 2009). Motivation poses a potential barrier as many instructors who teach traditional classes may not be interested in teaching online (Osika, Johnson, & Buteau, 2009). Deterrents include the extra time required to develop and teach an online course (Cavanaugh, 2005) and the perceived "disconnect" between teaching on-campus classes and online course delivery (Anderson, Imdieke, & Standerford, 2011). There is also an associated challenge in that instructors who begin teaching online without additional support tend to adopt new technologies for online teaching without transforming their traditional, didactic pedagogies. As a result, these instructors may fail to take advantage of the affordances of these technologies, which leads to poorer experiences for both the instructor and their students (Harasim, 2012). Moreover, students who advocate for the use of digital technologies in teaching sometimes expect technologies and teaching practices that are at odds with the evidence of what makes an effective learning experience, such as delivery of online readings or recorded lectures without a focus on communication and community building (Masterman, 2020). Although there may be resistance among some instructors to adopting new technologies and platforms, it is imperative that there are resources in place (e.g., professional development, research-based practices) to help ease such a transition as universities strive towards fulfilling the needs of an ever-changing student body.

In response to these pressures, the University of Windsor's Office of Open Learning established the Certificate of Online and Open Learning (COOL)—a free, non-credit professional development program for instructors that prepares them to design, develop, and teach high-quality online, open, and hybrid courses. This flexible program introduces learners to a scholarly base for exploring and adopting technology as well as alternative teaching approaches. The program introduces learning theories and evidence-based practices for online and non-traditional learning environments, such as open educational practices. It incorporates a range of development opportunities—including fully online courses, intensive course development institutes, workshops, a community of practice, and development of an ePortfolio—to meet the professional development needs of instructors teaching in a variety of higher education settings.

In this paper, we present the journey of seven instructors who were both learners and teachers in the inaugural offering of the COOL program. Four of our authors are University of Windsor faculty and staff who administer and facilitate the COOL program, and the remaining authors are university and college instructors who were learners in the program. Collectively, we have reflected on our experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improving the program.

Developing the COOL

Faculty development is a relatively young field and has a number of different names (e.g., academic development, educational development, professional development) and foci (Beach, Sorcinelli, Austin, & Rivard, 2016; Zuber-Skerritt, 1991). While further research is needed, a recent meta-analysis provides evidence that faculty development has a measurable impact on student learning by informing changes to teaching practice (Condon, Iverson, Manduca, &

Willett, 2016). The program we describe in this paper is focused primarily on enhancing teaching practice particularly in online, open, and technology-enhanced teaching and learning, although there is also a focus on critical digital literacy within a teaching context.

The COOL program, open to full and part-time faculty, graduate students, and staff, was designed to support and recognize the needs of academics with limited discretionary time as they balance teaching, advising, research programs, and service. The development team had to balance providing exposure to learning opportunities without creating something onerous enough to act as a barrier to completion. The goal was to create a program that required approximately 3-6 hours of engagement per week for up to 18 weeks (for the course-based option) or an equivalent level of engagement in related activities. Work with graduate teaching assistants (Dimitrov et. al. 2013) found that extended programming was more effective at improving teaching effectiveness and changing perceptions of teaching and learning than short one-off events such as workshops. For this reason, the COOL program was designed to provide extended engagement with the Scholarship of Online and Open Teaching and Learning (SOOTL).

The COOL program offers a high level of flexibility for learners to choose a pathway tailored to their own interests and needs. Participants can complete the requirements of the program in multiple ways: by completing three six-week online courses, or through a combination of courses, organized events, and recognition of prior learning. Providing the option of recognition for participation in other forms of learning and development is a unique element of the program that seeks to recognise the various ways in which our learners may be able to achieve the learning outcomes of the program (see Appendix A for current program Learning Outcomes) and the diverse starting points from which they may enter. For example, we believe that undertaking a large project with a teaching and learning team to design or redesign an online course or program inevitably leads to professional development and deep practical engagement with the principles that underlie the program. Completion of the program also requires submission of a design or redesign for an online learning opportunity. The final capstone activity involves the development of an electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) as a means of capturing rich learning and development, which may also be shared publicly.

The program is designed using constructivist and connectivist principles (Siemens, 2005) infused with open educational practices (Cronin, 2017; Paskevicius, 2017). The design was particularly influenced by the work of Cronin (2017), who defined four roles common to open educators: balancing privacy and openness, developing digital literacies, valuing social learning, and challenging traditional teaching role expectations. Active engagement in the learning community is a core feature of the individual courses and the other activities in the program. The online learning environment can also act as a levelling tool, removing potential biases and power differentials that may otherwise exist in a face-to-face class populated with learners at mixed stages in their academic careers, allowing for social learning and challenging of traditional roles to happen more freely. A critical focus of the program, and one that may be foreign to many academics steeped in traditional practices, is exposing learners to the potential of open scholarship as well as its risks.

COOL Courses

The three courses in the COOL program are designed to immerse participants in the experience of being an online student. These courses can be taken in any sequence because they are designed to be standalone, but they each have some common elements. For example, each course uses a blend of synchronous (live weekly online classes facilitated in our virtual classroom) and asynchronous (e.g., discussion-based, self-directed, and offline) learning opportunities, similar learning hours, common terminology for menu items, and a syllabus template. They are designed to expose instructors to a range of different approaches to online teaching and learning. Even though this is not an official certificate program

approved for credit, providing milestone certificates for each course undertaken and an overall certificate of recognition for completion of the program seems to be a motivating force for the participants.

Anatomy of a 21st Century Educator

The first course in the series (although they can be taken in any order, this course is offered first during the calendar year) introduces learners to Simon Bates' (2016) model of the 21st Century Educator, consisting of six complementary and intertwined roles of educators (Figure 1).
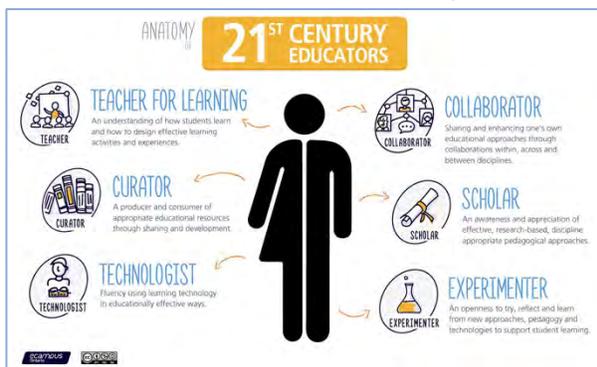

Figure 1

Anatomy of 21st Century Educators. Retrieved from: https://www.ecampusontario.ca/extending-skills-knowledge-technology-enabled-learning-still-yet/21st-century-educator/

The course is built on adapted, openly licensed content developed for eCampus Ontario's Ontario Extend program (Lopes & Porter, 2018). These resources were developed for a provincial program that aims to enhance the knowledge, skills, and attitudes considered foundational in online and technology-enhanced teaching and learning. eCampus Ontario's program has a focus on developing digital skills, introducing the idea of design-based thinking, building a professional digital presence, developing a personal learning network, and encouraging experimentation in teaching (Lopes & Porter, 2018).

The Anatomy of a 21st Century Educator course not only shares these goals, but also introduces learners to the idea of open educational resources (OERs) and how to find, adopt, adapt, and deploy

them using institutional systems, such as the Learning Management System (LMS), and models the ways in which participants can use OERs. The course introduces participants to open pedagogies and practices, and it challenges them to make public some elements of their development and learning in the course through social media, blogging, and other sharing mechanisms, and as part of the larger Ontario Extend community. For many participants, intentionally developing a personal learning network is a transformative activity, and there is a strong focus in this course on finding and expanding that network using digital tools. The course also deliberately immerses the learners in a course design that incorporates pre-developed content to support independent learning while still maintaining a weekly synchronous element.

Practice What You Teach

The second course, Practice What You Teach, focuses on many of the practical tools and strategies that can be useful for online instruction. These include video creation/editing, elearning authoring tools, synchronous and asynchronous presentations and discussions, and 2D and 3D animation. One of the crucial considerations of the course is providing access to high quality, free (often open-source) tools for learners. Synchronous sessions involve demonstrating and working with relevant tools. This allows learners to practice using these tools prior to implementing them in their online courses, and it means that they can consider recommending them for their own students to use.

Initially, learners are encouraged to immerse themselves in the institutional LMS, try out new features, and reflect on how they use the system or other tools to fulfill their pedagogical needs. An examination of sources of student activity data (video statistics, site statistics, etc.) leads to discussions about how this data can be used to review teaching practices or to offer support to students who may be at risk of failure.

This course introduces learners to a wide range of instructional design theories (ADDIE,

backward design, BOPPPS, etc.) as well as storyboarding and lesson planning templates, thereby drawing attention to the structured requirements of a successful online or technology-enabled course. Accessibility is also a key consideration. This course discusses some of the common accessibility considerations for designing multimedia (with reference to legislative and industry standards), and introduces learners to a range of tools for identifying potential accessibility issues in their course designs.

Exploring the Edges of Online Teaching

The third course, Exploring the Edges of Online Teaching, urges participants to consider non-traditional and emerging technologies: constructivism, connectivism, open pedagogies, augmented and virtual reality, and learning analytics. The course design incorporates research-based principles for how learning works (e.g., Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010). Learners experience being online students themselves in a safe course climate where they can take risks sharing 'half-baked notions' with their instructor and peers in an online learning community (Scardamalia, 2002). Participants reflect on their prior knowledge of online teaching approaches and develop an awareness of learning theories that underlie the design of online, student-centred learning environments (Jonassen & Land, 2012). Learners experience "gamification," in which some game-design elements are applied to the online course design to provide motivation for completion, to provide more autonomy over assignment selection, and to mitigate the cost of failure (Aguilar, Holman, & Fishman, 2015). They are also encouraged to try new technologies and practices that may otherwise be intimidating. For example, learners co-author blog posts as an open educational practice instead of completing a "disposable assignment" (Wiley, 2013).

ePortfolios

The COOL program uses ePortfolios as a means of capturing student learning in the certificate and relate it to their teaching in online and open environments.

Moreira, Henriques, de Fátima, Goulão, & Barros (2017) argue that ePortfolios offer the opportunity to develop technical and pedagogical skills in order to become better learning designers. Completing ePortfolios enables reflection on practice. In each course, learners are presented with a challenge—whether it be a new pedagogical approach, an assignment using a new technology, or publishing content on the open web—and the ePortfolio provides a platform to weave these experiences together with narrative in a way that is impactful to individual learners.

Wordpress underlies our institutional ePortfolios, providing an open platform in which students can design their ePortfolio with support from an administrator. This was an important factor for the COOL participants as it gave a sense of ownership over both the content they showcased and the way in which that content was presented and organized.

Learners frequently requested support for ePortfolio development. Some found it difficult to envision the contents of a teaching-focused ePortfolio as distinct from other elements of their academic career. For others, the platform itself was challenging, suggesting that their professional work was better showcased in alternate virtual spaces (e.g., LinkedIn). As the COOL program is intended to meet individual learners' goals, clarifying expectations for the ePortfolio portion of the COOL will be an important future discussion. Some learners have very specific goals related to renewal, promotion, and tenure or to professional development. Each learner should be able to select the platform, design, organization, layout, and content that aligns with their longer-term goals.

Learner Experiences

The remaining sections of this paper are devoted to describing and unpacking the experiences of learners in the COOL program. Four graduates of the COOL program—all contributing authors to this paper—have provided qualitative reflections on their learning experiences. The four stories below were constructed

after the completion of COOL. By that time, each of the four graduates had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences as well as the ways in which their teaching, supervision, and mentoring practices had been consequently impacted. The stories were constructed by reflecting on three prompts: (a) the biggest take-away from the COOL program; (b) significant challenge(s) experienced during the program; and (c) potential solutions to challenges or suggestions to improve the program.

Brandon's Story

My participation in COOL happened by chance. I heard about the program through a story in a campus news email blast. When I began the first course in COOL program, Anatomy of a 21st Century Educator, I had just received a developer's contract to design my first online course. The interdisciplinarity of my cohort meant that I needed to think through my plans in a detailed, logical way so that others could understand where I was coming from. The feedback I received from colleagues in my cohort greatly improved my overall course design.

I am drawn to using technology in the classroom. Most of the courses I teach are about using digital technology and social media in the classroom. The COOL allowed me to take what I already knew about digital technology and education (i.e., my disciplinary content) and create online learning opportunities, which, while seeming like a logical progression, is actually not as easy as it sounds. I suppose I had a bit of a running head start in this regard as I was already quite familiar with the theories discussed in the first course and some of the technologies in the second. However, I had usually applied them to a face-to-face or blended learning format and not in an exclusively online setting. I have found that students perceive the online learning environment differently than the in-class learning environment.

I found the collaborative elements of the COOL program to be the most rewarding, whether they were collaborative online discussions, larger projects such as collaborative vlog posts, or peer reviews of a colleague's online course design. I enjoyed being able to dig deeper with a smaller group of educators who had similar goals yet different perspectives than I did. This was also the case when engaging with the additional activities to round out my work in the COOL program: an online instructor institute, and a course review. These opportunities provided additional learning opportunities.

One challenge I faced was staying connected with the group outside class time. We were all teaching and researching in our various departments, and I was also finishing my doctoral coursework at the time. This meant I had limited time beyond the course meeting times to engage with others. The fortunate thing is that our small cohort was the first cohort to complete the COOL, and this has translated into us keeping in touch despite our varied positions across the campus.

In the future, I would like to play a larger role as a COOL alumnus. Since I completed the COOL, I have not had much contact with my classmates and no contact with current participants. I think there is an opportunity to develop some sort of network or group that can be ambassadors on campus—perhaps, online teaching and learning fellows.

Jane's Story

Learning new techniques and strategies to engage students in meaningful ways was my lofty goal when I landed in the Practice What You Teach course. My experiential learning course would benefit from technical upgrades as I was not using Blackboard to its full potential.

Completing COOL's collaborative online courses was a great way to see what was possible within a virtual classroom and how it feels to be an online student. By watching the instructors take calculated risks with technology and allowing students to take control of the learning, I gained the confidence needed to try it within my own environment and not worry about missteps. Becoming familiar with handling technical issues and not being entirely sure of what will happen when you open an online discussion is challenging, but my results were positive.

The COOL connected me with a valuable network that has helped me immensely both during and after the experience. I appreciate the technical skills I gained to enhance my Blackboard site and teaching style. Now my course site has tests, H5P interactive content, and open resources. The greatest new addition is the online discussion forum where I ask small groups of students to reflect on their experience with their community placements. This service learning program does not have a regular class meeting, so the new forum has created a community that I did not previously realize was even possible.

The ePortfolio component allowed me to reflect on my teaching philosophy. A critique of my LinkedIn portfolio, followed by editing, would have been more useful for me. The e-portfolio seemed relevant only to those seeking teaching roles.
The virtual classrooms of COOL were outside of my comfort zone. I was hesitant to share video or audio with my classmates. Text conversations were my only interaction during the live classes. This made one-on-one interactions with the course instructors very important to my sense of belonging to the course. As a result, I have made improvements in how I interact with content and students to be more welcoming.

In conclusion, my goal was reached and surpassed. New technologies will arise, and now I am more confident to give them a try. I look forward to seeing new and improved iterations of the COOL and will likely take any new courses they offer.

John's Story

I am someone who has always preferred in-person learning experiences. My experiences online were scarce, but I often found it difficult to engage as a student when presented with the online format. When I was approached to teach two brand new online classes, I immediately started to think about how (or even if) I could engage my students. I was skeptical, but the COOL emerged at the perfect time to help shape my practice. What I came to understand in the COOL program is that my preconceived notions that emerged from my previous experiences as a student in online learning were very shallow. The COOL program offered me a combination of theory and practical strategies to approach online learning in a constructivist manner. I discovered that my initial goal of replicating what I was doing in the classroom was not ideal. Instead, I designed my courses (i.e., assessment, weekly schedule, module development, etc.) with my learning from the COOL coursework in mind.

The first offerings of my new online courses were not perfect, and, one year later, I am still making changes based upon student feedback. If it were not for the COOL program, I may have made the critical mistake of teaching these online courses the way in which I was taught with very little opportunity for engagement. Thankfully, I have learned how to effectively use OERs to engage and support my students' learning. I am sure there are instructors just like me who are also in need of this valuable professional development. As the 21st century classroom continues to evolve, so too must our pedagogical strategies.

The COOL coursework wrapped up, and shortly thereafter I was starting to teach my first online course. To complicate matters, the vast majority of my students had no experience with the LMS and had never taken online classes. I was grateful to have the support of our department even after the COOL program was completed. The COOL also provided me with professional relationships and a team of support. The greatest challenge I experienced was moving up Bloom's taxonomy to the application level. I had a basic understanding of the theory of COOL and was exposed to many practical strategies throughout my coursework, but putting it altogether into a 36-hour online course proved to be very challenging. We experienced the COOL classes from the students' perspective, but, once you are instructing, there is a learning curve with regards to applying the COOL lessons to practice. In times of stress, I would default to my tried and true in-class strategies, but I quickly rediscovered that these cannot necessarily be replicated online while maintaining student engagement.

Perhaps more time to practice using our LMS as an instructor would have provided us with

opportunities to feel more prepared to teach online. Despite this challenge, I believe my course was much stronger as a result of my COOL experience than it would have been otherwise. A course within the COOL program on how to develop a course outline with online learning in mind would be helpful. Having the opportunity to work in the LMS with the program staff would have been useful. Designing a course with online learning in mind would enhance the experience for both the instructor and the students.

Discussion

The four learner stories illustrate the variety of goals, backgrounds, and motivations for completing the COOL program. Through reading, reflecting, and comparing the stories, the authors identified four common themes, described below, that will inform the next iteration of the program.

One common theme is the benefit of developing an ongoing support network from the COOL. Both Jane and John noted that these networks were valuable both during and after the formal COOL program, while Paula identified with the idea of being on a journey together. Brandon focused on the collaborative elements of COOL, including receiving feedback from colleagues in his cohort that helped improve his eventual course design. In contrast to Jane and John, Brandon noted that he felt like he has not had continued contact with his classmates and suggested the formation of a more formal network to enable participants to keep in contact. This emphasis on networks fits with the constructivist and connectivist approach that the instructors took when developing the courses.

Another theme highlights the strong desire to learn strategies for engaging online learners. Jane noted that this motivated her to enroll in the program. John also expressed a strong desire to engage his learners, partly because he had been previously disengaged as an online student. Paula discovered many new strategies for online courses (such as a mix of synchronous and asynchronous components) that went beyond what she had previously experienced.

The program design was intended to immerse learners in authentic and safe online learning experiences. The stories reveal that it was useful for instructors to experience online learning from a student's perspective. Both Paula and Jane noted that this gave them more confidence before they enacted the online instructor role themselves. Paula believed that feeling the anxiety and pressure to perform, like that of a student, helped her to become a better online teacher. Furthermore, as using open practices and resources was a guiding philosophy of the COOL program design, it is significant that multiple learners noted that they now include OERs in their own instructional efforts.

A common suggestion from the learners was to offer more practical online course creation experiences in the COOL, such as the creation of a course outline. An additional course or lab experience, especially one that allows peers to share and learn from one another, has been proposed and is being considered for future offerings. Another challenge involves balancing the needs of learners who are not yet ready to develop an online or hybrid course, and others, such as staff members, who do not need to develop full courses. This suggests that designing a contextually relevant learning opportunity, or related framework, using the principles from the program would be a more useful learning activity.

Reflecting on our shared experiences as facilitators and learners in a new program has provided valuable insights for improvements to better serve the needs of our audience. There is a need to provide greater diversity of learning opportunities, including the possibility of shorter courses focused on some of the more practical components requested by the first cohort. There is a strong desire to increase the flexibility of the program to meet the varied needs of the learners while still maintaining a depth of engagement and development that can lead to change in practice. Our learners are more diverse than originally anticipated, which challenges us to broaden our thinking with elements

such as the ePortfolio and design for a learning opportunity, and these elements may take multiple forms that are more relevant to individual learners. Finally, there is a clear desire and need to continue building community in the program both within and between cohorts. This may be established via cross-cohort mentoring or connecting to an already established community of practice.

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Appendix A

Program Learning Outcomes

By the end of this program, successful graduates will know and be able to:

- Critically evaluate, analyse, reflect on, and apply scholarly information to the design of online, open, and hybrid courses and/or educational resources
- Evaluate the effectiveness of their own eLearning approaches, and adapt and adjust designs accordingly
- Design, develop and implement active, engaging, and aligned online, open, and hybrid curricula
- Critically evaluate approaches to the use of emerging and established technologies in higher education
- Develop communities of learners in non-traditional learning settings (online, open, hybrid, distributed, distance education, professional, and international settings)
- Analyse, discuss, debate, and apply established principles of instructional design to non-traditional course design
- Critically reflect on their own beliefs, values, practices, and philosophies of teaching and use these to guide their own practice in online, open, and hybrid education modes
- Find, evaluate, adapt, adopt, use, revise, and share Open Educational Resources and other openly licensed materials in their teaching
- Describe and apply established quality standards, principles of Universal Design, and accessibility standards to the design and evaluation of online and open courses and programs
- Critically discuss emerging pedagogies of non-traditional teaching and learning and apply these to their own context where appropriate