Chapter 16
Enhancing Instructor Capacity Through the Redesign of Online Practicum Course Environments Using Universal Design for Learning

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ABSTRACT

A current trend in practicum or field experience programs is online and blended learning approaches being implemented alongside traditional classroom experiences. Principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) should be integrated in the design of these online environments in order to better support learning needs of all students. Instructors must also have confidence and competence in designing and facilitating learning within technology-enabled environments. This chapter reports on research conducted using design-based research to support instructor capacity development within field experience in a Bachelor of Education program. Three strategies are identified and discussed to enhance instructor's capacity: scaffolded support, modeling UDL practice in the online environment, and coaching to foster developing capacity using UDL. The chapter concludes by reporting on a new study that emerged as a result of this work, along with recommendations for practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Professional programs in higher education are continuing to implement online environments in support of learning (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016; Brown & Green, 2010). One of the concerns with this trend is how instructors are being assisted in developing their understanding and skills to design and facilitate online environments that effectively support learning for all students (Lock & Johnson, 2015). One recommendation in designing online environments is to support instructors with a practical, working knowledge of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Instructors are encouraged to incorporate the three UDL principles when creating courses: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of action and expression (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). The challenge becomes identifying how to apply UDL principles into practice in technology-enhanced environments in support of blended and/or online learning.

This chapter focuses on how a design-based research (DBR) team worked within a field experience (i.e., practicum) course context in a Bachelor of Education program at a Western Canadian university. A requirement of the field experience program is for both students and instructors to use an online learning management system (LMS) in support of the course learning tasks. Integrating the LMS in the course is one matter; the other is providing the necessary support for instructors to meaningfully integrate the online environment into their field experience courses. A common issue is the range of experience and competence instructors have in online learning design as this affects how they create and use the environment to support students in their practicum. Adding to this is the need to provide instructors with instructional design support in using and modeling UDL principles to meet the goals of field experience. Workshops and how-to resources are limited in their degree and nature of support for instructors. Additional strategies such as having an online community of practice (i.e., a place for instructors to share ideas and grow their own skills), access to a master course shell (i.e., environment) template that instructors can customize, and one-to-one technology coaching can play a critical role in instructors' development. The educational development opportunities provided to field experience instructors were guided by the TPACK model (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) and supported instructors in creating cohesion across pedagogy, technology, and content.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, to contextualize the work by identifying trends in online and blended learning for practicum or field experience including the challenges of developing instructor capacity to design and facilitate learning in such technology-enabled environments. Second, to report on the research conducted using DBR to support instructor capacity development that also included the creation of various strategic supports. Third, based on the literature and research findings, three strategies are identified to enhance instructor's capacity: 1) scaffolded support; 2) modeling UDL practice in the online environment; and 3) coaching to foster developing capacity using UDL. The chapter ends with the reporting on a new study that emerged as a result of this work and with recommendations for practice.

BACKGROUND

Blended and Online Learning

Online and blended learning approaches are becoming commonplace as contemporary educational paradigms (Wilcox & Lock, 2014). Online learning has attracted attention as an increasingly "viable

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