The Agora: An Open Faculty Development Program in Student Centred and Mobile Learning

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Abstract

The Agora is an open, blended faculty development experience co-developed by the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC), Canada and the University of Guadalajara (UdeG), Mexico. The program was designed to create a unique learning experience for university faculty to confidently integrate student-centred strategies and activities using mobile technologies to enhance learning outcomes. An additional goal of the program was to shift faculty to be more open with sharing their knowledge, teaching and learning practices, and reducing faculty and discipline silos. This Creative Commons (CC-BY-NC) licensed program adopts the Agora as a metaphor for an open, collaborative, community space where learning happens through interaction and engagement with others.

While the program was originally created for faculty at the University of Guadalajara, it was intended to be adapted to any institution context. Designed around a series of face to face (f2f) and online, hands-on studios, participants are required to complete and share openly a number of challenges – small, achievable tasks that centre on active learning techniques and/or mobile/multimedia creation – within the context of the studios. Throughout the program, faculty are facilitated into local communities of practice (by institution or discipline) and gain peer feedback and support through participation in triad groups. Communities of practice and triads continue to exist long after the program is completed through a variety of means including an open tool called Discourse used as a semi-open online discussion space.

More than 400 UdeG professors have completed the program and a formal research study is underway to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in transforming teaching and learning.

Keywords: Faculty development; student centred; mobile learning

1. Introduction

Faculty development is an important part of higher education, yet it is well recognized that faculty participation in workshops, short courses, and formal training programs rarely result in transformed teaching and learning practices in the classroom (c.f. Ebert-May, 2011; Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002). Many faculty development programs saturate learners with too much information in too little time, and information takes priority over hands-on doing. These programs fail to put students (in this case faculty) at the centre of their learning.

In developing countries such as Mexico, as well as more developed countries such as the United States and Canada, the lowest common denominator technology is the smartphone. Mobile learning presents great affordances to teaching and learning, yet the tendency by faculty is to view mobile technology as a distraction and to limit its use rather than to leverage their functionality in the classroom.

Recognizing these problems, and with a desire to shift faculty to be more open with sharing their knowledge, and teaching and learning practices, the University of Guadalajara sought the assistance of the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC) to create a program for faculty that leveraged mobile learning as a means towards greater student centred teaching and learning. The result was a unique learning experience for university faculty called *The Agora*, a faculty development program in student centred and mobile learning.

2. The Agora

The Agora was adopted as a metaphor for this program as it embodies the open, collaborative, spirit of the experience where participants come together to learn as a community. The hybrid pedagogical framework of the Agora - explore, create, share, showcase - via studios, challenges, and real-life application allows faculty to experience an approach to learning that invites experimentation and

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innovation. This framework can then be used by faculty in their own programs or disciplines. During the program, faculty were invited to participate in hands-on, experiential learning activities, in support of a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning. This was followed by opportunities to collaborate, plan and apply what they learned into their own classrooms and share and showcase their results with others. Throughout the program, faculty were facilitated into local communities of practice (by campus or discipline) to gain feedback and support colleagues through participation in triad groups.

As adult learners of varying levels of expertise and interests, it was understood that faculty would need an ability to choose their path and level, and be supported to complete hands-on tasks. This was achieved through the use of hands-on studios, practical examples, challenges and experiential learning, providing faculty with the tools they needed to meaningfully plan, design, implement and share student centred and mobile learning in their courses.

Although developed for UdeG faculty, an important design consideration of the Agora was to create a program that would be applicable to more than one institutional context, and would remain accessible to others once project development was complete. For that reason the program can be easily scaled up or down, and because the Agora is Creative Commons licensed, it can be translated, remixed, or adapted for non commercial purposes. Additionally, to support faculty to be more open with sharing their knowledge and teaching and learning practices, they were introduced to and experienced open pedagogy, open practice and sharing, in addition to the technical components of searching, finding, and reusing, creating Creative Commons licensed materials.

3. Program Design

The Agora is nine weeks long and takes place over a period of six months. It is designed around three phases: Studios and Challenges; Planning and Implementation; Showcasing and Sharing.

Phase One – Studios and Challenges
The first week of the program is structured around a series of facilitated, hands-on foundational (required) and optional studios (http://udg.theagoraonline.net). Similar to conference style programming, faculty choose and participate in a series of F2F studios where they are required to complete and share openly a number of challenges. Challenges are small, achievable tasks that centre on active learning techniques or mobile/multimedia creation (http://udg.theagoraonline.net/bank/). Within each studio, there are three challenges of varying difficulty that can be completed. The studio structure allows for - and requires - that faculty complete at least one challenge before leaving the studio. Studios function as messy, 'try anything' sites of failure and success, with the emphasis being on trying as opposed to only succeeding.

During phase one, faculty are introduced to the #udgagora hashtag and Twitter through a variety of hands-on activities and are encouraged to publish their challenges to Twitter throughout the week. At the end of the week, faculty are placed into triad teams to help transition them to a peer support system for the planning and implementation phase of the program.

Phase Two – Planning and Implementation
Phase Two consists of an 8 week online component where faculty are required to plan and implement 2-3 challenges with their students, and report back student feedback on the implementation as proof of completion. Faculty seek feedback from their triads, the Agora community, and program instructors throughout this phase.

In our implementations of the Agora, the online platform for phase two was mainly through a community tool called Dilo (Discourse http://dilo.theagoraonline.net), Twitter, and weekly Google Hangouts. In order to reduce the 'teaching distance' and increase engagement between program instructors and participants during the 8 weeks online, weekly Google Hangouts were held, with a gradual transition from program instructor led Hangouts in weeks 1-3, to participant led Hangouts in weeks 4-8. To facilitate accessibility, all Hangouts were recorded and shared via the Agora YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=udgagora).

Phase Three – Showcasing and Sharing
At the conclusion of phase two, faculty are required to publish a final report outlining their planning process, implementation and results in a searchable open, online manual/compendium called Comparte (http://udg.theagoraonline.net/comparte/). This provides a tangible artefact of successes and failures for UdeG faculty and the broader global community. Publishing to this open manual was a

requirement by the University of Guadalajara for official completion of the program. Faculty gather F2F for one day during phase three to showcase work, share results, and celebrate learnings. Participants also begin to plan as a community of educators how best to continue their own development and support colleagues who had not been part of the program.

4. Maintaining Engagement and Connection

This project involved more than 400 faculty and program instructors from Mexico, Canada and the United States. Social media was a large part of the program design, functioning as a 'glue' for participants and instructional teams, and as an ongoing (global) space. Twitter, Youtube, Google Hangouts, Flickr and Wordpress were the official areas where Agora participants connected. In addition there were a large number of faculty created social media spaces, for use with students and/or other Agora participants.

The #udgagora twitter hashtag remained active throughout, with evidence of faculty in previous cohorts still using the hashtag with their students one year later. The first cohort generated 124 instructor additional hashtags that they used with their students (Tag Explorer https://youtu.be/pJhg4UbEczc) and at one point during the first week of the program, the #udgagora hashtag trended in Mexico.

An important micro-engagement strategy was through the use of mini-activities published via Twitter known as the Daily Try. Daily Tries were published daily during the program, and participants were encouraged to do a Daily Try at any time throughout the program. The Daily Try part of the program site displayed a leaderboard and provided a place to navigate all Daily Tries (http://udg.theagoraonline.net/daily/). To date, there have been 1952 responses to 239 Daily Tries. All face-to-face portions of the program were documented in photographs and shared via CC BY license on the project Flickr channel (https://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/udgagora/). This proved to be an important aspect of community building and engagement.

Figure 1: The online spaces and tools used in the implementation of the Agora

5. Results

Faculty were considered to have successfully completed the program upon submission of at least one implementation report, which had to include student feedback. In the first cohort of the Agora, 282 out of 315 registrants completed the program. Eighty-four of these completers submitted more than one report.

One of the goals of the program design was to encourage collaboration and faculty communities of practice beyond the program. A post program survey administered one year after the program's

conclusion showed that 154 of 204 faculty are still collaborating with their Agora colleagues, which suggests that communities of practice continue to be maintained. Furthermore, 160 of 204 professors said they would like to be involved in teaching the program to other professors at their campus, suggesting there is ongoing interest and engagement in the program.

References

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