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USING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO IMPROVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

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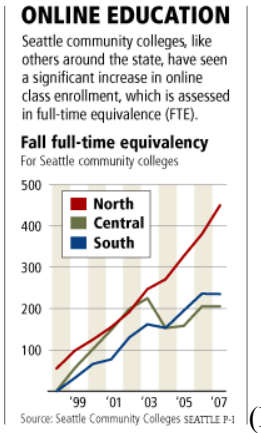
Abstract. This paper describes a process for working with online instructors to improve the level of instruction and to introduce instructors to new technologies.

Stating the Problem

As more and more students are taking coursework online, it is imperative that ways to interact with the online faculty are explored. According to Alvarez (2010), twenty-five percent of college and university students are taking courses online. According to the Sloan Report over 4.6 million students took online courses in fall 2008. This is a 17 percent increase over the previous year (Learning on demand: Online education in the United States, 2009). The trend holds true in community colleges as well. The graph below illustrates the tremendous growth in online instruction at Seattle Community Colleges.

Table 1. Online Education



(Rolph,2008)

The challenge becomes providing professional development for those instructors who are working in the online environment. Many of these instructors do not have face to face interactions with colleagues as occurs in a more traditional setting. Some may not even be in the same locality as the university. Many of students they teach are part of the Net Generation or sometimes referred to as digital natives. They are in the age group of 11 to 30. They have grown up in a technology world (Windsor, 2009). Most of our instructors are not in this generation so ways to bridge this gap as Net Generation enters the online classroom need to be found. Instructors need to hone their skills to provide the best online education possible for these technology savvy students.

Currently it is important to have instructors comfortable in the arena of technology as they are providing the new generation of teachers and administrators in the PK-12 education system the tools necessary to succeed in the ever changing technology landscape. When you consider that the Internet world as we know it has only been in operation since 1994, one can only imagine the changes that will occur in the next decade. The capabilities available today with WEB 2.0 interactive formats add to the possibilities for educational applications. The virtual world is becoming more and more like real life as demonstrated by Second Life. "Second life (http://secondlife.com/) is perhaps the most popular virtual world platform in use today" (Boulos, Hetherington and Wheeler, 2007). Understanding the way digital natives use the Internet to provide social networking opportunities is an important concept for faculty working in the online environment to understand. How can these applications be used in online instruction? Social Networks are an integral part of digital natives' lives and being able to leverage them as part of the educational system is an area to be considered (Boyd, and Ellison, 2007).

Solution Strategies

A Professional Learning Community is one strategy that can be used to provide conversations and professional development opportunities for online instructors. Senge (1990) started the idea of learning communities in his book the *Fifth Discipline.* Over the past twenty years this idea has been implemented in variety of ways. As the idea of learning communities has been implemented it has moved to an inquiry approach (Professional Learning Communities: What are they and why are they important?). This is the perfect format for working together as instructors of online teaching. As the Professional Learning Community develops it is critical to be sure that data collected from the instructors is being used to continually improve the instruction (Du Four, Du Four, et al. 2004). The Professional Learning Community for online instructors needs to take into account the tools that will be used in the online environment.

Determining the delivery model for working with online instructors is an important consideration. . This delivery model should use the same technologies that are used with students. By doing this, it provides the instructor an opportunity to experience some of the same learning delivery system as students. As faculty members who provide professional development for instructors, we want to keep in mind the National Teaching Technology Standards for Teachers:

1. Facilitate and inspire learning and creativity;
2. Design and develop digital-age learning experiences and assessments;
3. Model digital-age work and learning;
4. Promote and model digital citizenship and responsibility; and
5. Engage in professional growth and leadership (National Education Technology Standards, 2010).

Instructors need to implement these ideas in their online classes. These standards align with the expectations of the Net Generation (Windsor,2009). There are numerous platforms that are available to set up and provide opportunities for faculty to interact. The technology that is most familiar is the phone conference. Instructors have the opportunity to share ideas in a familiar environment. Another technology that can be used is Voice Over Internet (VOI) technologies such as Skype. Other options are Adobe Connect, Class Live Pro, or Go to Meeting. These technologies add the ability to use VOI as well as visuals and even the ability to edit course materials together online. BLOGs can also be a useful tool to provide on-going chats among instructors. Bloger.com is an easy way to set up a Blog on a topic that the Professional Learning Community can use as an on-going discussion board. NU-Fast is yet another format that provides a place for instructors to discuss issues in a threaded discussion format. By using these formats, instructors have opportunities in safe environments to try new technologies that they can transfer into their online classes.

Results

Over the past two years, a model that uses phone conference, VOI, and an online course shell in e-college have been used to provide online faculty with opportunities to develop professional learning communities. The Professional Learning Communities were developed for Action Research which is taken by all candidates who are working toward a Master's in Educational Administration and TED 624, Content Literacy, which is a methods course for a single subject teaching credential in California. One measure of the success of the Professional Learning Communities has been improvement in the students' evaluations of faculty teaching. Each instructor has seen a positive improvement in the student perception of their teaching since the establishment of the Professional Learning Communities. In addition, the faculty has reported that this process has been helpful for them in learning new instructional strategies and improving their online teaching skills. Using a variety of technologies to connect with faculty has also encouraged their use of a wider variety of technologies.

Next Steps

The next steps will be to try other types of delivery models for the Professional Learning Communities. Class Live Pro would be an excellent next step as it is also available to instructors in all online classes. This provides the feel of a classroom in the

online environment. The instructor has a whiteboard and can show Power Points, write notes, and use interactive strategies with the students. By using this as part of the Professional Learning Community the instructors will experience the technology themselves before trying to use it with students. At the end of the year, a survey will also be sent to the instructors to determine what has been most successful in preparing them to work in the online environment and what areas they see as next steps to improve their practice.

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