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The Added Value of Conducting Learning Design Meeting to the Online Course Development Process

Denise Shaver

Abstract

Do you find it challenging to have discussions with instructors about designing online courses and best practices in teaching? This article will highlight key components to conducting effective Learning Design Meetings. It outlines techniques used by our institution in engaging faculty in a discussion regarding better use of Learning Management Systems (LMS), storyboard layout, learning outcomes, student engagement, learning activities, formal assessments, and content delivery. Learning Design meetings have proven to be a compelling manner of decreasing faculty resistance while exposing instructors to best practices in pedagogy, andragogy, and online learning. Instructional Designers (IDs), Instructional Facilitators (IFs), and Course Authors who work in higher educational online settings should find this information useful. Novices in the field may find these practical techniques particularly beneficial.

Introduction

In fall of 2014, Andrews University, a small faith-based Midwestern university introduced a new process for online course development. This process included the use of Instructional Designers and Instructional Facilitators to shepherd course authors through the online course development process. The Course Author Manual was designed to detail prescriptive steps in the process for Course Authors. A corresponding Instructional Facilitator Manual was made for Instructional Designers and Facilitators to remember the actions that should transpire preceding and subsequent actions for each step. The Learning Design meeting is the second step in our online course development process. This meeting helps to set the tone for success, reduce faculty resistance to the process of online course development, and increase the rates of timely completion of online courses. Motivated by the need to find more effective ways for successful and appealing online course development, this paper explains the added value of our institution through the inclusion of Learning Design meetings in our online course development process. A description of the implementation of this meeting is the focus of this article. Anecdotal evidence of the meeting's success will be provided.

Context

Our institution is a small, liberal-arts, faith-based university located in southwestern Michigan in the United States. The on-campus student population is comprised of approximately 3,500 undergraduate and graduate students. Online student enrollment is 698. The trend for online education in America continues to grow. According to Waldis, Waldis, & Hatchey (2014), more than 30 percent of four-year college students and over 60% of community college students will take at least one online course. In sync with this educational trend, Andrews University currently offers 5 online programs with online courses offered in a variety of schools. It is estimated that nearly 350 online courses will be offered in the coming semester. Since the demand for online learning is growing at our institutions systems and personnel had to be put in place to meet the need.

Background

One of the ways the institution rose to meet the growing demand for online courses was the hiring of Instructional Designers and Instructional Facilitators. Dick and Ives (2008) described the work of an Instructional Designer as a design process and stated that it is "a conversation between designer and client, and extends it by focusing our lens on the skills that the designer employs to guide these conversations" (p. 69). This is a correct description of the work of the Instructional Designers at this institution. IFs within our school context are largely education doctoral students or graduate students with educational training and teaching experience who work under the supervision of the Lead Instructional Designer. Their primary responsibility is to guide instructors through the course development process and support them throughout the semester.

A guiding principle for implementing Learning Design meetings is for the IDs and IFs to listen to the instructor's goals and vision for the course. This invites a dialogue with the instructor and helps to eliminate presuppositions from the IDs and IFs regarding the course. The art of persuasion is the key to success in this type of meeting. Allowing the instructor's experience and opinion to drive the course development process leads to a more congenial working relationship. A relaxed atmosphere infused with humor and understanding disarms even the most resistant or reluctant participant.

Rationale

Instructors unaccustomed to online delivery modes often find the creation of an online course long, difficult, and frustrating. These attitudes can manifest themselves in overt or covert resistance. In his work on online course development and delivery McNeal (2015) found the following reasons for faculty resistance to online course development from faculty and administrators: 1) limited faith in the validity of online courses, 2) a way to undermine face-to-face enrollment, 3) the erosion of the traditional curriculum, and 4) an inherent advantage for the faculty offering the course. Upon embarking upon this process, our team encountered all of these reasons for resistance to an online course development process. An appealing and disarming approach to course development had to be introduced to counteract many of the pejorative dispositions to the online course development.

The course development process seeks to promote best practices in online teaching by producing courses most conducive for effective online learning. A Learning Design Meeting is the second meeting in our process and is intended to help course authors transfer face-to-face learning experiences to dynamic online delivery or to design an exclusively online class offered for the first time. The intent of the whole process is to create a supportive environment that encourages, rather than impedes creativity and authenticity. Often, the result of this recursive procedure is the development of a dynamic learning relationship between the teacher and the IDs and IFs.

This process organically arose from the challenges presented by the existing online development process. It was a natural outgrowth of the plethora of online delivery unawareness. In addition to the traditional campus, our university serves an international audience and has participated in distance education for over 50 years through correspondence courses. The transition from correspondence courses to online delivery resulted in online, self-paced courses. Since most instructors were accustomed to face-to-face educational delivery, most of them were unfamiliar with the best practices in online course development and teaching. A systematic process was needed to scaffold teachers interested or involved in teaching online in order to improve the quality of courses being offered.

The first two years of online course design support were chaotic and frantic. From an analysis of those failures and successes, a process was created that encompassed both the detailed procedures and steps of development inclusive of a backward design of course design. Internal resources such as an increase in manpower, the hiring of an Instructional Designer, and a team of Instructional Facilitators increased faculty support. An external consultant was contracted once the process was piloted to assist in finalizing the documents. The two documents that were created for this process was the Course Author and Instructional Facilitator Handbooks which provides the sequential operations of the course development process. These have been proven to be invaluable tools.

Theoretical framework

The inspiration for this instructional design technique emerged from a review of the literature. Kemp, J. E. (1977) *Instructional design: A plan for unit and course development* and Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience and school*. The ADDIE and KEMP instructional design models were adopted after explorative analysis. The ADDIE model consists of five cyclical phases: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. The Kemp model is a continuous process of planning, design, development, and assessment.

Phase one and two of the ADDIE model, the analysis and design phase, heavily influenced the creation of these procedures. In conjunction with the analysis phase of the model, our institution hones in on the establishment of course instructional goals and objectives and ascertains the level of the instructor's online instructional knowledge. From the design phase, the IFs target revising course outcomes, designing engaging activities, identifying the most appropriate types of assessment, content delivery, and begin exploring the use of educational technology tools. IFs also arrange for necessary educational technology tools training. One ID specializes in educational technology tool training. The most common sort of training is LMS-use training and video conference training. Other training tools are incorporated as required. This instructional design approach also incorporates the planning cycle from the KEMP model.

The KEMP model is a holistic approach to instructional design. The planning phase of the model involves the evaluation of the tools and resources pertinent to effective teaching and learning (Forest, 2016). Implementation of this phase is the target of the Learning Design Meeting. It aims to motivate Course Authors to create significant learning experiences online by aligning student outcomes with learning activities and meaningful assessments. Learning design meetings help to set the tone and expectations for the design process.

Online Course Development Process Flowchart

Purpose:

To assist course authors and instructional facilitators (IF) with a roadmap to effectively develop and deliver quality instruction online.

Timeline:

From the initial meeting until the course launches, plan for a minimum of six months in order to create a quality course that adheres to Andrews University online standards.

Novices can be overwhelmed with new information and experts learn differently than novices. Higher education faculty are typically novices at teaching principles and therefore, may need assistance with the design of learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocklin, 2000). In 2014, our institution launched a comprehensive system of online course development support that involved the use of an Instructional Designer and Instructional Facilitators (IFs). Each Course Author is assigned an Instructional Facilitator tasked with the following duties: serve as the primary point of contact between the course author and the rest of the development team, introduce storyboarding and its importance in online course development and guide the instructor on the most appropriate storyboard for their instructional approach, provide training in outcomes and alignment, identify various types of online assessments, and determine content delivery style. Based on the experience and knowledge of the instructor, the selection of online instructional tools may be discussed. The IFs work under the supervision of an Instructional Designer.

Our online course development process is informed by the constructivist approach to teaching. It is widely understood in the educational arena that the constructivist approach to teaching involves empowering students to construct their own. Hunter (2015) affirmed that the constructivist perspective of teaching that students construct their own knowledge through mental representations and cognitive organizations of body of knowledge has a long history. Julie Carwile (2007) provided a greater insight into a constructivist approach to teaching online. She stated that constructivists' approaches to teaching online should include encouraging students to create their own questions, providing a variety of avenues for students to express their views, and including collaborative elements. The discussion forum, in her view, is a medium which can be used to accomplish all of these tasks and more. All of the components play an integral role in our online course process.

The Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) framework to curriculum, assessment, and instructional design also helped to inform this process. This three-pronged framework includes 1) identifying the desired results, 2) determining assessment evidence, and 3) planning learning experiences and instruction. After an extensive discussion on how to create clear, measurable outcomes, a dialogue on assessment ensues to achieve outcome metrics. Finally, the identification of learning activities which are content- and level-appropriate and conducive for the online learning environment is made.

Implementation

The term Course Author is used because not everyone who designs the course will eventually teach the course. Content experts who are often full-time faculty may author the course, but not have time or be desirous of teaching an online course. The meeting takes place between the Course Author, Instructional Designers, and the Instructional Facilitator assigned to the course. Determining the storyboard layout and review learning outcomes, formal assessments, student engagement and learning activities, and content delivery are the goals for this meeting. Most instructors are familiar with most of the terminology presented. Even beginning teachers face-to-face or online are knowledgeable about educational jargon such as outcomes, assessments, and learning activities.

After a brief discussion on how on teacher and student introductions, a review of student learning outcomes occurs. Though most teachers are familiar with writing student learning outcomes, our desire is to achieve objectives, a more precise description of the outcomes for the course, and outcome and activity alignment. Though both goals seem easily accessible, they are often a time-consuming, yet meaningful experience for both parties. Once clear-cut outcomes and activity alignment are achieved, we proceed to the next step. Using a backward design also allows us to review assessment items or ideas.

Since backward design admonishes you to begin with the end in mind, assessment is the next topic. Assessment is the significant ways in which one measures outcomes. They include, but are not limited to, exams, research papers, presentations, and projects. Starting with assessments helps Course Authors determine if their preselected assessments are good measures of student learning. Assessment discussion also fosters the much needed discussion on rubric generations and writing clear instructions. Teachers often omit the creation of rubrics, but using rubrics helps both the teacher and the student to understand expectations and evaluation criteria.

The vocabulary which appears to be least familiar to course authors is storyboarding. Storyboarding is the manner in which instructors are guided to organize their course in the LMS. Course Authors are presented with three story board framework options: time-based, conceptual, and project-based. These options include the same elements in different formats. It allows the Course Author to contemplate the overarching approach to course delivery. Time-based, as the name suggests, informs the learner on when items are due. Conceptual layouts highlight the importance of the concepts or topics that will be presented. Project-based frameworks help the instructor design courses that assist students in developing the projects in stages, rather than at one particular time. This allows students to submit segments of their projects as part of the learning activities. This approach to project-based learning allows students

to complete their project incrementally and provides opportunities for teacher feedback and mastery of each section of the project.

Time-Based Storyboard Framework

	Dates	Measurable Outcomes	Assessment	Activities & Assignments	Content	Tools
Week 1						
Week 2						

Conceptual Storyboard Framework

Concepts are used where the textbook has 6 to 8 chapters instead of 15-16. Or where there are less than 10 big concepts. Or where there are 20-30 concepts.

	Weeks / Dates	Measurable Outcomes	Assessment	Activities & Assignments	Content	Tools
Concept 1						
Concept 2						

Project-based Storyboard Framework

Project-based courses are organized around one or more big projects or real-world experiences. This Storyboard Framework is partially completed to show how it could be organized.

	Essay #1	Essay #2	Essay #3	Other Supporting Activities
Date(s)				
Measurable Outcomes				Use library resources to support writing.
Assessments				
Activities & Assignments	Draft Essay Peer critiques Final Essay			Library scavenger hunt MLA lesson Evaluate online sources
Content				
Tools				

Online course development at our school contains all of the previously mentioned constructivist elements. Course Authors are guided to create inquiry-based activities, design multiple avenues of student expression, and collaborative assignments. Use of discussion boards or some alternative form of group communication for interactive courses and blogs for self-paced offerings are a required part of our school's online standards for teaching online. Course authors are emboldened to find creative uses for discussion forums. The following are standard suggestions for innovative discussion board use:

Discussions	Case Studies	Faculty Office	Portraits
Role Plays	White Paper Analysis	Student Center	Interviews
Group Work	Class Introductions	Peer Review	Polling
Literature Circles		Jigsaw Teaching	Debates

This conversation regarding discussion forums provides IDs and IFs with another avenue to assess the author's knowledge about assessments, including interaction and collaboration with or without the use of educational technology tools. Once adequate knowledge regarding the Course Authors experience and comfort with using discussion boards has been ascertained informed decisions can be made. These dialogues also engender another chance for IDs and IFs to facilitate gently the reception to new ideas, concepts, and approaches to teaching.

Conclusion and Further Research

Two years of applying this process to online course development at our school has yielded bountiful results. Instructors have a clearly delineated procedure for completing the task. Having a clearly defined process has reduced frustration and increased productivity. The Learning Design meeting is the heart of this process. This meeting lays the foundation for the expectation of excellence in the product. This meeting also helps to reinforce the time-consuming commitment it will take to produce an online course.

Instructors often comment on how the information in this meeting has illuminated their understanding of course design at large, either face-to-face or online. Many of them comment on how the ideas learned in the meeting will not only be added to their online course, but to the face-to-face version, as well. Another benefit of the meeting is the potential for relationship-building. This meeting gives instructors' information and techniques that have immediate applicability. Since the online course development process is often long and arduous, information that contains short-term functional usefulness increases the value of process and can forge an important bond of trust and respect between the IDs, IFs and Course Author.

Pedagogical insights help teachers grow in the art of teaching. These meetings attempt to infuse best practices in pedagogy, andragogy, and online learning. Course authors usually leave the meeting with a spirit of gratitude for the knowledge which they obtained. Comments on how empowered they feel as teachers are not uncommon at the conclusion of the meetings. A running theme throughout the Learning Design and all of the meetings in our procedure is support.

A goal for the IDs and IFs is that every Course Author leaves every meeting with full reassurance of support for achieving every task. From outcomes to assessments, the commitment is to assist the instructor with needed support from beginning to end. This is evidenced by helping to rewrite outcomes and demonstrating how to construct rubrics during the meeting. Follow-up meetings are often scheduled prior to the conclusion of the time together. Observations and experience confirm that these meetings so set the tone for success that intransigence and inflexibility regarding the process are significantly eroded. Though this meeting does not reduce the time-consuming and challenging nature of online course development, it improves receptiveness to it.

Additional research will enhance and validate the Learning Design Meetings contribution to effective online course development and faculty resistance to the process. Quantitative and qualitative data should be collected to get further insight into the value-added to instructors and on the complete development process. Surveys should be distributed and focus groups created to capture the faculty experience and growth

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