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Implementing Online and Hybrid Programs and Courses: Benefits, Challenges, and Proven Practices

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Abstract

As leaders of learning institutions seek to shift courses and programs to hybrid and online delivery formats, they need to carefully consider the benefits and challenges of implementing these options. This chapter offers proven practices and lessons learned from program leaders at a university which has long used online

and hybrid modes of instruction. The experiences of these program leaders, faculty, and students reinforce the growing research on the many benefits of online and hybrid delivery. Taking steps to establish organizational readiness, implement change management principles, and proactively overcome faculty and student resistance will increase the chances of successful implementation.

Introduction

Many researchers have engaged in controversial discussions on the philosophical approaches to learning in online and hybrid formats. Debates continue on the effectiveness, benefits, and limitations of online and hybrid delivery, and faculty and students continue to challenge curricular approaches in these formats.

Historically, curriculum design in all delivery modes has followed a pedagogical, or teacher-centered, framework (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2006). Since the late 1970s, the leaders of some nontraditional institutions have shifted the curriculum design to reflect the classic works of Knowles (1980) on the needs of adult learners through student-centered learning, or andragogy (Domask, 2007). As access to technology has increased, curriculum design discussions have evolved to include ways to enhance the online experience by offering multiple pathways to obtain content and feedback (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006).

In 2003, 34 percent of institutions of higher education in the United States had complete online degree programs (Allen & Seaman, 2005). Some schools have online programs with the same requirements, classes, and teachers as their traditional programs. The alternative is attractive for many students, including the minimally tapped market of students who have little time but have the funds, as online programs typically cost more than traditional classroom programs (Endres, Chowdhury, Frye, & Hurtubis, 2009). Curriculum developers in online and hybrid programs need to be aware of the benefits and challenges that come with distance learning and should become familiar with strategies that have historically been successful in overcoming the challenges.

Hybrid and Online Delivery

Benefits of Hybrid and Online Delivery

Hannon (2009) discussed several benefits to online courses, including asynchronous components for students in multiple time zones, the enhancement of student learning through online discussions, and online access to course materials. After evaluating research on the topic, Appana (2008) noted the main benefits of online learning include "new markets, economic benefits, international partnerships, reduced time to market, educational benefits, anonymity, student interaction and satisfaction, growth in faculty learning curve, and 'rich' feedback and evaluation" (p. 7). Nontraditional learners have reiterated what Solnik (2007) and Kiriakidis (2008) found: they appreciate the flexibility of being able to access class anytime; they benefit from collaborating with their peers around the world; and they enjoy having the opportunity to share best practices and experiences.

Online and hybrid programs have been shown to promote learning effectiveness when online learning is blended with local experiences. This approach accommodates diverse student populations and learning styles and allows theory and practice to be combined with locally relevant issues providing real-world learning experiences (Moloney, Hickey, Bergin, Boccia, & Polley, 2007). As an example, at City University of Seattle (CityU), courses and programs are taught at multiple campuses around the world. With online and hybrid course offerings, students are able to choose the delivery mode most compatible with their learning preferences and learn from instructors located in other countries. Many CityU students appreciate collaborating with students and faculty members who bring international perspectives from across borders. Students can choose to travel to other countries to engage in international learning or learn online from geographically dispersed instructors who bring real-world, international experiences to the online classroom.

Lim, Morris, and Kupritz (2007) compared hybrid-learning models with online-only models and found several benefits of hybrid learning: lower instructional difficulty level, lower perceived

workload, higher perceived support, and higher learner satisfaction. Durrington, Berryhill, and Swafford (2006) demonstrated that hybrid and online learning could be as effective as traditional classroom instruction when the technologies are appropriate for the instruction, when instructors provide timely feedback to students, and when levels of student interactivity are high. Tanner, Noser, and Totaro (2009) conducted a study that indicated that students in online courses might achieve even better results than their classroom-based counterparts.

From an instructor or program manager's perspective, the following benefits of offering courses in online or blended formats have been documented: (a) improved faculty support, (b) effective delivery of student assistance, (c) increased ability to share electronic course materials, (d) greater sharing of faculty workload, (e) promotion of virtual learning communities, (f) increased facilitation of student feedback, and (g) more effective program management (Tang & Byrne, 2007).

Many CityU program managers find that they are able to better manage their online and hybrid programs and courses by having ready access to the online classroom experiences. Using performance dashboards offered through CityU's learning management system, program managers are alerted to potential concerns by reviewing how often instructors are present in the online classroom, how responsive they are in the discussion forums, and even how well they are doing in providing rich, formative feedback designed to help students improve their work. Also through the learning management system and other conferencing options, CityU program managers are able to conduct interactive sessions among instructors teaching similar courses to share ideas and best practices, and continue to improve the courses and programs.

Challenges of Hybrid and Online Delivery

Owen and Allardice (2008) acknowledged the following limitations with implementing hybrid and online delivery formats: (a) a lack of expertise at management level, (b) the presence of few champions in senior management, and (c) a lack of management and faculty buy-in. Other limitations include (d) a failure to bridge the gap between pedagogic design and technology at a college level, (e) a lack of relevant training, (f) a lack of policies based on needs analysis and field research, and (g) a resistance to changing paradigms.

Leaders face many of these challenges in implementing online and hybrid programs. Strong advocacy and support provided by senior management in shifting to online and hybrid delivery allows program leaders who were early adopters to begin integrating technology into their programs and designing course content in online modalities. Gaining insight from lessons learned, leaders can begin policy discussions, implement change management principles, and provide supplemental faculty development workshops to provide needed support to make the institutional shift to online and hybrid learning models.

Appana (2008) articulated several potential limitations found in online learning, including the need for startup funding, adequate time, organizational preparedness, student readiness, differing stages of team development, crisis management, faculty learning curve, members with limited language skills, technical support, team effort, synchronous- or asynchronous-classroom contexts, costs, accessibility to course materials, delayed feedback, and evaluation and assessment.

Leaders at CityU took steps to prepare the organization for online and hybrid delivery. The selection of the learning management system came only after conducting a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of multiple options. A team was established to support the use of the learning management system and ensure adequate faculty and student preparation. Ongoing professional development workshops have been offered to equip faculty with basic and advanced skills in using the system, in addition to learning and sharing strategies for effectively teaching through the online platform.

Implementing Hybrid and Online Programs

According to Li and Lui (2005), designing the online experience for students by integrating technology can take many forms,

from simply providing an online resource for content and course materials to providing a space for students to display their best work. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) encouraged developers to integrate technology to promote higher learning by ensuring that learners' needs are addressed and motivating learners to invest themselves and spend time on their work. The authors also recommended challenging learners to reflect on their own learning, become aware of why they do what they do, and to engage with content in multiple contexts.

Amrein-Beardsley, Foulger, and Toth (2007) noted that adult learners value the following characteristics in the hybrid courses: (a) guidance through course announcements, course information documents, and information on specific assignments; (b) some degree of individualization, self-direction, variety, and a learning community; (c) two-way communication, including feedback and confirmation; and (d) learning outcomes that allow for self-direction based on real-world needs. CityU program leaders and course managers strive to ensure consistency in the student experience by providing them with course information in just-in-time formats. Learning communities are offered through team work and discussions, and students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning by making the assessments relevant and meaningful to their current and future work.

At CityU, faculty members are reflective practitioners, actively working in the fields in which they teach. Online and hybrid delivery modes provide many options for engaging with learners and promoting higher learning through discussion boards, integration of videos and podcasts, and using wikis and blogs to collaborate and foster collective intellectual inquiry. Students benefit from multiple ways of learning through technology in addition to gaining insights from the diverse perspectives of their peers who are geographically dispersed.

Overcoming Resistance

Online interaction should help students reach higher learning, which can include looking at content in a new way, addressing learners' needs, motivating learners to spend time, challenging

learners to understand their own learning, and framing understanding in multiple contexts (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). The goal of program developers and faculty should be to ensure that high-level learning takes place, regardless of the delivery mode. Moser (2007) noted, "If blended learning is to be successfully integrated, a bottom-up approach informed by socio-cultural principles is essential, whereby faculty feel ownership in the decision-making and development process" (p. 68).

The following seven strategies are recommended for gaining faculty buy-in for distance learning initiatives: (a) empower departments to accept more responsibility for distance learning, (b) provide research and information for faculty about the benefits of hybrid and online delivery, and (c) encourage faculty to start small and begin incorporating technology into their classrooms. Institutions are encouraged to (d) provide incentives for faculty who integrate technology into their classrooms, (e) improve training and instructional support for these initiatives, (f) build a stronger distance education faculty community through virtual faculty lounges and other forums, and (g) encourage scholarship and research on hybrid and online learning (Seven Strategies, 2004).

CityU leaders have struggled to manage the challenges faced with moving to online and hybrid delivery options. Program managers took ownership of their programs and conducted market analyses to determine the best time to move to online and hybrid options and meet the changing needs of their students. Faculty members were encouraged to start integrating technology in small ways, and these technology options have expanded over time. Faculty development options were provided for faculty who desired to learn more about integrating technology and how to improve their online presence. Ongoing support for research and scholarship continues to surface new ideas and opportunities to share best practices.

Overcoming Faculty Resistance

Many faculty members are resistant to integrating online coursework into their programs and have voiced concerns that academic

quality will diminish. Educational scholars who believe that face-to-face interaction is required for adults to learn echo these concerns. Muilenburg and Berge (2005) believed that online learning is impersonal and more beneficial to educational institutions than to students. Gorski (2004) noted, "Effective teaching and learning emerge from strong pedagogy, high levels of expectations for all students, and a classroom approach that centers and empowers those students, not any particular technology or medium" (p. 37). Gorski continued, "The Internet can contribute to effective and progressive teaching and learning" (p. 37), but noted that online education should not be a total replacement of the human teacher. Hannon (2009) noted that these are common concerns that faculty can overcome through gaining comfort with technology and by sharing best practices.

For the successful implementation of online and hybrid programs, faculty development and support systems need to be in place for the instructors. Wang (2007) recommended developing facilitators who can enhance online learning through expertise in content, online social process, structure management, and technical modeling. In each of the roles, faculty need to develop new strategies, have opportunities to share best practices, and obtain support from experts in the field.

CityU continues to expand its faculty development offerings to support faculty in their efforts to teach their subject matter in online and hybrid delivery modes. In-person, hybrid, and online workshops are offered each year—and sometimes twice a year—to provide opportunities for faculty members to learn new skills and share ideas with their colleagues. Exemplar models have been evaluated and selected by peer-review teams, and best practices have been disseminated among program leaders and course developers. Over time more faculty members have become comfortable with technology options and have opted to teach in online and hybrid delivery modes.

Overcoming Student Resistance

Online courses are not for everyone. Solnick (2007) recognized the following drawbacks to online learning: conversation does not flow as freely online; students can feel anxious when they do not receive immediate feedback; and technology challenges can frustrate and discourage students from persevering. Mupinga et al. (2006) discussed several sources of negative affective responses, including (a) students' familiarity with the learning environment, (b) students' skills and confidence with computer technology, and (c) students' preferred learning styles. O'Neil and Fisher (2008) reinforced that online learning works well for learners who are comfortable using technology and are independent, well organized, and disciplined. If a learner is not organized or disciplined, needs constant instructor reassurance, or craves face-to-face interaction, online learning might not be the best choice.

CityU advisors are equipped with information on how to evaluate students' motives, learning styles, commitment to interacting with others, and computer competence to help them make the best decisions about taking online courses (O'Neil & Fisher, 2008). Initially many learners choose online learning for the freedom afforded in asynchronous environments, although more learners are choosing online models of learning as their primary learning environment (Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtoom, & Wheaton, 2005). Some students are advised to start with hybrid course offerings until they become more comfortable with technology, while other students are advised to take courses fully online. These recommendations are made only after careful evaluation of each student's needs and abilities.

Sufficient student support is necessary in the online environment. Although the operational structure of hybrid and online programs is more important than the technical expertise of the student (Stein et al., 2005), learner satisfaction is often the primary motivator for online learning (Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007). Students need to feel supported in their learning experience through faculty and peer interaction, technology support, and regular constructive feedback.

Gould (2006) encouraged faculty to use the following seven strategies to improve student satisfaction in online courses: (a) post the course syllabus online, (b) administer a learning styles inventory, (c) explain the importance of group work, (d) use team contracts for team collaboration, (e) use various assessments and

learning activities, (f) be flexible, and (g) provide frequent inter-action. Shepherd, Alpert, and Koeller (2007) further suggested that faculty establish a tone of excellence, treat each student as an individual, and add emotion through descriptive, positive lan-guage. At CityU, faculty members are encouraged to apply these best practices and are evaluated on these criteria, in addition to many others.

Future Research Directions

Learners in well-designed online and hybrid programs with appropriate levels of interaction and feedback and adequate fac-ulty and student support can achieve the same outcomes and learning goals as those learning in the classroom face-to-face (Durrington, Berryhill, & Swafford, 2006). Yet the research does not clearly indicate which curriculum design practices in online and hybrid formats best achieve the outcomes and learning goals. Martell (2007) revealed that many schools are lagging in the use of appropriate assessment strategies and are struggling to use assessment data to continue to improve programs. Martell recom-mended that when assessing the quality of business curricula, pro-gram managers seek the answers to the following four questions: (a) what are their learning goals, (b) how and where did they assess these learning goals, (c) what did they find out from the results, and (d) what are they going to change? The results could reveal curriculum design strategies that are successful and those that are not. Future research could be conducted using assessment data to determine which curriculum design practices in online and hybrid formats best achieve the outcomes and learning goals.

Conclusion

Taking steps to establish organizational readiness, implement change management principles, and proactively overcoming fac-ulty and student resistance will increase the chances of successful implementation.

CityU program leaders and faculty have learned many lessons by moving programs and courses into online and hybrid delivery formats. There are many challenges that need to be considered and overcome to be successful in implementing these formats. However, the experience of CityU program leaders, faculty, and students reinforces the growing research on the many benefits of online and hybrid delivery.

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