

Internal Grant Final Report

Professional Development for New Online Faculty at Bow Valley College

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Abstract

Bow Valley College (BVC) like many other North American higher education institutions is experiencing growth of, and higher demand for its online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2010, 2016). One of the provisions required for the success of online education is online faculty who practice evidence-based online teaching. This study focused on the orientation, training, and continuous support for new online instructors at Bow Valley College and explored three themes of: 1) online instructor's prior technical and pedagogical knowledge and skills; 2) effectiveness of the online training that is currently available to them; and 3) further possible opportunities for expanding and extending support to online instructors. The results showed that new online instructors possess an adequate level of technical skills using basic tools of a Learning Management System (LMS) and other common computer applications. The available orientation for new online instructors is effective and there is need for more support in using advanced LMS tools, online pedagogy and best practices, and synchronous communication in online education. The best format and modality of further support should be further explored based on the preferences and availability of new online instructors in conjunction with the resources and constraints of the College.

Introduction

Bow Valley College (BVC) is a comprehensive community college serving communities of Southern Alberta. Since 2011, there has been a considerable increase in the number of online and blended courses offered at BVC (“Institutional Plan”, n.d.), which has resulted in an increase in the number of instructors who teach online. These instructors come from different professional backgrounds with different levels of experience; they are located in different areas of Southern Alberta and beyond, and operate on different schedules and time zones.

In line with its mandate to plan and provide training and professional development (PD) to all faculty members at BVC, the Teaching & Learning Enhancement (TLE) team has developed an online, self-paced, facilitated course called *Teaching with D2L* to orientate new online instructors. Desire2Learn (D2L) is the name of BVC’s Learning Management System (LMS) that is used for all course offerings regardless of their format and modality.

Teaching with D2L has been developed to overcome the challenges of location and schedule to ensure new online instructors can access training. TLE defines *new* online instructor as an individual who is teaching online for the first time at BVC. This categorization, while identifying a group of instructors, does not provide much insight into their relevant knowledge and skills.

The goal of this research is threefold as captured in the following research questions:

1. What is the base of pedagogical and technical skills of new online instructors at BVC?
2. Is the online, self-paced, facilitated course (i.e. *Teaching with D2L*) an effective mode to train and prepare instructors for teaching online at BVC?
3. What are possible opportunities to enhance the support and training that is offered to BVC online instructors on an ongoing basis?

Methods

To investigate these research themes within the context of BVC, two surveys were administered using BVC's surveying application, Select Survey. All of those who registered in *Teaching with D2L* during the data collection phase of the research were invited to complete the pre-course survey. All participants who completed the course were invited to respond to the post-course survey. The only requirement for registering in the course was being a BVC employee.

First part of the pre-course survey was designed to gauge new online instructors' technical skills in using BVC's LMS and other computer applications that are used most commonly at BVC. The second part of this survey gathered information about participants' face-to-face (f-t-f) and online teaching experience; as well as any training they had attended to improve their teaching practices.

In the post-course survey, participants were asked to rate their confidence with performing tasks related to objectives of *Teaching with D2L* as a result of completing the course; and to indicate whether this course had prepared them for online teaching or not. The second part of the post-course survey focused on identifying areas for further support, and gathering information on availability of the participants, and their preferred mode and format of support.

Results

Over three rounds of data collection in August 2015, November 2015, and April 2016, 29 people completed the pre-course survey and 12 people completed the post-course survey. Data

showed that 50% of participants did not have any online teaching experience, while 50% of them had taught more than 10 cohorts (classes) of f-t-f learners; see Figure 1 for more details.

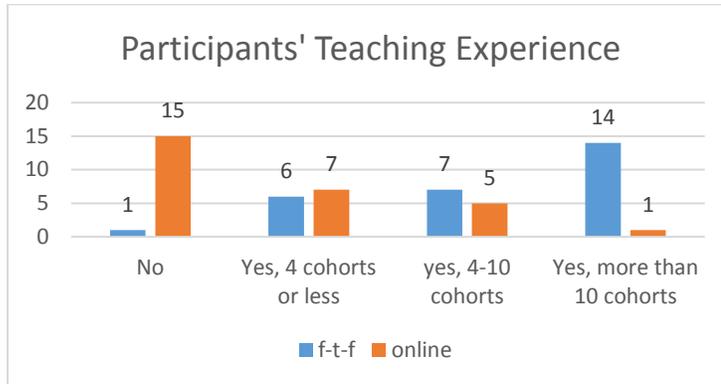


Figure 1 – Participants’ teaching experience prior to taking *Teaching with D2L*

In this section the findings of the two surveys are presented in three themes corresponding to the three research questions of this study.

[Theme 1 - Technical and pedagogical skill-base of new online instructors](#)

From the 29 pre-course survey respondents, 23 (79%) had used a LMS in the past in different capacities, such as learner, faculty, or administrator. From these 23, 18 (62%) had used D2L in one of these capacities.

Figure 2 demonstrates participants’ rating of their skills in using D2L tools on a scale of 1 (I have not heard of this tool) to 4 (I am comfortable using this tool).

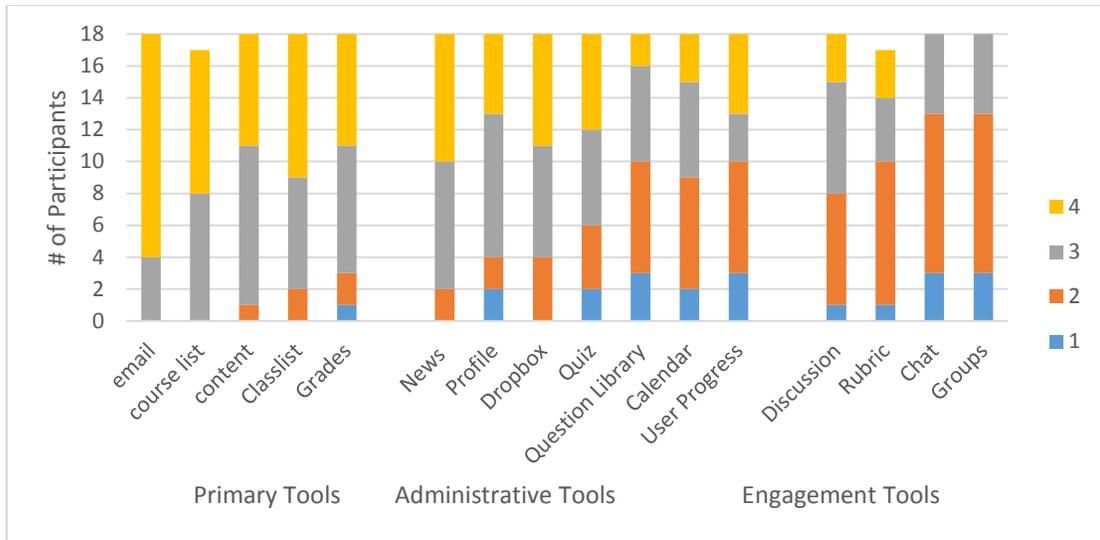


Figure 2 – Distribution of prior skills rating in using D2L tools

Figure 3 shows participants’ rating of their skills in using common computer applications, using the same scale described above.

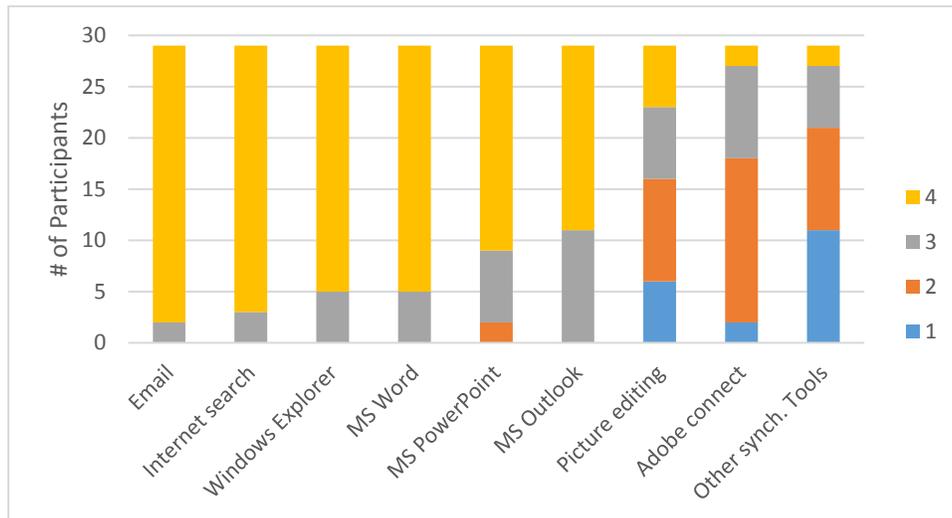


Figure 3 – Distribution of prior skills rating in using common computer applications

In identifying previous teaching-relevant training, 59% of respondents had attended other training opportunities specifically geared towards improving their online and/or f-t-f instructional skills. Moreover, 21% of the respondents indicated they had participated in other

training that they felt specifically benefitted their online teaching practices. Most of the training they described had a technical focus and did not cover pedagogical aspects of teaching online.

Theme 2 - Effectiveness of online orientation course

Figure 4 summarizes participants’ rating of their level of confidence with performing tasks that are part of the course objectives, from lowest (1) to highest (3), in the post-course survey.

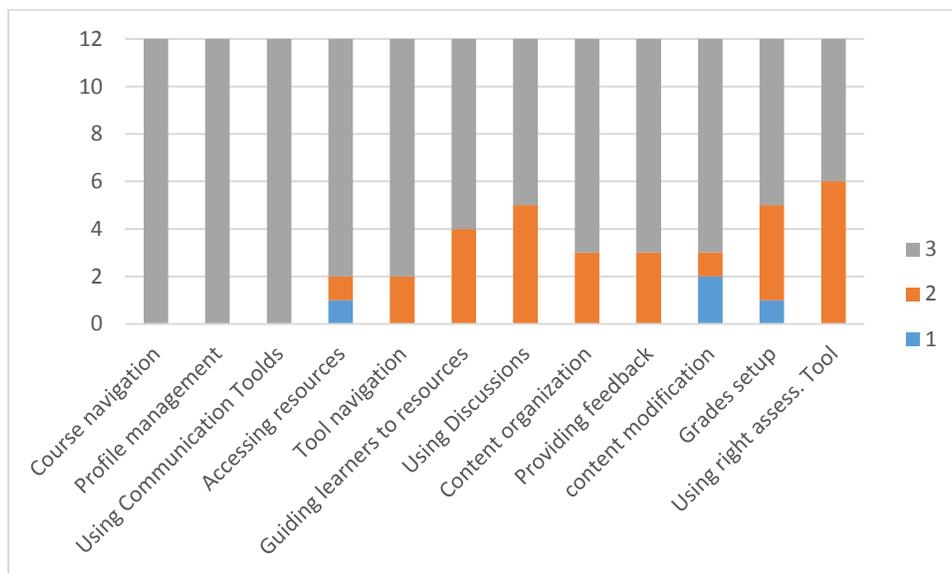


Figure 4 – Achievement of course objectives as indicated by participants

Data showed that all of the respondents *strongly agreed* (67%) or *agreed* (33%) that taking the *Teaching with D2L* course had prepared them to start teaching online at BVC. Furthermore, in response to an open ended question, eight out of 12 post-course survey respondents explicitly commented that the online orientation course had been helpful and beneficial to them.

Theme 3 - Opportunities for Further Support

In the post-course survey, respondents identified multiple areas where they required further support or training. When asked to select their top three preferred formats of training

after completion of this course, eight respondents (67%) identified ongoing available support; six respondents (50%) preferred online 1-hour workshops. One-hour f-t-f workshops and individualized consultation meetings tied with 33% each.

Finally, the data showed that all respondents lived in Calgary and the surrounding area and eight of them (66%) could come to campus as needed or at the minimum once a week. Three of the respondents (25%) were not available during regular working hours and preferred evenings and weekends for training. The remainder of respondents were available at least one day during working hours if they had to attend any training.

Discussion

Results show all, but one, of the participants come with teaching experience in a f-t-f setting, and their high confidence in use of basic tools in D2L can be due to using these tools in their f-t-f teaching. Participants' level of confidence drops as they move to the use of more sophisticated LMS tools.

Teaching with D2L course covers system tools that most participants are already comfortable using. However, all participants *strongly agree* or *agree* that *Teaching with D2L* has been effective in preparing them to teach online at BVC. Possible reasons for the effectiveness of the course could be: attention to pedagogy, the opportunity to get to know other online instructors and the TLE support team, and getting a better understanding of an online class by experiencing it firsthand from a learner's perspective. *Teaching with D2L* combines the technical with pedagogical and best practice aspects of online teaching, which is evidenced in the objectives, readings, and learning activities of the course as stipulated in the course outline.

The post-course survey makes it clear that *Teaching with D2L*, while beneficial, is not enough and there is a need for more training and support. Literature provides many examples where an online course – mandatory or optional – is only one part of a more comprehensive orientation and training program (Brannagan & Oriol, 2014; June, 2013; Paulus et al., 2010; Vail & Testori, 2012). It is recommended that TLE expand its formal support and training offering for online instructors. Three possible options for this expansion follows; however, any decision on the future offerings will depend on TLE's available resources and operational practices.

TLE can formalize its ongoing support to online instructors in a way that all of the new online instructors attend follow up consultations and PD sessions relevant to their needs. The post-course survey shows that all online instructors who participated in this study are from Calgary and the surrounding areas and can come to campus if required. Though their availability is varying, any f-t-f PD will have to be individualized or for small groups. Including all new online instructors in such a scheme will require a substantial amount of planning and administration time, as well as an increase in expert educational developers.

As the literature points out, another option for ongoing PD is a formalized mentorship program where new online instructors are paired with experienced online instructors in their field to observe their teaching, ask questions, and have relevant conversations (Brannagan & Oriol, 2014; Sword, 2012; Vail & Testori, 2012). If the TLE was to adopt a mentorship program, it would have to work very closely with each department and have up-to-date information about instructors' teaching assignments.

Extending the *Teaching with D2L* course is another option; the online course has proven to be flexible in meeting most schedules and constraints, and effective in achieving set PD goals

and objectives. The literature emphasizes the benefits of providing PD in the format of an online course, especially when the topic of PD is online teaching (Paulus et al., 2010). An online course overcomes PD challenges and builds communities of practice among faculty (Cook & Steinert, 2013). Affectively, participating in the online course helps instructors develop the mindset of a lifelong learner, hence, better acceptance of the training and easier transition from f-t-f to online teaching (Paulus et al., 2010). Looking from the educational development angle, participants experience online education from a learner's perspective, while the facilitators can take the course content on best teaching practices and use of tools one step further by modeling them in their own facilitation.

Development of a new course or revisions to the existing course will require more resources up front during the development phase and revision cycle(s); however, every time that the course is offered the ratio of facilitator(s) to participants would be more efficient than one-on-one consultations.

Conclusions

This research shows that new online instructors at BVC are comfortable with using basic LMS tools. Furthermore, *Teaching with D2L* online course is an effective orientation for new online instructors and can become part of a more comprehensive PD plan. Future research could investigate the strengths of *Teaching with D2L* that participants attribute to its effectiveness. This study highlights the areas where there is need for training and support for online instructors at BVC; and some possible formats for providing this support are: mentorship and collegial network(s) of support, formal individualized ongoing consultations, and more online courses. In order to choose the most suitable format, the TLE team needs to explore the

preferences and availability of a larger group of online instructors. More longitudinal research can be conducted to examine the impact of TLE's support and training on online instructors' teaching practices over time.

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