

Learning and Technology Faculty Focus Group, Fall 2004

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STOUT
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LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY FACULTY FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Executive Summary

The following report highlights the results from the Learning and Technology Faculty Focus Group conducted on September 1, 2004. A total of 21 instructors attended the focus group and shared their opinions about learning and the use of technology. The focus group questions were intended to be a follow-up to a student learning survey conducted in spring 2004.

The authors believe the data support the following general conclusions:

Overall, instructors expressed a mix of positive and negative comments with regard to the laptop program

Positive themes that were repeated across questions were “instant access” and the changing roles of instructors, students and support staff. Negative themes were increased workload, and concerns about the need to focus on enhancing student learning through a combination of technology and face-to-face interaction.

The laptops are saving students and faculty time by allowing for communication outside of class, providing instant access, and by reducing the need for paper copies

The laptops save time because they allow for the ability to ask and respond to questions at any time. They also allow instant access to student grades, key served software, discussion boards, and reference documents.

The laptops are having a negative impact on instructor workloads

Since the implementation of the e-Scholar program, instructors must spend more time preparing for class and more time answering emails. They are also concerned because the students have greater expectations of them.

The laptops facilitate group correspondence

The technology allows for better correspondence between students working in groups, particularly when they are geographically separated.

The laptops are increasing critical thinking by changing the role of teachers and by providing instant access

The laptops are changing the role of the teachers, in that the teachers are assuming a role as facilitator. Critical thinking is also enhanced because the laptops provide instant access to the web, which enables them to challenge their thinking and look up facts.

In order to increase the use of the laptop for online interactions, more training is needed and student perceptions must be changed

The instructors feel that the students need more training, and that the comfort level with the technology could be a barrier. Additionally, they reported that students feel that discussion is a waste of time.

Instructors are concerned about computer use during class

Instructors feel pressured by the students, parents and administrators to use the computer during class. They are also concerned that the laptops cannot be used effectively during class for some classes.

LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY FACULTY FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Full Report

The following report highlights the results from the Learning and Technology Faculty focus group conducted on September 1, 2004. A total of 21 instructors attended the focus group and shared their opinions about learning and the use of technology. The focus group questions were intended to be a follow-up to a student learning survey conducted in spring 2004. The focus group questions addressed the strengths and weaknesses from this student survey.

LAPTOP ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

The laptop assessment plan includes both process monitoring instruments and outcome monitoring instruments. The Learning and Technology Faculty Focus Group is one of the outcome monitoring instruments and it is conducted annually. Other outcome monitoring measures include: an analysis of pass rates and withdrawals in courses, student focus groups on teaching and learning, and a student learning survey.

These outcome monitoring instruments are conducted in order to provide information on the impact of the e-Scholar program on teaching and student learning. Results are used to determine the long-term outcome of the e-Scholar program.

METHOD

A random sample of 70 faculty and instructional academic staff who were teaching at UW-Stout in fall 2004 were selected for participation in a focus group, with 20 from the College of Arts and Sciences, 20 from the College of Human Development, 20 from the College of Technology, Engineering and Management, and 10 from the School of Education. These instructors received an email from the Teaching and Learning Center inviting them to participate in the focus group. E-mail follow-ups were sent to the non-respondents.

The focus group was about learning and the use of technology in the classroom. Participants were first presented with results from a student learning survey conducted in spring 2004, and then split up into four smaller groups to conduct the focus groups. Specific focus group questions are attached in Appendix A.

A total of 21 instructors attended the focus group, with 5 from the College of Arts and Sciences, 6 from the College of Human Development, 8 from the College of Technology, Engineering and Management, and 2 from the School of Education.

RESULTS

Below is a summary of the main points made during the focus group on most of the individual focus group questions. A few of the questions that were asked at the focus group had little discussion and are thus excluded from the summary.

Overall, instructors expressed a mix of positive and negative comments with regard to the laptop program. Positive themes that were repeated across several focus group questions

include “instant access” and the changing roles of instructors, students and support staff. Overall negative themes that surfaced were the workload associated with learning new technology and preparing for courses, as well as concerns about the need to continue to focus on enhancing student learning through a combination of technology and face-to-face interaction.

Ways in which the computer saves time

- *Clerical*: Make fewer hard copies, has changed the duties of the clerical staff
- *Communication outside of class*: Can ask questions at any time (not just in class), instructors can respond at any time
- *Instant access*: students can access their grades at any time, access to specific software, discussion board-instant turnover, able to make reference/resource documents available online, key served software

Several instructors also mentioned that the computer does not save them time. They reported that they now spend a lot more time preparing for class and answering emails. They also reported that the students have greater expectations for faster turnaround.

Ways in which the computer is used for group work

- *Out of class group work assignments*
- *Technology facilitates group correspondence*: group discussion boards, group projects on web, ability to correspond through the web when group members are geographically separated

Ways in which the computer is used to increase critical thinking

- *Changing role of teachers*: teachers as facilitators, students help solve technical problems
- *Instant access*: immediate wireless access to challenge thinking, able to “throw out a statistic” and have them check it out
- *Specific examples*: keyword searches from chapter headings, computer functions to help in analysis of data, listen to broadcasts in other languages

Some instructors expressed concern that there are times when laptops are not needed, especially for certain disciplines, and that different learning styles are not as responsive to “laptop learning.” Additionally, concern was expressed that face-to-face interaction is important and that the laptop isolates people.

Use of laptop for online interactions- what is needed?

- *More training*: students need more training, best practices training, comfort level
- *Student perceptions*: students feel that discussion is a waste of time
- Learning expectations differ on/off campus
- Computer can’t replace some “time-tested” methods for learning

Use of computer during class

Some instructors expressed concern that the laptop cannot be used effectively during class for some courses. Some instructors felt pressured by the students, parents and administrators to use the laptops during class time. They suggested that we work to change student expectations.

Appendix A. Focus Group Questions

Thank you for participating in this focus group.

Participation in this focus group is voluntary, and the purpose of the focus group is to identify “best practices” for the Teaching and Learning Center as well as to identify programming and outreach activities.

Warm up questions

- What classes did you teach in spring 2004?
- Describe one way in which you used technology for one of your classes in spring 2004

Now we would like to focus specifically on some of the areas in the student survey that were identified as strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Strengths

- Students reported high ratings on the question “Having my own computer saves me time.” Do you have any examples of instructional techniques or strategies that you used that helped the students save time?
- Students also reported high ratings on the question “How much do you use your computer outside the classroom for course work?” Do you have any examples of out-of-class assignments or projects where students may have used their laptop?
- Students also reported high ratings on the question “Having my own computer makes it easier to work in groups.” Do you have any examples of ways in which you have done group work which included the use of laptops?
- Students also reported high ratings on the question “Using technology tools increases my critical thinking.” Do you have any examples of instructional techniques or strategies that you used which may have increased critical thinking?

Opportunities for improvement

- Students reported low rating on the question “How much do you use your computer in classes during class time?” What assistance can we provide to you that might change students’ perceptions on this question?
- Students also reported lower ratings on questions dealing with online interactions, including the degree of student interaction online, comfort level with online discussions, meaningfulness of online interactions, and ability to gain a wider perspective through online discussions. What assistance can we provide to you that might change students’ perceptions on these questions?
- Students in the fall 2003 cohort reported higher ratings on 95% of the survey questions than students in the fall 2002 cohort. What are you doing for the fall 2003 cohort that you didn’t do for the fall 2002 cohort?