Canadian Educational Development Centre Websites: More Ebb Than Flow?

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This paper examines information portrayed on Canadian educational development (ED) centre websites and, in particular, whether information that corresponds to questions compiled from a literature search of ED centre practices is readily available from centre websites. This study phase is part of a larger national study of Canadian educational development centres' practices.

The Seascape: An Overview

Researchers in the UK (Gosling, 2001, 2006) and US (Lewis, 1996) have outlined the historical growth of faculty development. Elrick (1990) discussed conditions that led to Canadian educational development (ED) initiatives; Donald (1986), Wilcox (1997), and Scarfe (2004) chronicled the history of Canadian ED centre growth; and Mindorff, Ratkovic, and Babady-Bila (2004) mapped the activities of 42 centres across Canada. However, there is limited literature available on the practices of Canadian ED units.

The Educational Developers Caucus (EDC) *ED Profiler* (2004-2005) is now significantly out of date. While the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) website (www.stlhe.ca/en/links/teaching_centre.php) lists 34 Canadian teaching centres, only links to ED centres are provided; there is no database for information comparison. In addition, there are more than 63 centres at post-secondary institutions in Canada. A complete list that includes colleges is available through the University of Waterloo at www.uwaterloo.ca/canu/index.php, but this provides links to institutions rather than educational development centres. Kreber and Brook's (2001) assertion that there remains a need to map the current Canadian landscape of ED centres

and their practices holds true. Accordingly, our collaborative national study set out to describe the practices of Canadian post-secondary (university and college) ED centres, with the intention of gathering and compiling sharable information to be made available on the EDC website.

In turning to centre websites to compile some of this data, certain trends became apparent about what we communicate on our websites and perhaps more importantly, what we do not. The purpose of this paper is therefore to discuss those trends and what falls "between the tides." In it, I discuss the nature and purpose of ED websites as communication tools: What are we communicating, to whom, and for what purpose?

Currents: Background to the Study Questions

While this paper outlines the kinds of information that are available on ED websites, some background on how the study questions were compiled may be useful. David Gosling (UK), who has been collecting information on ED centres internationally, was a useful initial contact; his helpful summaries provided a strong starting point for questions to guide the data collection. In addition, the research team compiled a summary of relevant literature, particularly Canadian sources. We used an online platform (Sharepoint) for our discussion as we developed our list of questions from this body of work. The resulting 39 data collection questions (see Table 1) were developed from Carusetta and Cranton, 2005; Cox, 2002; Gosling, 2001, 2006; Konrad, 1983; Kreaden, 2001; Lawlor and King, 2003; Scarfe, 2004; and Wilcox, 1997, 1998.

Floating on the Sea: Data Collection

Initially we compiled data from our own centres in response to the question list. This pilot phase allowed us to assess our original list of questions, and it was clear that 39 questions would prove an onerous list for any centre to address. In addition, we found some

overlap and a need for further clarity before we could reasonably ask others to contribute to the database.

We asked our research assistant to chart our initial responses and look at the data we had already compiled and confirm which of it was available through the centre websites. While we knew it was unlikely that all 39 questions could be answered online, and that our next step (currently in progress) would be to go back to those centres to confirm and add to the collected data, some very interesting results became apparent from the online searches. In the next section, I discuss those findings.

Waves: What is on the Websites and What is Not?

The initial web search included seven post-secondary institutions, in each case the home institution of a member of the research group for this phase of the study. These were Durham College/UOIT, Guelph University, McMaster University, Mount Allison University, Mount Royal College, University of Waterloo, and University of Windsor.

What became very interesting were the apparent trends in what was readily available, partially available, and apparently not available on ED websites. Table 1 indicates the total number of institutions from our pilot study group (n=7) that fell into each of these three categories.

S.O.S.: Discussion of Findings

What becomes apparent in examining this chart is that as individual staff we hold a great deal more information about our centres than we post on our websites. That may be intentional, in that websites represent the messages we choose to portray and as such are necessarily distilled. It is worth noting, however, the number of topics where our portrayed information is incomplete or missing, and that only in "name of centre" do we achieve a perfect score.

I suggest that we have three main communities to whom we communicate: faculty, staff, and students within our own institutions, administrators

TABLE 1
Website Availability of Responses to Questions

Question *Complied from literature review*	Level 1 *Information available*	Level 2 *Information partially available or hard to find**	Level 3 *Information does not seem to be on web*
1. Name of unit (including previous names, dates of change) *note not all show historical names.*	7**	-	-
2. History – when established, length of time in current form.	2	-	5
3. Amalgamated with other units? Now? In past?	1	-	6
4. Staff – full-time, part-time, job titles, academic qualifications? (e.g., degrees). Time in role?	1	5	1
5. Role of head of unit (title, position within institution).	1	-	6
6. Physical location on campus.	3	2	2
7. Role, expected activities.	3	4	-
8. Organizational status, reporting lines, links to other departments?	1	-	6
9. Mission statement? Stated goals?	5	1	-
10. Interaction of faculty with centre as 'helpers' (leading programs, committees, etc).	1	2	4
11. Activities – noting whether any are shared responsibility with other units.	2	3	2
12. Activities of greatest impact (and how is impact assessed?).	-	-	7
13. Contribute to institutional strategy development on teaching and learning? In what way?	-	1	6
14. Report to academic community on activities?	-	1	6
15. Research? Own? Supporting faculty?	-	1	6
16. E-learning development role.	-	2	5
17. Other teaching development related departments at institution? Collaboration?	-	-	7
18. Mandatory programs? All voluntary attendance?	-	-	7
19. Collect statistics on activities?	-	-	7

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[*] Partly available indicated that not all data provided by the centre was found on their website.
[**] n=7

20. Funding – sources (e.g., all central, other).	1	-	6
21. Institutional climate – teaching and learning highlighted in overall institutional statement?	4	1	2
22. Give awards for teaching and/or related activities?	2	1	4
23. Awards won (3M, other, both internal and external).	1	2	4
24. Grants – do they give them?	2	2	3
25. Grants – do they (or staff) have any?	1	-	6
26. Professional development for own staff? (e.g., courses, conferences, etc).	-	1	6
27. Are learning communities supported? In what?	1	-	6
28. Sabbatical leaves.	-	-	7
29. Travel funds for conferences, meetings.	-	-	7
30. How are activities planned? (what offered, when, etc?)	-	-	7
31. Primary philosophy re: development.	-	1	6
32. Upon what literature do you draw to inform your practices?	-	1	6
33. Course (credit or not) in university teaching offered?	3	1	3
34. How does the unit 'build bridges' to gain points of entry?	-	2	5
35. Policies developed/implemented.	-	1	6
36. Innovations promoted by the unit, ways of evaluating their impact, obstacles to innovations.	-	2	5
37. Committee memberships.	-	-	7
38. Research into learning and teaching undertaken.	-	-	7
39. How unit's work is evaluated?	-	-	7

within our own institutions, and other ED centres. I acknowledge that there may be other groups, but I will focus in this section on considerations for these three.

Institution: Faculty, staff, students

Arguably, our websites exist to inform our academic communities what we do and how we do that work. Regrettably, the evidence suggests we may not be achieving that aim. For example, in Q6 (physical location on campus), Q7, and Q11 (our activities) information is remarkably incomplete. Certainly

centres may argue that much of this information is available online, but I suggest it is primarily available to those who already know what they are looking for and where to look. Could someone who does not know your campus find your centre based on the website information?

Institution: Administrators

While administrators need to know about our specific activities and mission and goals, they also need to know about the impact our activities have, and they need easy access to this information when mak-

ing funding decisions. For example, as a group, we could be doing a better job of communicating how we assess the impact of our work (Q12), and policies and innovations developed (Q35 & Q36). In tough economic times, it is troublesome that we miss the opportunity to educate administrators about what we do, and we fall short on communicating statistics about our work (Q19). We could use our websites powerfully to our advantage: articulating a response to how we are evaluated (Q39) could in fact help us guide this process.

Other ED centres

I believe we have a responsibility to provide information that will be useful to our discipline colleagues. A recent search of 12 Canadian universities to compile scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) grants and amounts showed that very little of this information was available on centre websites, much was difficult to find, and in many cases website information was out of date. It is in our own interest that we provide information that we and others will find useful.

I wish to make a special plea for communicating SoTL information on our websites. This is a powerful and growing area of inquiry in post-secondary settings: not communicating our work ultimately can inhibit growth in this area. In addition, in research-intensive settings, SoTL can open conversations. There is also much to be gained by making explicit our support for research in teaching and learning (Q38) and on what literature we draw to inform our work (Q32).

Lifejackets: Strategies for Website Improvement

These are but a few examples where our websites could benefit from greater clarity. Within our group and at conference presentations we have begun to discuss strategies for better communicating ED work via our websites. Suggestions have included:

- post year end reports;
- organize the website by services available rath-

er than by staff;
- organize the website as responses to FAQ;
- include achievements of people we have worked with to show impact of our work on others);
- consult other sites for exemplars;
- build websites for others (use post-its with what we want on site, arrange as a template, ask those outside the centre to re-arrange the template); and,
- given the importance of communication and how much time is involved in updating sites, hire someone to manage it.

Message in a Bottle: Codicil and Conclusions

This paper may seem to present a negative view of ED centre websites, and that is not our intention. The compiled questions do not necessarily represent areas around which centres have designed their websites. In addition, while the trends in the data are interesting and may serve to inform ED centres undertaking website and strategic planning review, clearly there is a need to add the additional data we have collected from 35 other centres to see if these patterns hold. We will of course return to our primary study purpose of compiling responses to all questions from as many Canadian ED centres as we can and will be posting a searchable database to the EDC website. A spreadsheet can be compiled to any who request it.

As website renewal is an ongoing process, we also recognize our chart is likely already out of date and perhaps the ship has already sailed. However, the trends it represents are compelling and will hopefully encourage centres to consider areas that represent opportunities for charting a course to making our work more explicit.

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Biography

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