ABSTRACT

The Moving Ideas Network Website was created to provide unique support to online instructors to promote quality online teaching and learning. The website offers monthly virtual round-table discussions that are related to the best practices of distance education. The goals and benefits of the website is to offer (1) Exposure to creative and innovative ideas in online teaching, online classroom facilitation, and management skills; (2) Development of a productive and cooperative work environment among faculty and staff; (3) Opportunity for senior instructors to contribute to their profession and organization, therefore, opportunity for entry level instructors to learn and advance online teaching and related skills; (4) Improve communication among faculty to faculty and faculty to administration; and (5) Greater understanding of issues and needs at various levels of online teaching and administrative support for both students and instructors.

INTRODUCTION

The Moving Ideas Network website was created to provide unique support to promote the best practice of distance education and to build a learning community among online instructors and administrators of Distance and Distributed Learning in the College of Extended Learning at Central Michigan University.

Central Michigan University is located in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. The institution was founded in 1982 and currently has over 28,000 students; nearly 20,000 of whom are on-campus students. Ninety percent of the on-campus students are undergraduate students. CMU draws many of its students from the Detroit, Michigan, metro area. Central Michigan offers over 3000 individual courses and confers over 25 different degrees.

Within Central Michigan University is the College of Extended Learning (CEL). CEL started in 1971 in the metro Detroit area and currently has over 8000 students. There are over 60 off-site locations in twenty-one states in U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Twenty per cent of our off-sites are located on military bases. Since 1971, CEL has graduated over 55,000 students. The College of Extended Learning has over 1600 adjunct faculty – teaching both face-to-face and online courses.

The College of Extended Learning has Distance & Distributed Learning (DDL). DDL was established in 1971 by offering learning packages, sometimes referred to as correspondence courses. Today DDL offers web-based, telecourse and learning package courses in 8-week and 12-week terms with an annual enrollment of over 5400. Distance and Distributed Learning offers BA, MA, and PHD programs to students all over the world. Many College of Extended Learning students find themselves taking online courses from DDL due to job transfers or military reassignments to locations without an on-site Central Michigan University presence.

Distance and Distributed Learning has over 60 instructors located throughout the United States and offers approximately 140 course titles each term. Many of the instructors are Professors from CMU’s main campus in Mt. Pleasant but a large number of them are instructors residing in Nevada, Texas, South Carolina and so on. The physical locale of faculty poses unique challenges: faculty development, support, and building a “sense of community.”
Designing Virtual Homestead: Moving Ideas Network

The Moving Ideas Network
Central Michigan University’s solution is to create a virtual homestead for the online instructors: the “Moving Ideas Network.” The network, developed by Dr. Yoonil Auh, has two major components: the Moving Ideas website and the Faculty Support Group. The Moving Ideas Network uses “Maximizing Learning” (www.cel.cmich.edu/cral/ml-faculty.pdf) as its foundation. Maximizing Learning was developed in 1999 to document CEL’s requirements for the faculty role and to communicate CEL’s expectations for its faculty. Some of the expectations listed include 1) Understanding and respecting individual differences, 2) Setting expectations and establishing purpose, 3) Maximizing and optimizing learner’s “time on task,” 4) Communicating & cooperation, and 5) Feedback.

Online Teaching Resources
The network provides links to teaching resources such as Harvard’s Active Learning, the Apple Learning Interchange, and The Chronicle: Internet Resources. The Moving Ideas Network also includes Lesson Zero courses (www.ddlcampus.cmich.edu/lessonzero/default.htm). Here free, introductory-level information on a variety of topics is available. Lesson Zero courses are short lessons that provide a lot of learning in a small amount of time. Some of the subjects that are helpful to online faculty are Online Teaching Tools, Successful Online Faculty, Online Course Development, and Online Teaching Best Practices.

Weekly Teaching Tips
Weekly Teaching Tips are generated from the information contained in the Moving Ideas Network. Each week online faculty receives an email reminding them that new teaching tips are available. New information includes Quote of the Week, Teaching Tip, Tech Tip, and a Website with new, useful information. Additionally, the Moving Ideas Network has links to discipline specific repositories such as Health & Life Sciences; Science, Math, & Technology, and Library Science.

Online Faculty Mentoring Program
The Moving Ideas Network houses the Online Faculty Mentor Program. This program was established in 2003, simultaneous with the appointment of Dick Cassle, Instructor as Central Michigan University’s Online Faculty Mentor. The Mentor Program is available to all CMU online faculty. New online faculty members receive an email introducing them to the mentor program which uses a Blackboard threaded discussion board as the primary communication tool.

Threaded Discussion Board
Each month during the school year, a new topic is introduced to the discussion board for instructors to participate. In the past, topics include, Jump Starting Your Class, Bringing Closure to Your Class, Asynchronous Communication, Synchronous Communication, Training, and Team Building. Examples of threads within these forums are The use of a “letter of introduction” to jump start your class, providing students with “chat tips” prior to the first synchronous chat session, and having students form teams to work together on homework assignments.

Faculty “Coaches”
Selected CMU online faculty members serve as “coaches” who are available to new online faculty to answer questions on using the Blackboard learning management system. Examples of “Ask The Coach” forums include Digital Dropbox, Groups, Student Homepage, and Virtual Classroom Chats. The discussion board also has a forum called “Teaching Outside The Box” where online faculty members are encouraged to share online teaching techniques they use that may be out of the ordinary or something that other online instructors may not have tried. An example here is a suggestion to have students write their email or document their discussion board thread before they fill in the subject line. Waiting to complete the subject line until after the document is complete helps generate a more meaningful subject line!
At the beginning of each month an email is sent to all online faculty members summarizing the previous months input to the faculty mentor program discussion board. This not only keeps everyone updated on a regular basis but serves as a reminder to participate in the faculty mentor discussion board.

CONCLUSION

From a pragmatic point of view, the Moving Ideas Network Website stresses the importance of providing cognitive aids and creating novelty in the learning community. At the same time, it has addressed problems the instructors may have in developing the confidence to express themselves "publicly" and to consider future direction of studying the alternative means of reflecting and evaluation. Such a website was able to provide us with the audit trail that was constructed by asynchronous discussion threads as part of the evaluation process for future professional development and support.

In conclusion, such developments of the website or “virtual homesteads” have impacted all by increasing and enhancing online participation. The benefits to facilitating and learning from such social interaction were no doubt created and puts forward the idea of a "personal public space," similar perhaps to Microsoft Blogs.

Student retention level was up 4% during the academic year 2003-2004 due to more constructive learning taking place between student and faculty and improved working relations between faculty and faculty, and faculty and administrators.