

LEADERSHIP IN ONLINE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHY INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNERS FOR ONLINE LEARNING SHOULD LEAD THE WAY

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With the increase in demand for online education at the university level has also come the "recognition that in order to be effective, such programs cannot simply be on-line replicas of the instruction delivered in classrooms" (Reiser, 2001, p. 64). An environment of collaboration with a shared vision is needed to bring faculty expertise together with online learning design and technological expertise. This article addresses why and how instructional designers should lead the way.

THE NEED FOR INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN EXPERTISE IN ONLINE COURSE DESIGN

IN MANY TRADITIONAL universities, professors are responsible for the design of the courses that they teach. Though content and learning outcomes may be set in the course description, professors often must choose or create the instructional strategies, learning strategies, and even the course materials and assessments. When these universities venture into the online education market, the professors often do not want to give up their autonomy regarding course design, but they also are unlikely to be familiar with the technology or the nuances of online course design. This is when leadership from an instructional designer who specializes in online learning is needed. Higher education institutions that are offering or might offer online courses in the future should adapt a collaborative approach to quality online course design. Having an instructional designer for online learning leading faculty in this approach will be a benefit to any higher education organization.

A Growing Online Education Market

The continuous growth in online education offerings allows students more opportunities to attend a multitude of colleges from various locations. Educational institutions need to grow and adapt to be prepared for this evolving online education market. For many higher education institutions that are venturing into online course offerings, a leader with a clear understanding of the direction and approach that needs to be taken is required. This calls for a leader who will be vital in moving the institution into the future of online education. This person needs to have a solid foundation in instructional and learning theories, use research to inform practice, be competent in multimedia and online educational formats, be committed to perpetual learning, and be ready for a challenge. One who has been educated as an instructional designer for online learning is best suited for this role.

Learning Agility

Universities must have the learning agility to supply quality education in this growing online market. Clark and

Gottfredson (2008) describe learning agility as “an organization’s ability to respond to adaptive challenge” (p. 4). It is important to note that this is not the organization’s ability to meet current challenges, but it is its “ability to grow, change, or innovate at or above the speed of one’s own market” (Clark & Gottfredson, p. 4). The Clark Learning Agility Model names the five factors of environmental context, learning mindset, leadership behavior, learning technology, and organizational support as those having the most critical impact on organizational learning agility (Clark & Gottfredson, p. 5).

The first step in being prepared to meet the challenge of the changing educational environment is to recognize it. Today’s evolving education market requires a more concerted move toward online education. To adapt to this Learning Agility 3.0 environment, an institution’s learning mindset must change to “continuous, adaptive and collaborative learning at the moment of need” (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 24). This is the learning mindset needed to achieve quality online course development.

The leadership behavior that supports this learning mindset is transparent and transformative. It challenges convention and motivates employees. It is backed by organizational support with a commitment to providing learning at the five moments of need, given by Clark and Gottfredson (2008, p. 23) as:

- Learning how to do something for the first time
- Learning more based on prior learning experience
- Learning at the point of application, independent of any prior learning, when previous learning has been forgotten, and/or when adapting performance to unique situations
- Learning when things change in order to adapt to new ways of doing things
- Learning when things go wrong in order to solve a problem

These five moments will all occur when traditional faculty are developing and administering online courses. Technology alone will be a major contributing factor to these moments of need, especially considering the rapid advancements in multimedia learning. Unfortunately, the misuse of technology in online learning can occur easily without the right guidance. An instructional designer, who understands the multimedia principles of online learning, is needed to provide that guidance.

How Online Course Design Is Different From Face-to-Face Course Design

Many traditional higher education institutions have begun a process of putting their courses online. Vasser (2010)

points out that when traditional face-to-face courses migrate into online formats, their lack of consideration of online pedagogical principles and technology often result in low-quality courses. Furthermore, professors who are accustomed to being able to make adjustments in their courses based on student feedback are generally unable to do so in an online format. Online learning requires an emphasis on underlying pedagogies and the technological designs that will support these pedagogies. Having professors put their courses online without giving them the necessary support to do so results in ill-structured design that inhibits student learning. An instructional designer for online learning can provide that needed support.

Multiple studies have found no significant difference in academic success between students in online courses versus face-to-face classrooms, but they also note that different instructional strategies were utilized. The most obvious difference is the technology. Technology can allow for learners to self-pace their viewing of instructional media. For example, being able to pause, rewind, and revisit a video lecture is an advantage to the online learner over the face-to-face learner watching a live lecture in the classroom. The disadvantage is that an online learner cannot ask for immediate clarification from the instructor, which one can do in a traditional classroom.

There are technologies that can alleviate some of this lack of interactivity, such as synchronous communication technologies, tutorials that require user input, simulations, and games. The ease of use of technology is also an important factor in student success. If the technology is too complicated for the learners or the instructor, then it will not be effective for learning. Also, inconsistencies that require students to learn multiple technologies and course formats can be frustrating for distance education students. A good technology support system for both the faculty and the learners is a necessary component of successful online education, but it is also important to know how to choose which technologies will be most effective in aiding learners in achieving the learning goals. An instructional designer can assist faculty in choosing appropriate technology that addresses their instructional goals while also meeting learner needs of accessibility, ease of use, and consistency across courses.

Creating a sense of community when there is no face-to-face interaction between learners or with the instructor is a major concern in online course design. Creating a sense of social presence will combat the isolation that learners often feel in online environments and increase motivation (Esani, 2010). Motivation is a key component of the self-efficacy that students need to be successful in online courses. Establishing teacher presence has also shown to be beneficial in creating a sense of community

and in motivating online learners, but many professors who are used to teaching face-to-face do not know how to establish this in an online environment (Esani, 2010). An instructional designer who specializes in online learning can offer methods of engaging students in asynchronous discussions, protocols for encouraging learners through e-mail and other forms of communication, and tools for providing valuable and immediate feedback without consuming an inordinate amount of an instructor's time.

It also must be recognized that "compared to the traditional face-to-face courses, online courses require more development and design time ... because every aspect of the course must be carefully organized with explicit and detailed instructions" (Esani, 2010, p. 188). In online courses, students do not have the ability to ask for clarification and get immediate feedback. Inconsistencies in online course designs across a program and lack of clarity in instructions can be frustrating for online learners. An instructional designer can provide the online course design expertise that is needed for creating consistent and organized course formats. Exploring and learning how to use new technologies can also add significant time to a professor's course development process. With the assistance of an instructional designer who specializes in online learning, faculty would not have to wade through the vast sea of technology to find out what will work for their course. The structure and assistance provided by an instructional designer for online learning can significantly decrease a faculty member's individual workload in course design and development.

COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP

An instructional designer for online learning is educated in instructional design processes, multimedia learning, and ethical issues in distance education. Instructional designers understand the need to keep up with a constantly changing field and to work collaboratively with subject matter and technology experts. The field of instructional design includes the competencies of effective communication, updating and improving one's abilities, applying current research and theory, and identifying and resolving ethical and legal implications. These foundational competencies provide a strong base for the leadership needed to lead online learning.

Fostering Collaboration

Individual intellectualism and the freedom of expression that academic freedom embodies is an important and valuable part of our higher education system. Professors are knowledge workers. Their expertise must be valued and respected. Infringing on academic freedom by

attempting to dictate online course development processes is not the answer to quality course design and is likely to be rejected by traditional faculty. It is well-known that creativity and innovation cannot be fostered in a restrictive authoritarian environment. Faculty are experts in their fields. Besides content knowledge, faculty often have experience in applying the instructional strategies that are most successful in promoting student learning in their fields. This expertise needs to be recognized and taken advantage of in online course development. An environment of collaboration with a shared vision is needed to bring faculty expertise together with online learning design and technological expertise. A collaborative approach is needed for this to happen, but traditional faculty may not be accustomed to working with others when it comes to course design. The key to cooperation is creating a learning culture that provides the resources for ongoing learning and promotes the value of the process.

An organization that commits to a culture of learning will have the learning agility needed to change with a more fast-paced and culturally diverse world. Those who work in higher education institutions tend to promote lifelong learning in their students and it seems only natural to embrace the same perpetual learning within themselves. Creating a learning culture among faculty for the design and development of quality online courses fits the ideals of faculty, even though it may not represent the traditional approach to course design. Kitchenham (2006) remarked that teachers found that collaboration with colleagues allowed for perspective transformation and was an important aspect of integrating technology into their teaching. For an organization to fully benefit from the knowledge of professors, opportunities for communication and transfer of knowledge must exist. Collaboration with an instructional designer, technology specialists, and other faculty does not have to be seen as a threat to professor autonomy in course design, but instead should be seen as a way to discuss ideas and options for quality online course design. A vision that incorporates this collaborative online course design approach and is also aligned with the university's overall vision is essential to the development of quality online education at any higher education institution.

The Online Learning Expert

Traditional faculty have experience in designing teaching and learning strategies and assessments that are effective for their subject matter in face-to-face classrooms, but they may not know how to translate this experience to the online course. Instructional designers for online learning are educated in the planning and analysis, design

and development, and implementation and management processes of online learning. This includes expertise in analyzing the learners, learning environment, and appropriate technologies. Many traditional faculty may not be aware of the differences between classroom and online learners or be familiar with emerging technologies. Even faculty who use and keep up with the latest technology may not be aware of what may be appropriate for online learning. An instructional designer of online learning can guide faculty in choosing media and technology that will enhance the learning process and teach them how to use it ethically in an online learning environment.

A common mistake in using multimedia is to use a technology-centered approach instead of a learner-centered approach to learning. This often occurs when faculty hear of a new technology and want to find out how they can use that technology in their online course. An instructional designer can guide faculty away from making this mistake by helping them focus on the learning goals and then showing them which technologies can help them achieve those goals. Instructional designers can use multimedia learning principles to guide design of instruction that aids in the learning process such as using conversational human voice narration with static graphics, segmenting content to be learner-paced, adding cues to signal organization and navigation of material, and incorporating activities for learners to reflect on their learning. Guiding faculty away from including extraneous material, flashy animation, and distracting colors by explaining cognitive load theory and accessibility issues for both physical and learning disabilities is also a responsibility of the instructional designer and will enhance the quality and accessibility of online courses.

Most faculty are aware of copyright laws and fair-use policies, but they may not have considered other ethical issues that are unique to online courses. For example, in a face-to-face classroom, students' comments during classroom discussions are not recorded. However, in an online courseroom, students' comments on the discussion board are recorded. These words could potentially be copied and sent to others or posted in other online forums. This reproducibility of discussion postings and comments could violate the confidentiality expectations that a student has that what they say within the confines of a course are between the instructor and their peers and not in the public domain. Additionally, many faculty are concerned about academic integrity in online courses. There are technological options to combat the potential for academic dishonesty, such as tools to check for plagiarism and lock-down webcam browsers for proctoring online exams. An instructional designer for online

learning can aid a university in determining policies for online etiquette and ethical practices as well as introduce faculty to the tools they can use to guard against academic dishonesty.

An instructional designer can aid faculty in transforming their strategies into ones that take into account the pedagogical differences, multimedia principles, and ethical concerns of online education. The instructional designer for online learning brings a unique expertise to the collaborative effort of online course design and development that traditional faculty should find valuable. Instructional designers also understand the evaluation and revision process that is necessary in ensuring quality, innovation, and continuance in education. This expertise along with valuing the expertise of the faculty, inspiring faculty with innovations in online learning, and promoting quality in online education is what the instructional designer for online learning brings to the collaborative process and is why the faculty will join in this effort.

Taking on the Leadership Role

As Kotter (2008) differentiates, leadership activities involve coping with change while management activities involve coping with complexity, making leadership about direction setting instead of about producing plans. Change requires a vision and a collaborative effort to make that vision a reality. Professors do not want to be managed, but they are less likely to object to being led. Kouzes and Posner (2007) describe exemplary leadership as comprising the five practices of "modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart" (p. 14). It is important to remember that leadership is a relationship and that others must share in the vision and be allowed to contribute their ideas and take ownership in the process of change if this change is going to continue in the long term.

Leadership within a learning culture fits well with the recommendations made by Clark and Gottfredson (2008) about how to improve an organization's learning agility. Schein (2008) explains that being the leader of a learning culture requires "new levels of perception ... extraordinary levels of motivation ... emotional strength ... new skills in analyzing and changing cultural assumptions ... [and] the willingness and ability to involve others and elicit their participation" (p. 369). Instructional designers for online learning must put themselves forward and embrace these attributes of transparent and transformative leadership.

Honest and transparent communication is essential in transformative leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2007)

discuss important components of communication in leadership as using language “that best express the culture you want to create,” asking questions that make people think about values, using stories for more memorable and personal communication, and seeking feedback on one’s leadership (p. 78). Flood et al. (2000) describe transformational leadership as inspiring “followers to do more than originally expected” (p. 403). Venturing into online education may be daunting for traditional professors. Seasoned professors may feel that this is not what they were hired for and that they are not obligated to join in these endeavors. Much of this attitude is more likely due to unfamiliarity and lack of support than to an opposition to distance education. Professors value lifelong learning and quality education. Inspiring faculty to share in a vision of offering the same quality in distance education that they offer in face-to-face courses is part of the transformative leadership style that an instructional designer for online learning must adopt.

It seems obvious to say that leaders must be good communicators, but the idea of what is “good” does not convey the whole picture. To inspire others, a leader must communicate an organization’s vision and values through the use of language that epitomizes those values, through inspiring stories that followers can relate to and exemplify those values, and through actions that reinforce and are consistent with those values (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). An effective leader knows that “communication comes in both words and deeds” (Kotter, 2008, p. 377). An instructional designer for online learning must model educational values consistently and communicate the institution’s vision of quality distance education clearly and frequently. It is not enough to put one’s vision on a banner and then walk away. Authentic leaders incorporate the vision in the day-to-day communication, demonstrate it in their daily activities, and lead with their hearts (Kotter).

In higher education institutions, traditional faculty often do not like being told how to do their job. They are experts in their fields and this expertise needs to be respected. An effective transformative leader must value the expertise that the faculty bring to the process. Burns (2008) states that “transforming leadership mobilizes only those who are, if latently, ready to be mobilized, and then only if the frame is true to their wants” (p. 310). Implementing this vision will require buy-in from the faculty. The leader must communicate that this is a step in the right direction for this university, that it is an essential part of the growth of this institution, and that the faculty are the ones that will need to make this happen. Being an advocate of this vision must be enacted through a democratic leadership style with the instructional designer acting as the ambassador. Appealing

to the common ideals of quality education will enlist others to commit to the cause (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Probably most importantly, this instructional designer will need to be a people-mover who recognizes and motivates the potential and talent in others. Without the faculty on board, there will be no one to lead.

CONCLUSION: A VISION OF THE FUTURE

Instructional designers have historically been involved in designing systematic processes for solving performance problems and creating training in military, business, and industry, but instructional design had little influence on public education or in higher education (Reiser, 2001). The increase in online education is causing a paradigm shift in these educational environments. With the increase in demand for online education at the university level has also come the “recognition that in order to be effective, such programs cannot simply be on-line replicas of the instruction delivered in classrooms” (Reiser, p. 64). Online universities have embraced instructional design practices in developing quality online courses and programs in taking advantage of this high demand for more accessible education. Traditional brick and mortar universities are also tapping into this increased distance education market, but many are still not embracing what the field of instructional design has to offer. Traditionally educated faculty do not have the expertise in online learning needed to create quality online courses. Instead of making them attempt to acquire this knowledge on their own, universities need to provide the support faculty need without undermining their autonomy and academic freedom. Technological support is required, but is insufficient on its own. Faculty need the expertise of an instructional designer for online learning to lead the way into quality online course design and development.

The practices of leadership fit well into the expectations of an instructional designer for online learning. Instructional designers must share their vision of the future of learning and model the behavior that exemplifies their commitment to these beliefs. They must inspire others to share in this vision. An instructional designer must challenge maintaining the status quo by recognizing and supporting the innovative ideas of others, fostering collaboration, and providing encouragement in striving towards this shared vision. Faculty want to provide the best education possible to their students. Instructional designers have the unique abilities to be successful leaders in this culture because of their understanding of the importance of learning how

to learn, as well as their problem-solving abilities and belief that people will learn given the right resources. These are all qualities that Schein (2008) describes as key characteristics of a learning culture. Providing such leadership is essential in the evolving field of online education where faculty and multimedia converge with diverse learners.

For changes to occur within a higher education institution, it must have the learning agility to meet both the current and the future challenges that will arise. Distance education is a rapidly evolving market. Learners expect quality education and have many choices. Higher education institutions need to recognize and adapt to this new market. Clark and Gottfredson (2008) report that learning agility means that an organization, not just the individuals within the organization, is capable of such change, and that it is the organizational support, learning mindset, learning technology, and leadership behavior that will most affect the organization's agility (p. 6). Higher education institutions can provide support to faculty by embracing a learning culture among their faculty and supporting this culture with the expertise that is needed to guide faculty in the creation of quality online instruction. Instructional designers for online learning have this expertise and are best equipped to take on these leadership roles.

The vision for the future of higher education is simple. Higher education institutions should embrace change, but they should also not abandon the values they were built on. Academic freedom should not be replaced by cookie-cutter course design and instructors who have no say in developing the courses they teach. Professors should be supported in venturing into online education, not replaced. Higher education institutions that wish to be successful in online education should provide the support of instructional designers for online learning to join faculty and lead them in quality online course development, evaluation, and revision. The future of higher education is rapidly changing and it is the instructional designers for online learning that should lead the way into this future. ■■■

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