Multi-layered Collaboration: From Online Development to Delivery

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration is often a significant element in course development and/or delivery. This paper describes a project that was collaboratively developed and facilitated by a team of faculty under the auspices of a consortium of universities called the Collaboration for Online Higher Education and Research (COHERE). The project is ongoing and its significance lies in overcoming or circumventing the typical barriers that stand in the way of success for many consortia-created collaborative projects of this nature.

RÉSUMÉ

La collaboration est souvent un élément principal dans la conception de cours et - ou dans leur exécution. Dans cet article, il y a une description d'un projet qui fut conçu et animé de façon collaborative par une équipe de professeurs, sous les auspices d'un consortium d'universités appelé : la collaboration pour les études et les recherches supérieures en ligne (the Collaboration for Online Higher Education and Research, ou COHERE). Ce projet en cours est important pour dépasser et pour contourner des obstacles qui vont typiquement à l'encontre du succès de nombreux projets similaires, des projets qui sont collaboratifs et créés par des consortiums.

INTRODUCTION:
THE **COHERE** COLLABORATION

Collaboration and consortia are not new concepts in higher education. Consortia have existed in higher education since 1925, with significant growth occurring in the period from 1960 to 1970. However, by the 1980s, many of these consortia had disbanded, with few new collaborations forged (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999). The 1990s saw an increase in the development of consortia and collaborations. Archer (2004) has posited that the development of consortia in the age of online learning may hold promising new possibilities for higher education. He argued that these consortia, if well constructed and administered, would enable member institutions to retain institutional autonomy in on-campus teaching and research while making a significant impact in the area of collaborative online teaching and learning. Canada's Collaboration for Online Higher Education and Research (COHERE) is actively translating this vision into practice.

COHERE (www.cohere.ca) is a consortium of nine research-intensive universities in Canada. It grew out of discussions between three senior academic administrators at the Universities of Alberta, Waterloo, and York. In 2001, a memorandum of understanding was signed by seven Canadian universities: Simon Fraser University, University of Alberta, University of Saskatchewan, University of Guelph, University of Waterloo, York University, and Dalhousie University. Under this Memorandum of understanding, the partner institutions agreed in principle to collaborate in the areas of student learning, faculty development, and research and scholarship; institutional members pay an annual membership of $5,000. Since 2001, two other institutions, the University of Calgary and the University of Manitoba, have joined the consortium. The member institutions, although geographically dispersed, share a strong research focus and a commitment to integrate online teaching and learning with the research agenda of their universities. Through the informed blending of online learning with traditional classroom-based learning, these institutions have sought to develop a rich learning environment for students, built upon critical inquiry and learning communities.

Since its inception in 2001, COHERE has undertaken several projects, including a study of blended learning among its member institutions, an investigation of a learning-objects repository, an evaluation of an online evaluation tool, and the publication of the monograph *Advances and Challenges in Online Learning.* As a consortium, COHERE promotes flexibility, that is, members are not required to participate in all initiatives but rather are encouraged to select areas or projects for involvement. As a result, groups are formed to undertake different projects.

One group undertook the development of an online course in Canadian Studies, drawing upon subject-matter experts from across the consortium. The development of this online course was both an exciting and a challenging task. It required partners to collaborate academically, administratively, and technologically. Specifically, it required academics to think differently about teaching, moving from the very individualistic and private tradition of classroom-based teaching to the collaborative and public online environment. It required administrators to think differently about issues of admission and registration to allow students from multiple institutions to enter a course taught in a pan-Canadian virtual learning space. Finally, it required information technology (IT) personnel to think differently about supporting students in this learning space, about authenticating students, and about linking institutional registration systems.

CANADIAN STUDIES: THE VISION

The idea to develop a "signature course" came about at the 2002 annual meeting of COHERE institutional representatives. Having undertaken several small projects, including several position and briefing papers, the group decided to move from the theoretical to the practical. It was timely to develop and showcase a course that reflected COHERE goals—excellent academic content and innovative online teaching. It was determined that a foundational course in Canadian Studies would meet the requirements. The vision for the course emerged as this group discussed the tremendous advantage to students able to enrol in a Canadian Studies introductory course taught by experts in the various themes, topics, and issues embraced by this interdisciplinary field.

Typically, the Canadian Studies department on any one of the campuses involved in COHERE is small. Each of the various universities committed to this project has areas of expertise in the field of Canadian Studies, but no one university has a large enough faculty to offer its students a full range of courses covering all the topics and issues that such an interdisciplinary area demands. Indeed, in several institutions, not a single full-time faculty member is assigned to only Canadian Studies courses. Canadian Studies is typically comprised of faculty from other disciplines, such as history, geography, women's studies, and political science, who offer to teach one course in Canadian Studies occasionally. Frequently, those who teach regularly in only Canadian Studies are sessional instructors. Therefore, the pooling of resources among universities to collaboratively develop and teach a course in this area would provide tremendous benefits for the students in all the participating universities.

University department chairs and faculty would also enjoy a tremendous benefit. Imagine a university having enough courses to offer a minor in a subject area with possibly no more than one faculty member devoted to the subject. The universities would receive courses without having to pay the full cost for either development or instruction. In addition, no unusual technology or equipment is required by either faculty or students. Students and faculty can be anywhere in the world while the course is running. Moreover, students all register at their home institutions and enter the common classroom through their own institutional door. Collaboration allows all those involved to reap a benefit that could not be imagined by any one university acting alone.

CONTEXT OF THE COLLABORATION

Although the COHERE memorandum of understanding provided an overarching framework for institutional collaboration, it was agreed that the Canadian Studies course needed a defined agreement signed by the participating partners. As a signatory to the agreement, each partner institution would commit to providing resources in terms of subject-matter experts, instructional designers, teachers, and support personnel from administration and IT.

The group that began this project wanted to broaden students' access to Canadian Studies content. The original idea was to have faculty who are experts on various aspects of Canadian Studies write material for a course that would be shared among the universities. The project became more complicated as the discussion turned to how the course content would be offered. Although group members were committed to an online offering of the content, it was the only goal they shared. The partner institutions soon encountered a range of problems, ranging from those of "Whose students are they?" to "What online platform will be used?" Other matters needing attention included arranging for students to receive support materials, such as readings, clearing copyright for this material, and deciding how to compensate faculty for the development of materials in a way that would be fair to all those involved.

Central to the project was ensuring a commitment from faculty members to develop and deliver the course on schedule. Although the Memorandum of understanding indicated support from senior administrators, it was the faculty members who would have to agree to work collaboratively throughout the process. From a review of the course description endorsed by the respective partners, it appeared that it would not be difficult to reach a common understanding of what constituted a foundational course in Canadian Studies. However, it took from an initial meeting in 2003 until the summer of

2005 for the participating faculty to reach an acceptable agreement around course content, delivery mode, and evaluation methods. Over those two years, some faculty members chose to leave the group and two institutions withdrew from the project, but a nucleus of committed academics remained, resulting in the pilot delivery of the course in the winter of 2006.

BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED AND CIRCUMVENTED

Despite its obvious advantages, the implementation of this collaborative project did not go smoothly. Academic consortia are neither easy to form nor easy to sustain, even in an era of global appetite for e-learning (Matheos & Wong, 2005). Faculty members are rewarded for individual effort in research and teaching, and universities tend to focus on what distinguishes them from one another rather than on shared characteristics and needs. Time and experience have shown that hard work and goodwill are often insufficient to produce finished projects. Some of the barriers related to the inequality of status among the institutions, while others were caused by the institutions' common tendency to compete for students. Bates (2001) has suggested that those involved in a consortium need to rise above the typical "culture" of competitiveness among post-secondary institutions and establish a working relationship of trust. Other barriers to the success of the consortia related to the administrative systems that manage students within each of the institutions, and still others had to do with technology and the various platforms that host online courses. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, there were issues of cost and the distribution of both costs and revenues associated with the collaborative project.

Initial meetings of the Canadian Studies planning committee led, not unexpectedly, to some frustrating discussions regarding course content and whether the structure of the content should be focused around modules or semesters. There were also discussions regarding what the content should encompass, and in what order it should be presented, how many weeks comprised a semester, and how credit hours should be affixed to either the course or the modules. Although there was a commitment to developing an online course, the course management systems used among the member institutions ranged from WebCT to Design2Learn and Blackboard. As well, the support for distance education was vastly different at each institution.

The problems and frustrations diminished when the planning committee decided to offer the course through a common portal hosted by COHERE, to designate responsibility for instructional design to one individual, and to use one platform (WebCT) for course delivery. Although the subject-matter experts were scattered across the partner institutions, project management was located in one place—Simon Fraser University—which provided a tem-

plate, established a schedule of critical deadlines, provided editorial functions, and kept in contact with all the content developers. All course materials were sent to Simon Fraser for uploading to WebCT.

On the academic side, the curriculum committee had changed from a group of disconnected faculty to a small, functional group of four members who were eager to find a way to develop and deliver a high-quality innovative course. They were also eager, for the most part, to teach online for the first time. In the early stages of the project, each of them worked independently on their respective areas; the result was a set of carefully constructed yet unconnected modules. The turning point came in the summer of 2005 when a senior academic led the group through a discussion about their respective materials, exploring ways that the modules could connect, developing assignments that drew upon learning from multiple modules, and essentially moving from teaching as individual subject-matter experts to a team mindset.

Registration difficulties were also ameliorated by consensus. The mechanics of enrolling in the course was achieved through each partner institution's normal registration process. Each university would keep "its" students and the associated tuition revenue from those registrants, and each would approve a course number and description. Once registered, students would receive printed materials from their "home" institution that gave them the URL address for the course, which essentially opened the participating universities' institutional doors to the Pan-Canadian classroom. When the semester began, all students would access the same website. The pilot delivery of the course took place from January to April 2006 with two cohorts of students, one from Simon Fraser University and one from the University of Calgary. A second delivery of the course was scheduled for delivery in September 2006 with four or more institutions.

Pilot Delivery: Feedback from Faculty

At the conclusion of the pilot delivery of the course, telephone interviews were conducted with the four faculty members who were involved in the course-content development and the facilitation of online discussions related to their areas of expertise. In addition, the teaching assistant (TA) who assisted the Simon Fraser University student cohort was interviewed. At the time of writing of this article, data related to feedback from the students was still being analyzed and therefore is not reported here.

The four subject-matter experts/course facilitators came from four different universities: Simon Fraser, Calgary, Saskatchewan, and York. All agreed that co-authoring the Canadian Studies course made it much stronger and richer than any one of them could have achieved individually. The develop-

ment process itself, however, encountered some turbulence because different institutions had different cultures and administrative requirements that took a great deal of time and discussion to reach consensus on. For example, there were differences in each institution's expectations with respect to the weighting of assignments and examinations. Two of the four subject-matter experts had had prior experience with distance education courses, but the way in which distance education was supported at their respective institutions was quite different. Only one of the subject-matter experts had prior experience in facilitating online courses.

A face-to-face meeting in June 2005 was judged to be significant in that it demonstrated to the subject-matter experts that they had created an extremely heavy course and there were inconsistencies in their approaches to structuring the content. There were also different understandings of how students were to access readings required for the online discussions and assignments. These differences were resolved over the next few months under the leadership of one of the experts who undertook the editing and streamlining of the content and assignments.

None of the subject-matter experts/course facilitators received a hands-on orientation to the WebCT platform when the course content was completed and uploaded. This was due mainly to their busy schedules and to their confidence that they could adapt to the new mode of teaching. The teaching assistant at Simon Fraser, however, participated in a face-to-face tutorial provided by the university. During the course delivery, he noted that some of the facilitators had trouble posting assignment grades and comments and students had trouble finding their assignment feedback. He was able to be of assistance and attributed this to the tutorial he had received earlier on. Three of the four facilitators commented that they were unclear as to whom to approach for technical help and administrative information during course delivery.

All four facilitators expressed delight with the diversity of students who participated in the course. Students came from different parts of Canada and several from the United States and a few from overseas; some students identified themselves as "new" Canadians. Their varied backgrounds contributed to a rich introductory discussion of backgrounds and motivations for taking the course. The facilitators were generally impressed by the quality of the critical comments made by the students in the discussions. Diversity among the students was also observed in terms of their writing skills. One facilitator pointed out that online writing differs from academic writing, in that students need to learn to use an appropriate "tone" to convey enthusiasm or disagreement.

The size of the discussion group (about 50 students from two institutions at the start of the course) was problematic. It was difficult for the individual

facilitators to keep track of the students and to build a sense of affiliation. All the facilitators agreed that for the next delivery of the course, the students should be clustered into smaller groups, each with a mix that was representative of different regions of Canada. Two of the facilitators suggested that the course should have a teaching assistant whose primary role is "traffic controller" or "social monitor"—that is, to keep track of students, motivate them via private emails to participate in discussions, and provide the online facilitators with clues about why some students had "disappeared from the radar." Inconsistent participation in online discussions is an issue that needs to be investigated.

As a result of their experience co-authoring this course, the subject-matter experts/course facilitators advised the next team of co-authors to budget more time for collaborative development and to make explicit their expectations for the course before writing their individual course sections. The course has great potential for students to learn from people across Canada and around the world, but a number of structural and process issues need to be addressed to allow the course to achieve its potential. In future deliveries of the course, a formal orientation for students would help to provide a common understanding of the learning process and the key contacts within each institution, as well as promote a sense of social affiliation and course cohesiveness between regional cohorts.

CONCLUSION

The collaborative development and delivery of this Canadian Studies course was both challenging and rewarding, an experience that could not have taken place prior to the availability of online learning. Each faculty member who worked on the development of this foundational course was an expert in a particular region or topic of Canadian Studies. Faculty course authors not only wrote the content but also facilitated the online discussions related to their modules. As a result, students had the advantage of learning from faculty whose current research and teaching interests involved the topics that the course introduced. Students were also able to interact with students from different regions of Canada and beyond and to develop skills for working within a virtual environment. This collaborative project provided a concrete example of how online learning and teaching touches all areas of the institution and demonstrated the great potential of the collaborative development and delivery of higher education courses.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Kathleen Matheos is currently the associate dean, Extended Education, at the University of Manitoba and the program coordinator for the Collaboration for Online Higher Education Research (COHERE). She has worked in higher education within the college and university systems in Canada for over 20 years and most recently in the China, India, East Africa, and Palestine.

Kathleen Matheos est présentement la doyenne associée de la Faculté de scolarisation prolongée à l'Université du Manitoba ainsi que la coordonnatrice de programmes pour la collaboration pour les études et les recherches supérieures en ligne (COHERE, ou Collaboration for Online Higher Education Research). Depuis de 20 ans, elle travaille dans le domaine des études supérieures aux niveaux collégiaux et universitaires au Canada, et plus récemment, en Chine, en Inde, en Afrique de l'Est et en Palestine.

Angelina Wong is a professor and director of the Centre for Distributed Learning and the Instructional Design Group, and acting associate dean of research, Extension Division, University of Saskatchewan. One of her research interests is how blended learning designs can enhance the whole learning and teaching experience.

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