Developing and Implementing a Prekindergarten Associate Degree Program Online to Meet the Needs of Non-traditional Students

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The Prekindergarten Associate degree program at Miami University is a teacher preparation program for those students planning to teach children birth-5 in child care and preschool settings. This early childhood teacher education program is offered on Miami's regional campuses, where many of the students are non-traditional with numerous responsibilities outside of furthering their education. With the need for a flexible learning environment, the Prekindergarten Coordinator in collaboration with Miami Regional E-Learning Initiatives, has developed and implemented the program fully online beginning in the spring semester, 2016. As with any online teacher education program, there are numerous challenges and barriers which must be overcome. This paper is a description of the development and implementation process of a face-to-face early childhood teacher education program going fully online. Quality online instructional design and suggestions for creating an engaging online learning environment will also be addressed to support other teacher education programs considering implementing online programs to meet the needs of non-traditional students.

With the recent shift over the last decade to offer online course options to students, higher education institutions cannot roll them out fast enough (Santilli & Beck, 2005). There is a growing body of research which focuses on the need for effective online or distance education options for students (Fung, 2004; Tezer & Bicen, 2008). A decade ago, there were many courses being offered online, but today entire programs and degrees are now being completed online. One particular field that has seen rapid growth

in online degree completion is teacher education (Faulk & King, 2013). With an increased number of non-traditional students, colleges and universities will need to acclimate to improve college experiences and increase graduation rates for this unique population of students (Newbold, Mehta, Forbus, 2010; Scott & Lewis, 2012). These adaptations must be made to increase the opportunities for professional continuing education for this group of non-traditional learners. Non-traditional students are often described as being at least twenty-four years old, having a family to support, and being employed full time. Since non-traditional students are those who have not followed the traditional route into college, they tend to be older than traditional students (Evelyn, 2002). Some of the more common issues faced by this type of students are daycare needs, financial stress, and transportation issues (Lutes, 2004). Nonetheless, this group of students often exhibit more desire to succeed and have more unique circumstances compared to their traditional counterparts (Newbold, Mehta, Forbus, 2009).

There are a number of characteristics which lead to a successful and positive online learning experience for non-traditional students. One important characteristic includes the development of relationships and friendships that connect one another through engaging online activities and assignments. Something as simple as introducing themselves at the beginning of the course can give students a sense of community (Blasi & Broad, 2002). Incorporating video discussion boards, chat rooms, or interactive activities are also a helpful way for students to connect with one another throughout the course. The online course environment and opportunities for engagement are also key factors in successful online courses (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Non-traditional students typically value the

support provided by others going through similar experiences. The cohort approach to teacher education programs seems to promote caring and a genuine concern for helping others meet their goals. Walsh, Abi-Nader & Poutiatine (2005) found that cohort models also helped to create supports for non-traditional students. This, in turn, may create a higher graduation rate if students feel supported in an online learning environment. Miami University's Prekindergarten program uses an informal cohort approach, which benefits non-traditional students by providing support and opportunities for communication between students. Several features within Miami's learning management system (Canvas) such as the chat, collaboration, and video conferencing allow the students to reach out to each other in a non-threatening environment. Establishing a strong sense of community is important for all online courses and programs, but it can be especially helpful to those students in teacher education programs.

The literature clearly states that non-traditional students prefer flexible academic learning environments (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Hansman, 2009). Flexibility is one of the top priorities for many college students, especially non-traditional ones that have multiple commitments and responsibilities outside of college (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). With a variety of online learning options now being offered, students are able to work at their own pace which provides greater flexibility (DuPlessis, Walker, & Naughton, 2008). This is essential for those non-traditional students employed in child cares, schools, and education programs as many as eight to ten hours a day who are earning their degree in education. Flexibility for non-traditional students is often characterized by having the option to take courses or entire programs online due to family and work demands (Li &

Irby, 2008). Flexibility from instructors is crucial, but flexibility from the college or university is also an important aspect. This flexibility leads to higher student persistence, which may, in turn, lead to greater graduation and attrition rates (Wlodkowski, 2003).

Since having access to the latest technology and resources are an integral part of taking online courses, students must be equipped with laptops, iPads or various methods of accessing the courses. Acquiring resources such as computers and expensive technology items are often a challenge for those without the financial means to purchase their own electronic devices (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Financial stress can also be especially challenging when returning to college after years of being employed. However, non-traditional students have been found to use more adaptive coping styles when dealing with stressful situations (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011). In addition, students may not have the comfort level or knowledge to use the latest technology and feel confident about taking online courses. Creating a highly technological online learning environment does not necessarily mean that the instruction is high quality (Howland & Moore, 2002). If there are a number of technical issues throughout the course, this will decrease the quality of learning experiences. Encountering barriers such as technological course issues may also further student's frustration levels.

Opportunities for Continuing Education at Miami University Regional Campuses

Miami University is nationally recognized as one of the most outstanding undergraduate public institutions in the United States. In

addition to the main campus in Oxford, Miami has several regional campuses located in close proximity to the main campus including Middletown, Hamilton, and West Chester, Ohio. Students who successfully complete Miami University's Prekindergarten Associate of Applied Science degree are eligible to apply for allows their Ohio Department of Education Prekindergarten teaching license (ages 3-5). This is a popular degree for those working in the child care or preschool field returning to college for their associate degree. Many of these individuals are non-traditional and work full time to subsidize their family income, so leaving a job to return to school is not an option for the majority of these students.

The purpose of this article is to describe the process the authors have gone through to develop and implement the Prekindergarten program online for the purposes of meeting the needs of the current non-traditional student population on the regional campuses. The authors of this article are the Prekindergarten Coordinator and the E-Learning instructional designer at Miami University regional campuses who coordinated and worked to develop the program fully online. This endeavor took place in a fairly brief time span during the 2015-2016 academic years. The following is a description of the online development process along with suggestions for creating high quality online programs which emphasize engagement and creative online assignments and activities.

Miami University's Online Course Development Process

Effective development and delivery of online course material is a challenging undertaking. All of the courses in Miami's Prekindergarten Associate degree program are offered fully online, including the required

non-major courses such as English, mathematics, and humanities/fine arts. Online courses for the Prekindergarten program at Miami University regional campuses were developed to be asynchronous, in which there is no set time required to meet. This allows students to work on the course(s) at any time of day which helps students to set his/her own flexible schedule around work and family commitments. Although there are no scheduled "class" times, due dates and deadlines do exist within the courses. The students can work through assignments, readings and activities at their own pace within these predetermined dates. This flexibility helps students with time management as well as keeping the course sequenced in a logical order.

There is a total of 418 field hours included in Miami's Prekindergarten program. After enrolling in the program, students observe a variety of child care and preschool settings for a total of 48 hours in two different introduction courses. Students complete a practicum which totals 50 hours in two of their Block 1 courses which are typically located in a preschool classroom. There are also two student teaching courses (infant & toddler placement and preschool placement) that are each 160 hours in a preschool or child care program. Since the program has transitioned to a fully online program, students are completing these hours in a variety of settings. For example, for the observation hours students are able to identify local programs in their community and receive approval from the instructor to observe. Videotaping is also a valuable resource used for supervision of student teachers who may not be local.

The process of online course development is intensive and time consuming. It is not simply replicating the face-to-face course into an online

course through a learning management system (LMS). Miami University's current LMS is Canvas by Instructure. Canvas offers a flexible learning environment which allows students to interact with it on their terms. Atomic Learning is an online training series integrated into Canvas to help students navigate the Canvas LMS interface. Tutorials on how to submit assignments, quizzes, and check grades, along with how to communicate with instructors and other students are available. Some of the benefits of online education cited by Miami University's Regional E-Learning Initiatives Department are: (a) online student completion rate meets or exceeds our face-to-face courses; (b) small class sizes with a 1:25 ratio for individualized assistance and feedback, and (c) nationally recognized university with academic, rigorous, and accredited programs.

Four Step Process. Online course development is a multi-step process, involving a content expert which is the faculty instructor, and an instructional designer from Miami Regional E-Learning Initiatives. As a part of the development process the first step is for all faculty instructors teaching online courses to participate in an online course orientation that exposes him/her to the LMS while learning the fundamentals of being an online instructor. This also allows the faculty to experience online learning first-hand. The faculty instructor navigates through the LMS as a student before participating in the design and implementation of an online course. S/he turns in assignments, participates in discussion boards and goes through content in various formats.

The second step of course development is the planning stage. This involves the faculty instructor and instructional designer working collaboratively to complete the E-learning course development grid. The

grid can be compared to a blueprint of a building. This document serves as an outline of what the course will entail as well as the resources that will be utilized within the course. The following components are included in the course grid, (a) course description, (b) course objectives, (c) topics within the course, (d) proposed modules, (e) module student outcomes, (f) topics, (g) instructional content, (h) learning interactions, and (i) evaluations. The course development grids consist of a number of sections. The first several pages include a course description, the course objectives, topics within the course and proposed modules. The modules serve as the units of study within the course. The course development grids then break down each module into module student outcomes, instructional content, learning interactions, and evaluations. In order for the course to have clear expectations for the students, the course objectives and module student learning outcomes must be aligned with the activities and assessments. In other words, the content and activities paired with authentic assessment will lead to the students mastering the stated objectives and learning outcomes.

Once the course development grid is completed and approved, the third step of development is the actual production of the site within the LMS. With a well thought out course development grid and embedded links to resources, this process involves simply inputting resources, discussion boards, and assignments into the LMS. It is important to recognize that the instructor provides the content for these interactions while the instructional designer transforms this content into interactions. Throughout this process the instructional designer and faculty instructor communicate regularly to clarify any questions that may arise.

The final phase and fourth step of course development is to undergo a peer review process. During the peer review process, the design of the course is examined by a variety of qualified instructional designers who are also instructors or department faculty. Feedback and suggestions are given to improve the quality and rigor of the course. Miami University subscribes to Quality Matters (QM), which is a national benchmark for online course design. This non-profit organization is dedicated to quality assurance for online education and provides QM Rubrics to evaluate the design of online courses.

Creating Engaging Assignments and Activities

The online course development process must focus intently on embedding interaction and engagement opportunities rather than solely content and knowledge acquisition (Jonassen, 2007). The role of the instructional designer is to work with the faculty instructor to identify current practices, and then develop innovative and interactive strategies to achieve the course objectives and student learning outcomes in an online format. It is the role of the instructional designer to inform the faculty instructor of tools available online that can be integrated into the course such as Voice Thread, Pinterest, DocHub, PowToon and Twitter. In a typical face-to-face class the instructor may introduce new content by giving the students a list of terms and definitions that will be completed during class lecture and discussion. When developing an online course, these terms and definitions can easily be transformed into interactive activities with software such as Articulate Storyline 2.

In each of the courses within the Prekindergarten program, the first module focuses on building a learning community as well as familiarizing the students with the course requirements. One example of a community building activity is a scavenger hunt, in which the students have a document with a list of qualities, values or characteristics. The students have to find someone in their course that possesses one of those characteristics and put that person's name next to that characteristic. For example, a characteristic might be, "Find someone that has provided child care in his/her own home." The students would then chat or email with each other to find a classmate who has provided child care in his/her own home. That person's name would then be placed on the document next to that characteristic. By the time the assignment is complete the students have interacted with each other multiple times. Collaborative learning communities are a critical aspect of both face-to-face and online courses.

The human element can sometimes be lost or masked with online instruction. Ensuring that students and faculty make connections and engage with one another should be a crucial aspect of all courses, whether they are offered face-to-face or online. Pacusky-Brock (2016) cites a number of principles and characteristics that should be included within online learning. The first is presence. It is helpful to include PowerPoints, video clips, and activities which are personalized to the instructor teaching the course. The Prekindergarten program includes online conferences and discussion boards throughout the courses to ensure questions are being addressed in a timely fashion. Awareness is also an important aspect of online instruction. Being aware of potential needs or issues in an online course helps to make intervention and support a higher priority. This may

be accomplished with an introduction video of each student at the beginning of the course. The Prekindergarten courses encourage students to introduce themselves and share any information that might be helpful for the instructor to know about before the semester begins.

Group assignments can be especially challenging to develop and complete in an online course, but cooperative group assignments can encourage students to work together interactively (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). Group or individual conferences using WebEx or other virtual programs held periodically throughout the semester can also allow students and the instructor to put names with faces. WebEx conferences are also held periodically throughout the semester to check in with students or to address questions about the course. For group assignments, many of the Prekindergarten courses successfully use Google Docs so that students can work together creating and editing their project as a group.

Creating engaging assignments and activities involves a high degree of collaboration between the instructional designer and the faculty instructor. During this process a number of questions are continually asked. For example, what activities can be done to insure that students will achieve the objectives and student learning outcomes for the module? Keeping the course objectives and activities aligned is a critical piece of development. An activity may be extremely engaging to the learner, but if it is not focused on the course objectives it is irrelevant. Another example might be, are the students going to be engaged throughout the module? Today's learners are accustomed to fast moving media which changes quickly. This must be considered when asking learners to watch videos or presentations. They must be short and engaging. Lastly, is the content accessible to all learners?

Miami University is committed to making sure all learners can access the content for online courses. This means that all videos need to have closed captions and text must be screen reader friendly. Pictures embedded into documents or presentations must contain alternate text describing the picture. When brainstorming possible strategies for introducing engaging content, the question of accessibility is an extremely important one.

Conclusion

With the increase in enrollment for Miami's Prekindergarten program after piloting one semester of being fully online, the future of the program looks bright. However, developing and implementing the program in an online format is just the beginning. It is crucial to ensure the quality and rigor of the online courses continue to be evaluated, especially with the constant changes in the field of early childhood education. To assist students to be successful in their online courses, the Miami Regional E-Learning Initiatives offers resources, workshops and trainings to guide students (and faculty) through the process of becoming a proficient online learner. which can be easily accessed through links within the "Getting Started" module of each course. Assignments that require additional technology skills (i.e. inserting video responses within a discussion board) contain video tutorials with specific directions. Tips and suggestions for the faculty and students such as grade submission or directions for completing exams online are sent to users several weeks before the term is finished. In addition, Miami offers a variety of technology resources for students to use or borrow through the library such as laptops, iPads, Makerspace, and a variety of technology resources.

With the rapid growth of online program and course options, students now have more choices to consider when deciding on institutions of higher education. Research has consistently shown that better educated early childhood professionals working with young children provide a higher level and quality of education and care (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002; Sachs, 2000). Therefore, the positive outcomes of having better educated early childhood teachers is a strong argument to give non-traditional students options in how they acquire their education. With the number of non-traditional students rising, colleges and universities must meet these challenges by providing quality learning experiences for a diverse population of students.

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