MDDE 610 Assignment 4: A Proposal for Digital Tools that may Enhance MDDE 665

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MDDE 610 – Professor Dr. T. Craig Montgomerie

April 14th, 2013

Dr. Marti Cleveland-Innes,
Department Chair,
Centre for Distance Education
Athabasca University

RE: Enhancing MDDE 665: Collaboration and Mentorship in Educational Environments

Dear Dr. Cleveland-Innes,

Drs. Moisey, Perry and I are excited to propose a number of enhancements to the CDE's recently piloted course MDDE 665: Collaboration and Mentorship in Educational Environments. Athabasca University has been a leading voice in the development of open online learning and it is the birthplace of the foundational theory of modern distance learning. The proposal before you is one to refine the opportunity for all online teachers and learners to work together and constructively coach each other in the best practices for online learning.

During the pilot of the course this year, Athabasca University and Alberta Education have developed MDDE 665 to be a powerful primer on collaboration and mentorship in online education. The course, offered to 100 certificated Alberta teachers, is simultaneously an exploration and enactment of best practices in fostering a collaborative and provocative learning environment in an online space.

The pilot terms demonstrate that the course is an effective way for Athabasca University to lead the conversation about best practices in online educational environments. Based on feedback from course participants, the design team believes that MDDE 665 can be refined to suit audiences beyond professional teachers through the application of a small number of enhancements.

The design team appreciates your time in consideration of this proposal. We are available to respond to any questions or comments that you may have.

Sincerely,

Scott Meunier

Instructional Designer,

Centre for Distance Education

Athabasca University

Background

MDDE 665 is a course about building strong and supportive professional relationships with people who are at a distance from oneself. It has been designed and piloted by Athabasca University with the support of Alberta Education as a site for the development of collaborative and mentoring skills amongst certificated Alberta teachers. Dr. Susan Moisey, lead instructional designer on this course, indicates that the majority of the course's instructional goals revolve around discussing and practicing working with and leading people in online environments (personal communication, February 7, 2013). Dr. Moisey also indicates that the most important feature of this course is that the participants are allowed to interact often and to actually practice the skills that were being discussed in the academic material (personal communication, February 7, 2013).

Problem

There are two major opportunities for further development. The primary issue is that future instances of the class will be offered to groups other than certificated Alberta teachers so the course designers must consider more variability in the participant base (S. Moisey, personal communication, February 7, 2013). Specifically, there are likely to be many students in later instances of the class to hail from the post-secondary, health care, or military fields and there will need to be additional content and enrichment opportunities that respond to and reflect the wider variety of student experiences.

The other issue is related to how online learning tools are introduced to learners. Dr. Moisey would like to see future student sets more systematically introduced to tools for online collaboration in order to complete the class (personal communication, February 7, 2013). While there certainly were chances for students and staff to share "cool tools" within the course structure, the feedback received by the design team suggests that a more structured approach

to tool set development is likely to benefit the learning experience. Students in both pilot semesters generally gravitated towards synchronous or seemingly synchronous learning opportunities like the web-conferences or pre-recorded video podcasts from instructors (personal communication, February 7, 2013).

It is important to note that some modifications to MDDE 665 took place during the intersession between pilot semesters. It was determined that while the content offered in the course is aligned with the originally intended scope, changes were needed in the area of the course presentation and organization inside the learning management system (S. Moisey, personal communication, February 7, 2013). As a result, no changes to the course content or hosting platform are proposed and what follows are suggestions to improve the learning experience for a wider participant base and to increase synchronicity.

Proposed Modifications and Rationale

There are three enhancing modifications that the design team recommends to address the course needs. Initially, the inclusion of a course-long project for students to curate and share an online portfolio related to their exploration of course issues. Secondly, adding the opportunity for weekly synchronous group web-conferences for content discussion and tool introduction. Finally, the design team proposes the inclusion of a class-wide point-based incentive system for those who demonstrate skills in collaboration or mentoring. Together, these modifications would be connected to the course's existing student assessment structure and may allow students to move into authentic positions of collaboration and mentorship.

Portfolio development is a simultaneously personal and social act. While it is the author of the portfolio alone who curates the document(s) and offers demonstrates of competencies, a reader or an audience is assumed by the author in preparation. As such, a portfolio is a wonderful place for people to connect around the ideas and demonstrations presented. It allows space for each student to address course content in his or her own way and within the

context of his or her own experiences. Beyond that, these spaces can be shared with other students and can function as the seeds for the growth of an extensive professional learning network. In the context of MDDE 665, students would be asked to initiate a web-accessible portfolio in the first week of class and would be encouraged to post reflective responses to course materials and learning activities. While students would certainly be encouraged to share and discuss portfolio entries throughout the 13-week duration of the course, a nominal asynchronous "presentation" of the portfolio would be employed for assessment purposes in the final week of the course (establishing a new assessment category) and would serve as a wrap-up activity. The rationale, then, for use of a portfolio is that it would allow for the widening of the purview of the course without having to completely re-work the basic content already established for MDDE 665.

Synchronous weekly web conferences are opportunities to connect and to mentor. With the application of this scheduled meeting, there would be a weekly course-related theme to be addressed in the meeting. However, the engaging "hook" for these meetings is that there is no explicit requirement for the instructors to lead the discussions. In fact, with Athabasca University's site license of the Adobe Connect conferencing platform, any logged-in user can be made into the host for the session, allowing students to take the floor and lead. Participation in and leading of these sessions would be assessed within the existing Participation assessment category.

Adding an optional point-based economy to the course is one part incentive scheme and one part enrichment opportunity. To create traction for the often intimidating prospect of assuming the roles of mentor and content producer (as opposed to the "empty vessel" and consumer-like roles that many students assume in classes), this simple economic structure would provide students with a reason to consider taking the floor. Quite simply, every student would be informed at the outset of the class that they can earn up to 5 experience points (XP) over the course of the semester for taking on tasks that fundamentally exemplify collaborative or

mentoring practice in an online learning environment. Things like leading a weekly web

conference on a certain topic, sharing a portfolio post in the class forums, or connecting the

class with a useful resource might all garner students XP (see Figure 1). Should a student

choose to pursue five of the given tasks (or negotiate an unlisted task with the instructor), these

five points would be applied directly to the student's overall mark, offering a potential enrichment

of 5% (an amount that, at times, is the difference between an A or an A+ on a transcript). When

considered against the reality of professional experience, taking the risk of leadership is often

formally rewarded by either professional associations or learning institutions in the form of

stipends or special recognition. When viewed this way, offering students an extrinsic motivator

for taking leadership roles is in line with reality and may serve to inspire the level of interaction

sought by the design team.

Figure 1 – Example Enrichment Project List for MDDE 665 Students
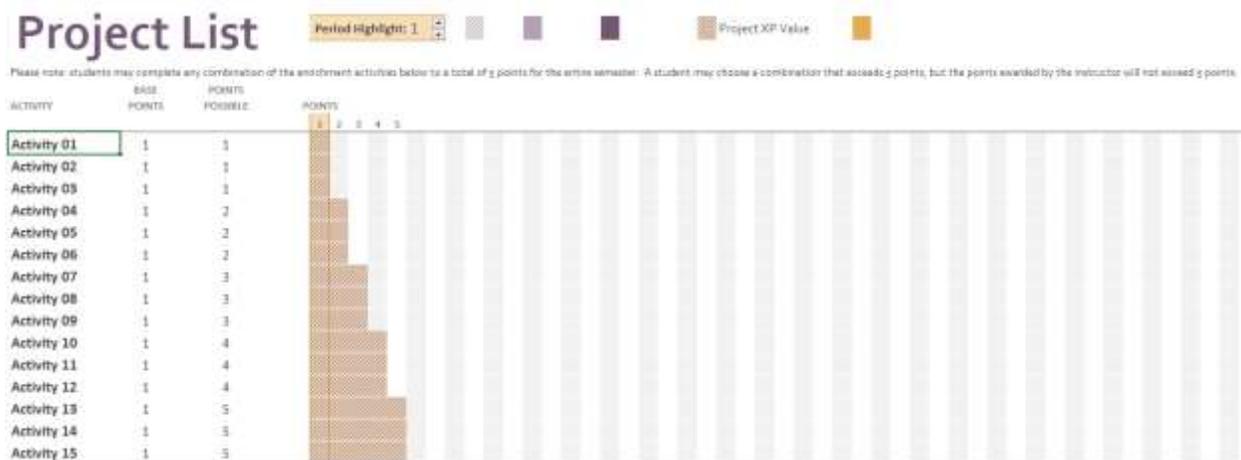
Design and Implementation Schedule

Conditional to the acceptance of this proposal, design and implementation of these recommendations could begin immediately and be in place for the fall semester of 2013 (see Figure 2). The recommended modifications have been chosen specifically because they employ technology that either Athabasca University has already invested in or that alternative solutions may be available at no cost to users on the web. As Athabasca University students, class participants would automatically have access to a stable portfolio application in the Mahara-based content management system. Similarly, the university has a site license for all students to use the Adobe Connect web conferencing platform and some applications of this are already being used in MDDE 665. Save for students who choose to explore other software solutions for the assigned learning activities, the university officially and amply supports portfolio development and web conferences as learning tools. This allows for relatively simple and rapid integration with the existing course structure. In actuality, most of the work related to the proposed modifications is related to the design of the required learning tasks and the optional, point-driven enrichment tasks rather than in determining stable technological solutions.

Figure 2 – Proposed Timeline for Implementation
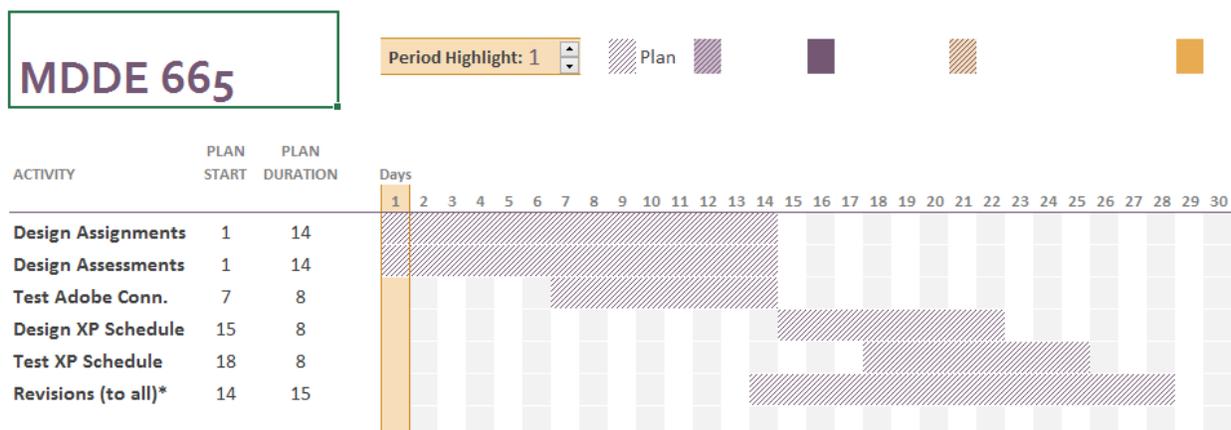
*Please note: Since course design is an iterative process, it is reasonable to allow significant time for testing and revision throughout the design and development period.

Evaluation Plan

The pilot sessions of MDDE 665 were evaluated in two ways. First, students were asked to complete digital and anonymous course evaluations. These questionnaires covered course design, implementation, teaching strategies, and assessment strategies. Second, completed students were invited to participate in focus group interviews with Athabasca-employed researchers working as facilitators. The results of these gave ample direction to the design team with regards to what aspects of the course needed to be adjusted for future instances of the course. The design team anticipates that any course built on the basis of the proposed modifications would be evaluated in this manner as well.

Projected Expenses

The majority of costs for this project are associated with personnel. As detailed in Figure 3 below, instructional design time is the greatest personnel expenditure projected. Since the technological solutions related to this project are already well supported by Athabasca University's IT department, very little IT time is anticipated as being necessary (though, when dealing with online learning, one would be remiss not to budget for it). The final personnel requirement is for a research assistant to aid in the evaluation of the course. There is the additional expectation that, since the University bears the cost of maintaining a site license for Adobe Connect, use of this system for testing and learning management should be budgeted for as well.

Figure 3 – Projected Expenses

MDDE 665 Redesign and Development: Projected Expenditures

EXPENSE BUDGET

MDDE 665 Proposed Redesign and Development

Based on a 20-day, 4/hr daily work cycle for ISD

Personnel (CDE Costs)	Budget
Instructional Designer (@90$/hr)	$ 7,200.00
IT Support (@ 90$/hr)	$ 3,600.00
Research Assistant (@ 24$/hr)	$ 1,920.00

Operating	Budget
Software Licenses (AU Cost)*	$ 250.00
Total Expenses	$ 12,970.00

* Value estimated as being 1/10th of the annual cost for an institutional site license for Adobe Connect