Diversity in Online Teaching: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Gender and Sexuality Programs are interdisciplinary in curricula, providing students with courses from a range of disciplines, but the courses within these programs are rarely truly interdisciplinary. Even if readings, course content and pedagogical approaches provide an interdisciplinary lens, it rarely is possible to have an interdisciplinary faculty interpret and teach this content.

At Kent State University, two interdisciplinary, diversity-based academic programs, LGBTQ and Women’s Studies, are updating their overall curricula and prioritizing online education as a means of reaching regional campus students, providing access to particular populations (such as non-traditional students, students with disabilities and returning veterans), and in doing so are achieving an overall goal of creating classes that are truly interdisciplinary because they are collaboratively created. A distinct advantage to online course development is an ability to have an interdisciplinary cohort of faculty develop modules in their individual areas of expertise.

The Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University has noted that there are three models for team or collaborative teaching, and articulated the strengths and weaknesses for each of the approaches on their website (https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teamcollaborative-teaching/) The three models are traditional team teaching, the linked course approach and connected courses. Advantages to these models include deep student learning, increased student retention, student understanding of different disciplinary connections. Primary challenges to these models include the team members not being well-organized, proper credit/compensation for faculty, aligning student schedules, and finding space for class meetings.

The model we have created for developing the Gender and Sexuality online courses at Kent State University overcomes all of these challenges by utilizing an innovative structure: rather than having multiple developers with equal responsibility for content creation, we have one faculty member responsible for overall course cohesion and then we have invited anywhere from three to seven faculty experts to develop module content. Under this model, faculty are fairly compensated for their work, course cohesion is strong, assignments are balanced, and students learn from an interdisciplinary cohort of faculty.
Online Development Model for LGBTQ and Women’s Studies

- Program director and primary faculty member determine which disciplines faculty should come from based on the basic data sheets for courses.
- Faculty are chosen from current faculty affiliates in LGBTQ and Women’s Studies, thus providing a range of faculty experts with a unique opportunity. In addition, affiliated faculty have expanded as we have reached out to departments to locate faculty experts.
- Faculty experts are responsible for developing individual modules ranging from 1-3 weeks in length. Faculty experts:
  - assign readings
  - create audio lectures, PowerPoint slides, videos or whatever preferred content-delivery method they deem most appropriate for their module
  - create discussion question options
  - recommend assignment ideas for the course
  - provide additional readings for students interested in this disciplinary approach to understanding gender and sexuality
  - provide pertinent teaching notes to help guide the course faculty member
  - have a willingness to connect with the course faculty member if they have questions about how to best teach the module they developed.
- A single instructional designer is working with these classes and among other responsibilities works to quickly educate and support faculty who range from having no experience in online teaching to proficiency in online teaching.
- The program director oversees development and provides transitional content and materials to ensure that students will have a cohesive and immersive experience regardless of the number of faculty experts.
- The program director and instructional designer review assignment recommendations and develop overall course assignments that integrate the modules, support active learning and offer a cohesive workload consistent with the course level.
- Challenges so far have been organizing faculty, keeping on schedule, and encouraging faculty with no experience (and sometimes no desire) to teach online to get involved.
  - We started this in Fall 2015 and are on track to have two classes completed and taught in Spring 2016.
  - We realized that we need greater lead-time than with other models, so will extend the timeline for classes we develop in Spring.
  - In dividing the development money, we have left a portion for compensated revisions to occur after the first time the classes are taught, in anticipation of needs to refine cohesion.