Process of Collaborative Course Design

Harford Community College (HCC) uses collaborative course design (CCD) for all online physical education (PE) courses. CCD is the shared creation of course content that applies the expertise of multiple faculty members to meet academic rigor and support ongoing course improvements. The three-stage process outlined below demonstrates a commitment to faculty inclusivity, maximizes time spent in instructional delivery, and provides a systematic approach to continuous course improvements.

Stage One: Design

During the initial design of the course, all instructors, including full-time and adjunct instructors, meet to decide what learning content and standardized assessments will meet the course learning objectives. The inclusion of all faculty who teach the course is critical to this stage as they bring their expertise and diverse backgrounds to the course design process.

At HCC, course layout begins with the inclusion of the college's standard nomenclature, such as "Start Here" and "Course Content." Courses must be designed to meet the learning objectives. Instructors must determine how the learning objectives will be assessed, what types of instructional materials should be included, and what types of activities will support learning. After making those determinations, the instructors decide how the content will be implemented and arranged into the course. For example, is the course content going to be arranged in modules, units, or another way? All instructors are encouraged to give recommendations about assessment and course setup. A considerable amount of attention is then given to whether the course is easy to navigate.

Collaboration can prevent some challenges commonly associated with online teaching. The collaborative design stage can be lengthy. An inadvertent problem with traditional course creation is the competing demand of live course instruction concurrent to course design. However, the initial investment of time is worthwhile because it results in a reallocation of time spent on instructional delivery. The tendency to simultaneously design and instruct is eliminated. Another challenge occurs when courses have a heavy technology component. In our online PE courses, along with many other online courses, we incorporate the use of technology to meet the learning objectives. It is important to determine whether the technological tools are reliable, intuitive to use, and meet the desired objective. We suggest that all "tech-heavy" courses be internally piloted prior to their debut. Experimenting with the tool in advance of the course's debut can identify problems that might suggest the tool is not appropriate for the course, is tedious to navigate, or exceeds what would be considered a reasonable level of proficiency for it's use. If it's determined the tool is appropriate, piloting also identifies "hiccups" that students might experience when using the technology. Through collaboration, faculty can create standardized strategies to help students address and correct technical problems.

Stage Two: Assessment

All faculty meet on an annual basis to assess the course. This stage focuses on verifying that the assessment methods continue to align with the learning objectives, the students are achieving the learning objectives, and that content terminology and statistics are current. Emerging trends could, however, warrant a mid-cycle assessment of learning material. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic required an immediate update to address safety considerations specific to physical activity courses.

Faculty determine what course content might need to be updated. One way to do this is to share course assessment data. Including all instructors' data can identify trends, such as whether a problem is occurring across all sections. If the assessment data indicate that as a group, we are not achieving a learning objective, instructors can brainstorm ways to increase success. For example, we might increase interactive activities, add more learning material, or improve a grading rubric. However, data might also show that only one section of a course did not meet the learning objective. This could indicate the problem is the delivery of the material and not the course content. If one instructor is struggling with course delivery, other instructors can share ideas about what has been successful in their classes. Again, a benefit of collaboration is to provide the instructor with feedback on strategies for more effective course instruction.

It is important that course content reflects current terminology and statistics. One way to ensure this is to divide the course into sections and assign each instructor a section to review. The instructor determines whether statistics are accurate and current, and if terminology and/or theory has changed in a way that requires updating. For example, one instructor might be responsible for reviewing modules one and two and another instructor might be responsible for reviewing modules three and four, etc. In a traditional design model, it is the instructor's sole responsibility to review their material and make updates. This tedious process is made easier through the shared responsibility of ensuring that content is current and accurate.

Stage Three: Update

Course updates are based on conclusions from the yearly assessment, including section reviews as described in Stage Two. It's recommended that updates be implemented in advance of the fall semester and that, barring any emergency changes such as an unforeseen technology issue, the updated version remains constant throughout the entire academic year. Mid-year alterations make it difficult to accurately interpret end-of-year assessment data. We also find that with fewer courses being taught in the summer, faculty have more time to make changes to the course design.

Whose responsibility it is to create and maintain course design can vary among institutions. At HCC, this is a faculty-led process. Adjuncts are not compensated for their time; therefore, they never make updates to the master course. Instead, full-time faculty are assigned to update courses on a rotating basis. This allows for an equal distribution of responsibility and saves time for those who are not in the rotation to update the course. Based on the outcomes of the assessment stage, updates might be adding interactive activities, supplementing learning material, improving grading rubrics, implementing changes based on the instructors' review of content, and adding information about current trends. The instructor who is responsible for the course design update also resets due dates for assignments, quizzes, and other date-associated content.

The CCD process does not prevent the inevitability of a total course overhaul. Over the years, changes in the learning management system, a change in the course objectives, or newer technology capabilities may necessitate a return to Stage One: Design.

Conclusion

A growing number of courses are being adapted for online delivery. This allows more opportunities for instructors to collaborate. Our three-stage process of designing, assessing, and updating a course has proven to be effective in multiple ways. Faculty can combine their subject matter expertise and share the responsibilities of course design development and continuous improvement to produce effective learning experiences for students.

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