Managing the Online Instructional Development Process: 
An Institutional View

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in online education becoming a larger and more central part of the mission of many colleges and universities. A growing number of institutions are formalizing their digital learning initiatives, including how online courses are developed and implemented (Garrett, et al., 2020).

Managing the instructional development process of online courses at the institutional level is significantly different than individual faculty members developing their own courses. Managing the process of online course development allows institutions to scale the development of online courses, better align individual courses to program-level learning outcomes, contain development costs, eliminate redundancies in the curriculum, and create a more consistent experience for online learners.

Decision-Making Framework

Each institution has its own unique culture. What works well for one school, college, university, organization or company may be less effective for another. Therefore, the decision-making framework illustrated in Table 1 below (adapted from Piña, 2021) provides guidance and ideas for the online/distance learning leader to consider in determining what to adopt and what to adapt.

<table>
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<th>Component</th>
<th>Decision Item</th>
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| Environment        | • Internal or external development  
                    | • Centralized or decentralized development                        |
| Roles and Responsibilities | • Faculty roles  
                          | • Scope of work, compensation and intellectual property  
                          | • Instructional designer roles                                   |
| Quality            | • Standards for Development and Evaluation                         |
| Operations         | • Independent or Guided Design                                    |

Environment - Internal or External Development

The growth of online learning enrollments, coupled with overall college and university enrollment declines during the past decade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021;
National Student Clearinghouse, 2020, Seaman et al., 2018), and the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, has served as a catalyst for institutions to adopt online learning as a part of their mission and normal operations (Garrett, et al., 2020).

The Online Program Management (OPM) market was established to provide two basic types of services to institutions wishing to offer fully online programs: 1) A full-service model, where the OPM agreement includes all of the services for developing, supporting and promoting the online program or 2) an a la carte model, where the institution contracts only for specific services provided by the OPM, such as instructional design, marketing, promotion, analytics, or user support (Pelletier, 2018). While the OPM market has increased markedly during the past several years, many institutions find that the desire to control their own programs is more compelling than an OPMs potential to rapidly offer programs and provide up-front funding, marketing and analytics (Busta, 2019, Springer, 2018).

Environment - Centralized or Decentralized Development

Centralization or decentralization of course development is highly influenced by institutional culture. It can be considered as a continuum: At one end, resources and personnel for online course development are centralized in a department or group that is available to the entire institution. At the other is one in which academic departments, schools or colleges are run autonomously from each other, with course development personnel and resources dispersed throughout the institution (Bergeron & Fornero, 2018).

Roles and Responsibilities - Faculty Roles

Institutional culture, employment and bargaining agreements, interpretations of accreditation guidelines, and the ability or willingness of an institution to provide personnel and resources to the online course development process, will largely determine the role of faculty play in course development. Three common roles played by faculty are autonomous, partnership and team (Piña, 2021).

In an autonomous model, the responsibility for developing the online course rests completely upon an individual faculty member, who is usually not obligated to work with anyone else at the institution (Hawkes & Coldeway, 2002). In an autonomous model, the faculty require more extensive training, as they will be assuming the roles of all members in the partnership and team-based models described below (Slaughter & Murtaugh, 2018).

In a partnership development model, the faculty member partners with an additional person—most often an instructional designer—to develop the online course. While the faculty member serves as the subject matter expert, the instructional designer can provide faculty with ideas for structure, format and strategies to make their courses more successful. The instructional designer can help assure that student learning outcomes are well aligned with the assignments, activities, test, etc. that assess those outcomes (Xu & Morris, 2007).

In a team-based development model, the faculty member works as part of a design and development team of three or more individuals (Hawkes & Coldeway, 2002). The faculty
member serves as the subject matter expert, while technical development tasks may be done by instructional designers, content editors, multimedia developers, graphic designers, psychometricians, copyright specialists or instructional or information technologists (Hixon, 2008).

**Scope of Work, Compensation and Intellectual Property**

Determining the role of faculty is also related to three other decision items (Piña, 2021):

- The *scope of work*, (i.e., what needs to be done for the work to be deemed complete) should be explicit and written down.
- The *compensation* or incentivization for online course development (e.g., whether it is seen as expected part of the faculty member’s basic responsibilities with no extra remuneration or whether the faculty member receives release-time or a stipend/compensation for course development
- The *intellectual property* (i.e., whether the online course is “owned” by the faculty member or the institution and whether the compensation given to the faculty member constitutes a work-for-hire agreement.

**Instructional Designer Roles**

The role played by the institutional designer is directly related to the faculty role described above (Piña, 2021).

In an *autonomous* model, IDs are often viewed as optional or expendable. Faculty may view the instructional designer as a non-peer who is “trying to tell me what and how to teach,” not knowing or recognizing the distinct expertise and experience that the ID brings to the course development process (Dimeo, 2017).

In a *partnership* or a *teams-based* model, the instructional designer is assigned either voluntarily or by mandate. The success of this model is also determined largely by the relationship between the faculty member and the instructional designer (i.e., whether the faculty member considers the instructional designer as a mere subordinate or assistant or accepts the instructional designer as a true partner and collaborator for the course (Xu & Morris, 2007).

**Quality - Standards for Development and Evaluation**

While there is no common agreement regarding what constitutes online course quality, several resources are available to assist online/distance learning leaders (Martin & Kumar, 2018). These include Quality Matters (Quality Matters, 2022); Blackboard’s Exemplary Course (Blackboard, 2022); OLC/Open SUNY Course Quality Review (OSCQR) (Online Learning Consortium, 2022); and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) Instructional Design Standards for Online Courses (Piña, 2017). Some colleges and universities prefer a “best of all worlds” situation by creating their own institutional standards based on one or more of these standards and rubrics.

Whether an institution adopts one or more of the standards and rubrics mentioned above or creates its own, a decision needs to be made regarding how to use the standards, rubrics, etc. to
evaluate/certify/approve online courses (Piña, 2021). Some may choose to have individual faculty members, instructional designers, academic leaders or committees perform evaluations, while others may opt for a more formal route, such as Quality Matters certification.

Operations - Independent or Guided Design

In a traditional independent setting, it is assumed that the faculty member who develops a course is the same one who will always teach the course (Piña & Bohn, 2016). The course reflects the personal style and preferences of the individual faculty member. The differences between different instructors’ courses could reflect instructor variety and personality or could provide difficulty and confusion due to inconsistent interfaces, navigation, layout and use of course tools and procedures (Slaughter & Murtaugh, p. 261). Adjunct faculty could find it difficult to teach courses customized to a different faculty member.

“Providing a template for instructional designers and subject matter experts to compile the necessary content for the online courses they are developing allows for consistency across the design and development cycle. Using a design template also allows for the organization of the course information in a streamlined manner” (Slaughter & Murtaugh, p. 261). Templates can vary but tend to be organized to maximize intuitive navigation for students. Courses featuring templates tend to be easier for adjunct faculty, but some faculty may feel that templates stifle their creativity (Piña, 2021).

Master Course: A master course will typically add all basic course content to a template, making a course “ready to teach”—advantageous for new or adjunct faculty. An online master course can take different forms but is often understood to mean that all sections of a given course start out being identical (Piña, 2021). Faculty with editor access to their courses can then customize them as they desire.

Conclusion

The process of course development at the institutional level should be systematic—carried out in a planned and deliberate manner—taking into account the various decisions and tasks involved (Carr-Chellman, 1996). Failure to consider the components and decision items described herein early on will likely result in having to resolve more serious issues related to these areas at a later date.

References


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