D2L™

Teaching the Teacher

Valdosta State University Turns to Brightspace to Implement a Unique Competency-based Education Experience for Georgia's K-5 Elementary Teachers

Overview

In November 2009, President Obama launched the Educate to Innovate initiative to move American students from the middle to the top of the pack in science and math achievement over the next decade.[1] Recognizing that great teaching is part of any child's success, President Obama also issued a challenge to the nation to recruit and prepare more than 100,000 new teachers over the next decade.

Rising to this challenge, Valdosta State University (VSU) has turned to an innovative Competency-based Education (CBE) initiative delivered online via the Brightspace platform to raise the technical skill levels of elementary teachers currently working in the State of Georgia.

AT A GLANCE

Client	Valdosta State University
Students	11,000 full-time total, 10 students participating in CBE pilot program
Faculty	VSU total: 467; Pilot teaching: one; Pilot development: eight
Level	Post-Secondary
Solution	Brightspace Online Learning Solution

CHALLENGE

- Enable a pilot group of K-5 teachers to achieve their science endorsement using a new competency-based education model.

SOLUTION

- Brightspace Online Learning solution, adapted for Competency-based education.

RESULT[1]

- Successful completion of 10 teachers in the VSU Science Endorsement pilot program.
- Advancement in VSU's understanding of how to best design and implement a CBE program.

[1]https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/k-12/educate-innovate

Challenge

"Like many educational institutions these days, we are actively exploring alternative ways of doing business, and we were intrigued by the competency-based education model and its success at the University of Wisconsin," says Dr. Anthony Scheffler, Interim Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, and professor in the James L. and Dorothy H. Dewar College of Education and Human Services, VSU.

While VSU staff explored possibilities surrounding CBE, Scheffler and the school's Dean were approached by the Valdosta City School System to partner in the delivery of a science endorsement program, allowing K-5 elementary teachers to strengthen and enhance their competency levels for teaching elementary science. The School System was dissatisfied with the existing endorsement programs offered by the state, and were seeking a better option.

"As those discussions evolved, we saw this particular endorsement program as a great fit for us to pilot using a CBE model," says Scheffler. "Each endorsement has three courses so they are small. The curriculum could be completed in a short timeframe, and we had a school system ready to sign on and provide ongoing feedback. We saw it as a win-win for VSU and the schools."

To fund the initiative, VSU's Dewar College of Education and Human Services was selected by the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning to receive a national JumpStart grant to assist with the implementation of the CBE program.

VSU has been a D2L Brightspace user for several years. It was first introduced to the learning management system through a state systems-wide learning initiative. Brightspace is used university-wide, and all classrooms are provided with access to the LMS for face-to-face, blended, and strictly online learning. For the CBE pilot, VSU staff arranged for a separate instance of the platform allowing them to try and test out new features unique to CBE.

"We were looking for a lot of flexibility. We knew CBE would be different from the average online course. We needed a platform that could be shaped in a way to achieve the model we were trying to build. Based on our knowledge of the Brightspace platform, we knew it could be molded to the goals and objectives of the program," says Vincent King-Spezzo, Senior Online Instructional Designer, Centre for eLearning, VSU.

In CBE, content personalization is key. "Our students are working professionals, so they have to be able to accomplish a course where time is not a limiting factor. Brightspace allows our science endorsement students to progress in highly personalized ways, while still capturing the metrics we need to demonstrate the student has fully accomplished the course and achieved mastery," says King-Spezzo.

Solution

Aimed at working teachers, VSU's science endorsement is all about demonstrated learning. Following the CBE model, teachers use a variety of projects, activities, and lab experiments within the classroom to demonstrate their mastery of the subject matter. They are also asked to videotape lessons, draw diagrams or illustrations, and take before and after pictures. Working with the teachers is a team of three VSU staff: a success coach; an instructor responsible for learning outcomes, guidance and content understanding; and an assessor, whose sole role is to go through the assessment and grade the student. In VSU's CBE model, the mastery of subject matter can take two forms: Mastery Level III, which corresponds to an 80 percent or higher on a traditional transcript; and Mastery Level IV, which indicates a higher level of student mastery and translates to a 90 percent or above on a traditional transcript.

To support the instructional team, King-Spezzo and his VSU colleagues utilized Brightspace to capture critical analytics on student interactions. This includes the number of times logged into the system, the number of active discussions, content modules accessed by date, assessments in the Dropbox, and so on. VSU also used Brightspace Intelligent agents to streamline communications between the instructor and the student.

"These agents allowed us to automate certain routine aspects of communication, such as notifications, so instructors could focus on higher value, higher level communication with their students," notes Spezzo-King.

Kathy Sundin, online communications coordinator for VSU's Center for eLearning also stepped in to create a custom web front end. As a result, when a student enters the CBE course, they view a streamlined, simplified interface solely focused on CBE.

"We wanted to put all the technology in the background so the students could just focus on learning," says Sundin.

Finally, VSU worked with D2L to overlay the CBE program's Mastery III and IV grade scheme over the traditional number grade found in the Brightspace system; color coding and simplifying the new CBE grading format so students could view their progress at a glance. When students submit work via Dropbox, the assessor uses the Brightspace rubric to assign a level of mastery on every single criterion. This rubric provides students with an acknowledgement, and feedback on their progress.

Result

Given than the CBE learning model is new to both VSU staff and students, the science endorsement program was kept deliberately small. Only 10 teachers, recommended by participating school systems, were admitted into the first phase of the pilot.

"In reflection it was smart to start small. We didn't want to get into issues that would not necessarily advance our understanding of CBE," says Dr. Scheffler. "We were able to keep the pilot highly interactive, with teachers coming in to see us monthly to provide feedback."

Scheffler admits there's been a learning curve throughout this CBE pilot.

"There's a lot we have learned on the operational and functional sides, in terms of curriculum design, and we continue to learn about accessibility. We said this was what we wanted with this first program, to go with a form of backward design, start with the competency and then have it flow through to the mastery. We've also found we had to trim out a lot of the activities in order to work efficiently and strategically through the design model. Through this we have learned less is more."

Through the VSU CBE pilot, elementary teachers in the State of Georgia are able to perform a study that is in depth, discipline-centric and authentic, and yet provides them with the flexibility to fit their schooling around work and life obligations. It's also driving teachers to use the very same technologies school systems are now putting into K-5 students' hands.

"Today, we expect teachers to use Google in the classroom and set up students for personalized learning. By using Brightspace to learn in a technologically friendly way, our hope is they'll ultimately teach this way as well," says Scheffler.

About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes the learning experience better. The company's cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is not a common one-size-fits-all learning management system (LMS). It's easier to use, more flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, you can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is also a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that you can take action in real time to keep them on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K–12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. | www.D2L.com

CONTACT US

Phone: 1-519-772-0325 (Worldwide)
Toll Free: 1-888-772-0325 (North America)
0-808-234-4235 (United Kingdom and Europe)
0-800-452-069 (New Zealand)
1-800-656-210 (Australia)
0-800-891-4507 (Brazil)
Fax: 1-519-772-0324
Email: info@D2L.com
Twitter: @D2L
Web: www.D2L.com