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Conditions for the development of online teaching capacity: A case study

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Abstract

Online learning has shown its potential for more than three decades in postsecondary institutions. However, for online learning to be implemented appropriately, a key aspect is proper development of faculty members who are going to facilitate online courses. This paper describes an instrumental case study investigating the conditions for the development of online teaching capacity of faculty members in a professional Faculty in Canada. Personal commitment, support systems and leadership were found to be key factors influencing the capacity-building process. Understanding such conditions can help institutions design educational development strategies that better align with the needs of faculty members.

1   Introduction

The number of online courses offered in higher education institutions is increasing over time (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016; Donovan et al., 2019). The amplified interest in adopting online learning means that universities must have strategies and supports in place to ensure that high quality online learning is available to current and future students (Parrella & Yong, 2012). One approach is to provide educational development initiatives focused on building online teaching capacity. Many studies focus on the design and evaluation of educational development programmes for online instructors (Herman, 2012) as well as on the levels of satisfaction that faculty members report with such programmes (Hixon, Buckenmeyer, Barczyk, Feldman, & Zamojski, 2012). Nevertheless, few studies address the relationship between instructors, academic leaders and educational developers in the creation of the necessary conditions to support the improvement of an instructor's capacity to teach online.

2   Methods

This study explored how the relationship between key educational stakeholders (i.e., instructors, academic leaders and educational developers) within a university created conditions for faculty to become online instructors. An instrumental case study (Creswell, 2013) was conducted, analysing the educational development processes undergone by online instructors within a professional Faculty at a research-intensive Canadian university. Data was collected using faculty surveys, interviews with stakeholders, and document analysis of educational development-related paperwork. Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A critical case sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was used to identify a bounded system that fulfilled the following two main criteria: a Faculty or department that delivered educational

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programmes via online learning; and the existence of support systems for faculty members, both at Faculty level and university level. Individual participants from three stakeholder groups were selected through criterion sampling. A description of each group, and the criteria employed to select individual participants, is presented in Table 1.

Role	Description	Criteria	Number of participants
Educational Developers	Professionals responsible for designing and implementing initiatives aimed at developing teaching capacity in postsecondary instructors	2+ years of experience in educational development for online teaching	2
Academic leaders	Individuals with administrative and leadership roles related to the specific Faculty	2+ years in their positions, and who had been involved directly or indirectly with online courses or programmes as part of their positions	2
Instructors	Academic staff in permanent or temporary appointments	Taught at least one online course in the Faculty where the study was conducted	5

Table 1: Description and criteria for participant selection

3   Findings

As a result of this investigation, three main conditions emerged as being essential for the development of online teaching capacity of instructors: (1) personal commitment; (2) supports; and (3) leadership. In this section, each of the conditions are examined in terms of what emerged from the study and from the literature.
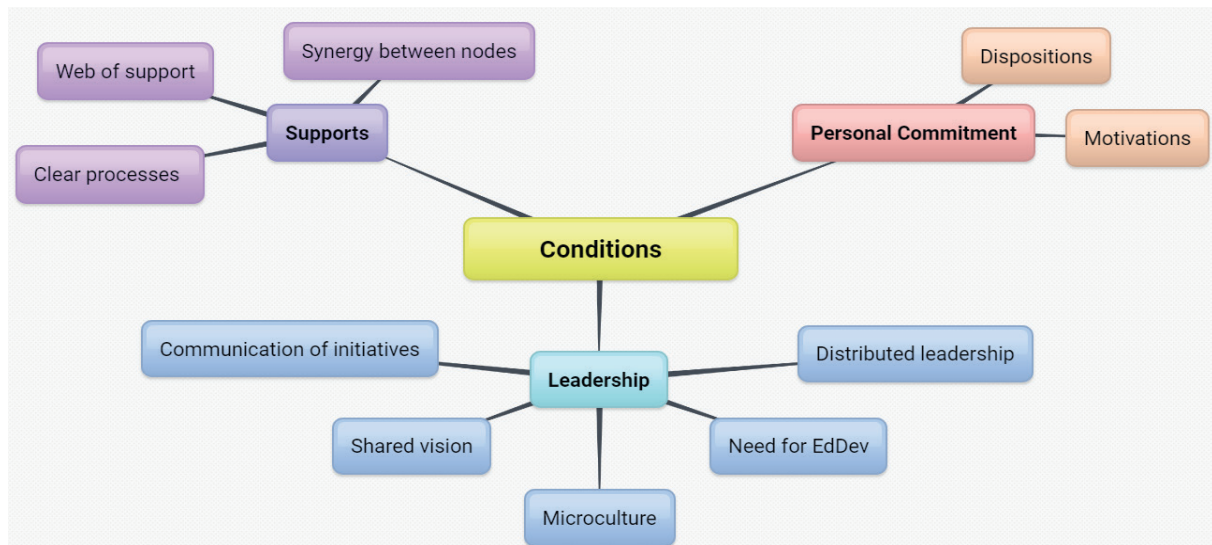
3.1   Personal commitment

A first condition determined to be essential to the development of online teaching capacity among instructors was personal commitment of instructors. It is important to establish institutional leadership, create organizational development and, particularly, that each instructor takes ownership of their own capacity-building process. Here motivation for personal development plays a key role. Instructors in this research demonstrated their interest in developing online teaching skills in various ways. They were motivated by the mandate of their Faculty (the sole degree provider in their province in their field), and the fact that online learning was one of the strategies used by the school for the delivery of its programmes. Instructors

also aspired to high quality online instruction so that the school could fulfill its mandate. Motivations to teach in an online environment and to develop one's own capacity are correlated (Chaney, 2010). This means that instructors who are motivated to teach online courses are more often than not likely to be intrinsically motivated to engage in online teaching capacity-building processes. In my case study, all instructors who were interviewed highlighted the importance of facilitating learning at a high level for their students.

Another aspect of personal commitment that was identified in interviews revolved around individual's dispositions towards self-improvement. This involved a clear intentionality in learning about online teaching: being open to discussing and experimenting with new strategies and approaches to teaching. This openness was also visible when several instructors took steps to experience online education as students, which they claimed served them well to more deeply understand what students would be experiencing when engaging in their online courses.

3.2   Supports

The second condition deemed essential for the development of online teaching capacity in instructors was the existence of a variety of supports that accommodated the diverse need of instructors. Instructors demonstrated the need for assistance in several areas, for example via introduction to pedagogical, technological, administrative and other elements relevant to online teaching capacity-building processes. However, instructors may have various levels of expertise in educational technology and online learning; different approaches to teaching; and distinct preferences on how they best learn a new technique or tool. Therefore, offering a variety of options from which instructors may choose what works best for them is crucial to the success of online teaching endeavours in higher education institutions (Frankel, 2015; Gregory & Salmon, 2013; Herman, 2012).

Furthermore, not only is the diversity of offerings important, but the synergy between each service provider, so that instructors' needs are met while maintaining sustainable support models. Large research-intensive universities such as the one studied in this research can house several Faculties and departments, each approaching teaching and learning practices differently (Cook & Marincovich, 2010). As such, it is crucial to carefully adjust educational development offerings to focus on a general message while accommodating each department's individual needs (McAlpine & Saroyan, 2004). Careful and strategic articulation between stakeholders must also take place for this to happen (Rochefort, 2013).

However, instructors and academic leaders in this study noted that sometimes it was difficult to clearly identify paths for instructors to navigate the different educational development offerings and initiatives. This was especially true for adjunct faculty members. Such support systems should be organized in clear ways and communicated appropriately so that instructors are able to decide what approaches or paths would be most suitable to their needs and preferred styles.

3.3   Leadership

The final condition dealt with the role that certain individuals and groups had in leading the Faculty in online teaching, and the value placed on developing teaching capacity. Leadership can be understood as "influencing others to achieve new, hopefully desirable, ends; it frequently involves initiating changes designed to achieve existing or new goals" (Spillane & Diamond, 2007, p. 5). In this case study, such goals included reaching students from across the province, as well as offering online teaching at an exceptional level. To achieve these goals, five components of leadership had to be present. Leadership had to be (1) visible in the way a vision for online teaching was shared among instructors, which (2) created a micro-culture of excellence in online teaching. However, this was not done by the senior leadership

of the Faculty in isolation; rather, (3) leadership was distributed so that individuals and groups were empowered to take ownership of their development and to create opportunities for others to also engage in online teaching. Leadership was also seen in the (4) recognition of the need for practices around online teaching capacity building. Finally, the (5) communication of initiatives and strategies for capacity building was done in a way that engaged others to take control of their own development.

4   Conclusions

Online teaching is expanding its role in higher education. In the context of the Faculty of Professional Studies, and that of many other institutions, this implies that instructors need to develop knowledge and skills to design and teach effective online courses. In order to do so, this study highlighted three main conditions that impacted the process of online teaching capacity building: leadership, web of supports, and personal commitment.

Acknowledgements

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