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Lessons Learned: Boosting Faculty Development Services During a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

The following Lessons Learned paper focuses on how our department stepped up during the pandemic to help faculty transition to a new learning management system when most faculty began teaching online for the first time. Faculty needed to quickly move from face-to-face to online delivery while the university administration pushed for more student engagement. Our challenge was to reach a broader audience and develop content relevant to their immediate needs while at the same time introducing them to our department and providing a means for them to continue their development with a wide range of workshops, on-demand content, and training. This lightning talk will briefly show how the department developed the curriculum, delivered workshops serving a large number of faculty during this shift in course delivery, and (by analyzing registration and attendance data and web analytics) learned how to serve faculty in the future.

1. Introduction

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, faculty struggled to transition their face-to-face offerings to an online environment. Instructional technology professionals did their best to support faculty through various services. Donnelly and others suggest that disaster resilience was a big part of what faculty needed when universities may be prepared for active shooters and other terrorist attacks, but "a global pandemic that completely shut down campuses for months was beyond what most institutions anticipated [1]." Universities decided the best option was to send students home and offer the rest of the spring courses from a distance. Texas A&M was among these universities that decided in March 2020 that all sections would be going online for the rest of the semester.

The Engineering Studio for Advanced Instruction & Learning (eSAIL) housed in the College of Engineering at Texas A&M was still in start-up mode, grappling with how to offer support to all faculty in the College of Engineering. The department's main goal was to increase enrollment in College of Engineering graduate programs, starting with working with departments and individual faculty to create more online courses to grow graduate programs. Texas A&M University already had an office (Academic Innovation) that focused on training and administering the campus learning management system (LMS), Blackboard. When the decision was made to transition to a new LMS, and the university chose Canvas, the Academic Innovation department was allowed to grow and reorganize to meet the demand of transitioning over 3,500 faculty members. Of those faculty, 710 resided in the College of Engineering. eSAIL wanted to ensure these engineering faculty received the support they needed while building the department's reputation and partnering with more faculty to create quality online courses. They also began getting creative in their support offerings (as many other universities did) to train faculty who had never taught online before or never used Canvas, the new LMS, all while dealing with a global pandemic.

2. Methods

The head of distance education, designers, and the department director worked together to brainstorm new services to meet the demand of training all engineering faculty. The department looked to Academic Innovations (AI) first to ensure a lack of redundant material and offerings. Curriculum development began on a voluntary, self-paced course taught through an LMS. However, it was decided that a faster approach to serving the faculty was through workshops. Data obtained from feedback and participation from the first Q&A sessions run during March of 2020 were analyzed. The department website also had a handful of online videos about Zoom, Blackboard (still the LMS at that time), and Google Classroom, along with recordings of webinars, short tutorials, and links to other resources from AI and the Blackboard site. Workshop presenters looked at web analytics to decide what curriculum should be the priority for the site. Continued evaluation of workshops happened through registration, participation, feedback data, and a limited number of surveys submitted by participants. More formal data collection started in November of 2020 when the university's registration system (Aventri) was used, and workshops were made more of a priority. Presenters then began using Zoom, making it easier to keep up with their own registrations. Later, the department's customer service ticketing system was analyzed to see what questions were coming in the most from faculty during certain times of the semester and throughout the transition to Canvas.

3. Results

3.1 Registration Data and Feedback

The Q&A sessions lacked any specific topic at the start with the hope of getting services to faculty quickly. Only a handful of faculty participated, with most waiting for others to ask questions they didn't know they needed answering. Sessions transitioned to advertised topics, creating breakout rooms for more lengthy questions and sharing planned information in a less formal setting. These were also not well attended, with 2 or 3 faculty and 5 or 6 staff from eSAIL. One issue was the quick turnaround time of the workshops after advertising them.

Feedback from these first Q&A sessions showed the need for more developed webinars with a structured agenda. Staff was divided up to improve services and workshop offerings, and webinars were planned at different times during the day and week. Feedback from the Q&A sessions and web analytics were used at this time to come up with a curriculum that best addressed the immediate needs of the faculty. Faculty needed to get online and struggled with all the bells and whistles that Blackboard provided, so basic workshops for Blackboard were created and workshops for Zoom and Google Classroom, a quicker way to get online for those faculty just starting in the online arena.

As the university transitioned to Canvas and the department lacked participation in the Blackboard workshops, more Canvas workshops on basic navigation, tool use, and adding material were developed and presented.

Questions coming in through tickets showed that navigating Canvas would be a good start for a very introductory webinar. Looking at AI's offerings and offerings from comparable universities using Canvas [2], [3] helped give ideas for other workshops and webinars. One idea was to create an opportunity for a smaller group of faculty to get hands-on experience to transition their Blackboard course into Canvas. Hence, the development of a Making the Switch workshop from eCampus to Canvas. (eCampus being Texas A&M's branding for Blackboard). Other titles included:

- Canvas Basics
- Content Delivery in an Online Environment (Adding Content to your Canvas Course) (workshop on adding content and making it Accessible)
- Using ENGR Mediasite with Canvas
- Canvas Gradebook
- Setting Up Quizzes
- Online Proctoring
- Accessibility Tips for Powerpoint

Looking at service tickets gave information to create a timeline during the semester for workshops, such as repeated workshops on exams and grading around midterms and finals. This strategy goes back to the idea of giving faculty information when they need it. Making the Switch workshop was repeated between semesters after the pilot group made the switch and more faculty began transitioning to Canvas.

Data also showed that more advanced webinars and workshops for those teaching online for years could be added. The department reached out to faculty to share their experiences. Research at other institutions also showed issues with student engagement [1]. This same issue presented itself the first semester during the pandemic at Texas A&M. Many of the students who had little online learning experience voiced concerns about losing that connection with the faculty. Because of this, two of the workshops directly addressed engaging students and incorporating active learning practices.

In November and December of 2021, we offered 12 workshops with 87 registrations and 50 participants. January 2021 was our most active month, with 16 workshops bringing in 355 registrations and 195 participants. This data showed that most faculty transitioned to Canvas during the second semester it was offered and waited until after the holidays to start preparing for the Spring semester. Because of this, August was projected to be the most active month, with faculty waiting until the last minute. However, registration data began showing a lack of participation in August 2021. This period marked the end of the transition from Blackboard to Canvas. Only 22 faculty registered, and eight participated in the ten workshops planned that month.

In total, the Spring and Summer of 2021 only saw 74 registrations and 45 participants for the 34 workshops scheduled. Most participants came back for more than one workshop showing that the first may have been helpful, but they wanted more information.

From August 2020 to August 2021, eSAIL had:

- 13 Unique workshops presented 47 times,
- 521 Total Registrations 284 Attended, and
- 139 Faculty Served.

3.2 Web analytics

Website analytics can also give insight into what faculty are interested in or need. During the first year (February to August 2020), the site analytics showed 3,412 sessions, with 21% of traffic going to the workshop page and then leaving the site. This traffic came from emails to departments advertising workshops and then linking to the off-site registration system. 10 - 14% of traffic came to find contact information and technical support. The College of Engineering has a large number of faculty using the lecture capture video server (Mediasite), which accounts for a majority of service tickets for the department. People were coming to the eSAIL site and looking at what other information we had to offer as well. Unfortunately, there was not much there in the beginning. 1 - 3% of traffic found random pages on faculty panels, our covid response, and FAQ. We also had a limited number of webinar recordings and other video tutorials on Zoom that 1% of our traffic found.

Currently, the site has been updated with tutorials for some of the more basic workshops offered in order to focus on giving more advanced workshops in the future. Analytics show that the tutorials that offer video content and text and graphical step-by-step instructions get the most traffic. For example, a page on How to Add a Document Title into a Word Document or PDF moved from the third most hit page in October 2021 to the first most hit page in November and December of 2021, with 332 hits in December, a growth of over 209 hits over the past months. The Tutorials and Resources page also ranked high in November, sitting in third place after the home page with 56 hits. December saw a decline to 20. This decline is not surprising as no new content was added, and faculty went on break. Other pages in an accessibility series round out the top of the page view list. Also, Google Analytics shows that the top growing pages in December 2021 other than the Add Document Title into Word Document (+209) are Gradebook Basics PDF (+6) and Canvas Gradbook (+4).

4. Lessons Learned and Looking Ahead

The department wanted to focus more on on-demand material to publish online in the future. Looking at the registration data and web analytics helped show that the focus could be more on improving web presence and on-demand offerings at this point. At the same time, these workshops built eSAIL's reputation with campus administrators, so a small number of offerings with more advanced topics, third-party tools, or quick tips to help faculty at the start of the semester could be presented.

Several tutorials have been added to the website that include videos and step-by-step instructions. Analytics showed this format to be the most popular. Topics for these included the more basic quick tips that did not need a full hour to explain, such as importing courses and cleaning up the Canvas Dashboard. The department would also like to partner with faculty more

to understand better what they need. A call to work with a select group of faculty for focus groups and surveys has been sent. Faculty can inform eSAIL what they need rather than the department guessing or looking to other universities. A newsletter is also in development as an additional avenue for getting short tutorials to faculty and advertizing other services for one-on-one help. A short course in Canvas for faculty to help them develop online and remote courses working with us or on their own has been published for faculty to request access voluntarily. This will soon be marketed through the newsletter and will help faculty new to online learning.

Research showed that students needed support during this transition [1] as well. Faculty feedback led to developing another online training course, a student course in Canvas. A course from the Canvas Commons service [4] was chosen and adapted to fit the needs of the College of Engineering students with the hope that new online students would find it helpful. However, the first pilot of this community began with all engineering students being automatically added, creating confusion for some and low attendance and participation. Only select students will be added with better communication about how it can be used in the future.

5. Conclusions

Even though eSAIL has struggled with curriculum development, especially after the transition to Canvas, the department can still use workshops for marketing. Fewer workshops can be offered to conserve resources while promoting best practices. Workshops will transition from basic learning management tools to more advanced topics. More on-demand tutorials can be created for those quick questions faculty may have to help with topics such as gradebook basics and accessibility issues. Resources can be focused on more course development and one-on-one consultations. eSAIL now has the opportunity to help faculty go beyond the basics of developing online courses and into developing a more transformative, engaging experience for students.

References

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