

Professional Learning: A Collaborative Model for Online Teaching and Development

Audrey Bowser: Arkansas State University

Kimberley Davis: Arkansas State University

Jacques Singleton:Arkansas State University

Topeka Small: Arkansas State University

This article examined a unique collaborative initiative between a team of graduate level faculty to improve the quality of course development and delivery using a collaborative review process. The collaborative review of teaching has become a widely accepted means for assuring quality distance learning coursework and for the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of online teaching. The criteria of the *Quality Online Learning and Teaching (QOLT) Assessment for Peer Reviewers* instrument were used to measure the quality indicators that address good teaching and learning practices. The authors outline the steps in the process of developing and managing such an online graduate distance learning program.

Online instruction has significantly impacted graduate education programs. Online learning opportunities are expanding rapidly in the university setting to meet the changing needs of the higher education student. Agreeing that online education is critical to their long-term strategy, postsecondary institutions in United States report a total of 7.1 million students taking at least one online course in fall 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Experiencing yearly growth, the percent of online enrollment as a percent of the total enrollment in higher education grew from 9.6% in 2002 to 33.5% in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Although there has been a substantial growth in the delivery of academic programs and courses by distance learning provided by institutions of higher education, the need for quality learning must be realized. Building faculty expertise and skill in this endeavor are desired and considered essential. Faculty who are teaching in the College of Education and Behavioral Science (COEBS) in this study

have been and continue to be pioneers of distance learning for graduate education majors.

The growing demand for distance education courses is occurring at the same time that higher education in the United States is evolving. External pressures are converging to challenge the traditional mode of providing higher education, particularly in public institutions. Decreased state funding, escalating tuition, a depressed economy, advances in technology and techno-literacy, and students' expectations of convenience and flexibility are major external drivers of change. Simultaneously, there are internal pressures to drastically reduce costs and increase revenues in public universities and colleges. These external and internal pressures combine to influence change in the traditional modes of teaching students. Distance education programs can be a highly successful approach to meet the demands of an escalating number of students while also reducing costs and generating revenue to

provide quality education (Kuruville, Norton, Chalasani & Gee, 2012).

The perceived flexibility associated with online learning and satisfaction in distance education classes is a major factor for students choosing to enroll in e-learning courses. Students are more likely to enroll if they can benefit from both the time and place flexibility that the distance education medium offers (Arbaugh & Duray, 2002). The millions of students enrolled in online courses today provide clear evidence that this modality is meeting market demand for students. While online education broadens the diversification of educational opportunities, it also creates a new paradigm for online teaching and development in higher education.

Background of Online Program in Education

Arkansas is experiencing substantial growth in the delivery of academic programs and courses by distance learning provided by institutions of higher education, located both within and outside of the state. There is increasing demand by students in Arkansas for academic courses and programs offered by distance learning and for some students or prospective students (such as those with handicapping conditions, work and parental obligations, economic challenges, and other constraints) it is the only way in which they may pursue their education (Chancellor's First Friday, Arkansas State University, 2012).

This university identified in 2008 the need to begin offering complete high-quality academic programs in selected areas online. The courses offered in these programs are comprised of intensive seven-week time blocks with one to two weeks between courses. Students may enter this 30 semester-credit-hour-graduate program at the onset of any seven-week course (except for the final capstone course, which must be

taken last), and may conclude successfully in approximately 18-24 months (Chancellor's First Friday, Arkansas State University, 2012).

In review of essential attributes of distance learning, the development of pedagogy and a valid course curriculum were viewed as having utmost importance. Developing a course for online instruction requires content knowledge and understanding of the interactivity, technological requirements, and best practices in the asynchronous environment. The goal is to ensure academic rigor in these classes, designing graduate courses taught online as close to traditional classes as possible. It has been suggested that the social phenomenon of community may be put to good use in the support of online learning. Deemed as a means to increase collegial support and improvement of teaching, faculty collaboration demonstrates an approach for designing online courses based on best practices (Carney, Dolan & Seagle, 2015).

Collaborative Review Process

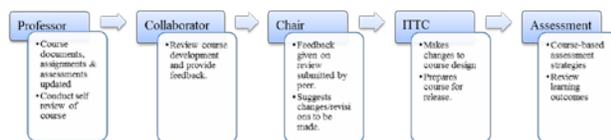
As the need for online instruction continues to grow, the need for quality control of the course work to maintain course quality and credibility becomes a fundamental element of program delivery. Establishing a quality review process for online courses has therefore become critical. A formal review of online courses can measure the quality of the course and reveal changes needed for improvement in the application of the technology, the pedagogical processes, and overall clarity in the presentation of a course. Once program courses were developed and offered online, the college deemed it necessary to make sure all courses maintained their authenticity and level of rigor. The process of establishing and conducting a collaborative review based on a proposed framework or checklist is essential

for examining all aspects of the quality of an online course.

Collaborative review is not a new pedagogical approach however, once aligned with online course standards, it can offer tools for quality assurance processes. Peer feedback refers to reciprocal teaching in which paired teachers provide assistance to observe one another as they incorporate new teaching techniques in the classroom (Vidmar, 2005). The primary goal of peer feedback is to promote professional development, collaboration, and self-assessment (Vidmar, 2005; McTighe & Emberger, 2006). The process involves giving and receiving feedback in both written and verbal format. A formal review of online courses can measure the quality of the course and reveal changes needed for improvement in the application of the technology, the pedagogical processes, and overall clarity in the presentation of a course. Faculty acknowledged the critical need for developing standards that assure quality of their online courses. The process of establishing and conducting a quality review based on a proposed framework or checklist is vital in examining aspects of best practices for the essential attributes of distance learning.

A five-phase process was developed to ensure objectivity and credibility of Quality Matters in improving online teaching and learning. The steps in the collaborative review process are iterative, in order to address issues and challenges encountered at each stage, thus refining the process. As shown in Figure 1, the chart illustrates the collaborative review process.

Figure 1. The Collaborative Review Process



The college selected the Southern Region Education Board (SREB) Quality Matters Rubric Standards, “Quality Online Learning & Teaching (QOLT) Assessment for Peer Reviewers,” to review the quality of the online program instructional plan and design. The process provided the opportunity for fundamental ownership in the outcome and level of synergy that ultimately ended in a better designed and more useful tool. Initially, the review begins with a self-review whereas the professors complete a thorough review of their course after course documents, assignments, and assessments were updated for the upcoming semester. Upon completion of the self-review the professor would then select another professor from a different content area. The peer review process begins when the professor reviews the course for cohesiveness and provides feedback using the Online Course Quality Checklist (see Appendix for Table 1). During the collaborative review process, participating faculty engaged in a valuable team-based learning experience. The diversity among the faculty allowed experts from various fields to critique student and faculty teaching and learning. Next, the department chair would review the Online Quality Checklist completed by the professors and peer collaborators to ensure that each indicator has been addressed during the review. Following the peer review, the department chair debriefs with all faculty to provide a complete review of each course involved in the peer review process. After the review, the department would then devise a collaborative plan that includes strengths, areas of need, and recommendations for changes.

When the first three-stages of the review process is completed (self, peer collaborator, and chair review) and issues have been determined for remediation, the course professor has to determine how to remediate the matter and make the necessary revisions to complete the review cycle.

Fundamental to the success of the collaborative review process is that each professor has a mutual respect for the peer's expertise. Furthermore, the course professor considers what his/her peer collaborator and the chair reviews have determined about what needs to be added, taken out, or changed in the course. Once the professor of the course makes the appropriate changes within the online course he/she will then compile a list of the changes on the course revision section of the Online Quality Course Checklist and return the form back to the department chair to complete the file on that course.

After all changes were made by the professor the Interactive Teaching & Technology Center (ITTC) faculty support coordinator reviews the course in terms of course design and accessibility in preparation for online course release. Upon successful completion of all reviews by the professor, peer collaborator, department chair, and ITTC faculty support coordinator, the course is ready for full release to students for the upcoming term.

To further enhance the collaborative process the assessment office begins the process of refining or developing assessment plans for continuous improvement. The "continuous improvement" process includes outcome development, measure selection, cyclical assessment planning, benchmark designation, and accountability structures. These components ensure that the programs adhere to regional accreditation standards, specialized accreditation standards, and state mandates. The final phase of the collaboration process defines how well students are learning within academic programs, it also informs action plans for future improvement and increased student learning in all academic programs, regardless of the modality.

Barriers and Limitations of Peer Review. Peer review is one of the most valuable collaborative processes employed; nonetheless, it does not come without its challenges. Throughout the peer review process, a few issues arose that impeded progress. The decision as to which rubric would be employed was the first source of contention. It was difficult to get faculty buy-in for the use of the Quality Matters rubric initially, simply because faculty were not sure that this rubric embodied everything they felt needed to be evaluated. Some faculty submitted other rubrics for consideration, but it was the Quality Matter rubric that emerged as the best one for peer review of online courses within our college.

Another issue was the matter of interpreting the rubric. It is important that rubric scorers interpret the rubric in exactly the same way to ensure that the scores are valid. To this end, inter-rater reliability was established to ensure agreement among raters. When inter-rater reliability was not high enough to constitute agreement among raters, the discrepancies were discussed and raters were able to reach consensus on the rubric items in question. Another issue to arise was that of subjectivity. While rubrics have the inherent ability to diminish subjectivity, this is not always a guarantee. Our experience was such that subjectivity was the root of much disagreement between raters. To combat this issue, raters had extensive conversations and training on the rubrics in an effort to maintain objectivity. In some cases, an additional peer reviewer was brought in to eliminate disparities among reviewers.

Furthermore, there were logistical issues that had to be considered. It is imperative that multiple raters had access to the course shell at any given time so that the reviews could be completed as efficiently as possible. The challenge with granting access to the author of the course and multiple

reviewers is that of privacy. While the majority of faculty members welcomed the collaborative process, some faculty did express concerns regarding academic freedom of course development. In these cases, the professor's evaluation and peer's evaluation of the course occurred simultaneously. This gave both reviewers the opportunity to engage in open dialogue, eliminating anxieties about the infringement of knowledge and expertise.

Implications for Practice

The introduction of online teaching and development requires new pedagogical and technological skills (Garrison, 2011). Developing these skills often requires advanced knowledge of instructional design aimed at increasing online learning. Collaborative reviews in distance education demonstrate the value of professional learning. Faculty reviewers have responded favorably to the collaborative review process and feel they are able to accurately assess one another's work. The practice of implementing such a review process can provide a useful model for the design and implementation of online course development. Conversely, faculty members were able to construct new meanings through collaboration and the integration of multiple perspectives through interaction and negotiation with each other (Hung, Tan & Koh, 2006). Although collaborative work can be somewhat challenging in any situation, the value of the activity can be more than just the learning outcome. It is the sense of learning how to use the technology together that allowed graduate professors of education to become knowledge constructors (Jonassen, 2000), actively constructing their own knowledge through faculty collaboration.

Indeed, Arbaugh (2008) affirms that higher-order learning experiences are obtained through a community of inquiry

composed of faculty to achieve the desired outcome. With a better understanding about collaborative reviews for online teaching, how they work, and how they develop/evolve, this new learning paradigm will guide faculty in the use of pedagogically informed models to enhance online course development and design. Damoense (2003) further suggested that learning that focuses on collaboration between the instructor and learners may ultimately increase interactivity and provide an authentic environment for learning. The authors note that because online learning and teaching is still evolving, there is more to be studied. Additionally, more well-designed research is needed on effective quality assurance and measuring instructional effectiveness in online courses.

Conclusion

As technology continues to evolve efforts to further the possibilities for relevant and interactive distance learning courses steadily increase. Most likely, online learning and teaching opportunities will continue to grow, and this should create new and innovative pedagogy and technology that support online teaching and development. To ensure the relevance and rigor of online learning, it is important that programs develop an effective assessment process. This collaborative review process was overall well received by the faculty teaching online graduate education courses. The process accomplished the mission of improving teaching effectiveness as well as improving the college's quality of online programs. While the evidence is anecdotal, the faculty within the college participating in this study describes positive collaborative learning experiences. It was determined that with adequate planning and technical support, and continuous program monitoring, distance learning can be a practical opportunity for preparing professionals in the field of

education and leadership. The collaborative review process is noted as a best practice in education and has proven to be a strong indicator of success in the development of online learning.

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Audrey Bowser, Ph.D., is Director of Professional Education Programs at Arkansas State University. Her research interests include multicultural education and the integration of educational technology in teaching and learning.

Kimberley Davis, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Arkansas State University. Her research interests include positive behavior interventions and supports, response to intervention, the overrepresentation of black males in special education, special education teacher recruitment and retention, assessment, and enhancing learning in online environments.

Jacques Singleton, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor of Special Education at Arkansas State University. His research interests include special education teacher recruitment and retention, urban education, online/instructional technology education, at-risk students, and inclusion.

Topeka Small, Ed.D. is an Assistant Director of Assessment at Arkansas State University. Her research interests include student learning, assessment, accreditation, and online teaching and learning.

Appendix

Table 1
Online Course Quality Checklist

Course Title:	
Course Professor:	
Semester:	
Year:	
Professor Evaluation of Course:	
Peer Evaluation of Course:	
	Comment:
Course Overview and Introduction	
1.1	Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.
1.2	Netiquette expectations for are stated clearly.
1.3	The professor posts a welcome letter in which he/she welcomes students to the class, introduces him/herself, and explains the purpose of the course.
1.4	Students are asked to introduce themselves to the class via a week-one discussion board.
1.5	Course-specific proficiencies, beyond those which have been identified as being essential to participation in the program, regarding technical skills expected of the student are clearly stated.
1.6	A syllabus using the approved College of Education & Behavioral Science CAEP format is provided to students.
1.7	The grade book is updated in regard to due dates for assignments, designations for inclusion and exclusion of assignments for grade calculation purposes, and point values of each assignment.
1.8	A link to the student survey regarding evaluation of the course is embedded as an activity in week 7.
Learning Objectives	
2.1	The course learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable.
2.2	Learning objectives are stated clearly and written from the perspective as to what candidates will know and be able to perform.
2.3	Learning outcomes from the content area standards are included among the learning objectives.
Assessment and Measurement	
3.1	The course grading policy is stated clearly.
3.2	Specific, clear instructions and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of students' work and participation.
3.3	Rubrics are clear, directive and conform to the unit format (i.e. Exceptional, Adequate, Inadequate scale).
3.4	The assessments selected measure the stated learning objectives and are consistent with course activities and resources.
3.5	The assessment methods that are employed are varied and appropriate to the content being assessed.
3.6	"Self-check" or practice assignments that are utilized provide timely and useful feedback to students.
3.7	"Real-world," authentic learning experiences require students to apply course concepts and objectives.*
3.8	Remediation activities provide students at least a second chance to meet course outcomes.
Resources and Materials	
4.1	A variety of instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated course and module/unit learning objectives.
4.2	All resources and materials used in the course are appropriately cited.
Learner Engagement	
5.1	Opportunities for student-to-student interactions/communication exist to promote learning and networking.*
5.2	The course design affords opportunities for student-professor interactions that enhance learning.
5.3	The course has at least one activity in which students engage with other professionals in field-based work.*
5.4	Students engage in a variety of learning activities that address a variety of learning styles.*
5.5	Course activities engage students in critical reasoning, problem solving, and higher-order thinking such as application, synthesis, and evaluation.*
Learner Support	
6.1	Navigation throughout the online components of the course is logical, consistent, and efficient.
6.2	Instructions on how to access resources at a distance are sufficient and easy to understand and follow.
6.3	Course instructions answer, if necessary, basic questions related to course-specific research, writing, technology, etc., and/or link to tutorials and/or other resources that provide the information.
6.4	Professors post and keep virtual office hours to enhance assistance to and interaction with students.
Accessibility	
7.1	The course incorporates ADA standards and reflect conformance with institutional policy regarding accessibility in online courses.
7.2	Course pages and course materials provide equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content.
Course Revision	
8.1	Enhancements of the course are continuous and are based, in part, on data from student and peer feedback.
8.2	The course architecture permits the professor to add and/or edit content and assessments.*
Additional Comments and Recommendations:	

All items denoted by * are from SREB's November, 2006 "Checklist for Evaluating Online Courses." All other items are from "Quality Matters Rubric Standards," 2008-2010 edition.