Building an Effective Online Course-Development Community

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N otontraditional students are re-defining education—they seek those educational resources that they deem the most effective, economical, and accessible. In response, colleges and universities are attempting to utilize instructional technologies to reduce the barriers of time, space, and curriculum. Yet as administrators and faculty strive to address the needs of these learners, the demands of adult learners, and the importance of lifelong learning to professional economic survival, they are having to exchange ideas about both development and demand. Thus many institutions are focusing on an economy of scale with the instructional design and collaborative instructional development.

One example is nursing education at the University of Missouri. In 1997, the faculty from each nursing school in the University of Missouri System met and developed their proposal for the best way to leverage the funds available and the best way to utilize technology to support student learning and success in their programs. The proposal included the collaborative development of several Web-delivered, problem-based learning courses.

Building a Collaborative Development Community

One outcome of the collaborative development of the nursing courses was a strong sense of community. This collaborative development community included three basic subgroups or teams, each with a specific purpose related to successful online course development.

Within this framework, the instructional designer's roles spanned all of the different teams. The designer functioned as a change agent, provider of expertise, and facilitator, consultant in online instruction and Web course development, a facilitator, and a project manager. Additional team members could be phased into the project teams if needed. The teams were built around their specific functional goals:

- Instructional team: instructional designer, content experts, reviewers
- Technology team: instructional designer, specialist, programmers, server administrator, production specialists, graphic artists
- Evaluation team: instructional designer, students, administrators, outside online education experts, outside content experts, instructional team members, technology team members

The "distinctive gathering places" for each of these teams were solely for the purpose of communication and collaborative decision-making. Communication and interaction initially took place in face-to-face meetings. However, the teams quickly moved to the virtual environment that would also be the basis for course communication. Collaborative community building was solidified within the virtual environment and provided the added benefit of enabling those who would be the instructional designers of the courses to become more comfortable in their virtual classrooms. During the implementation phase, the facilitator focused on the members' ability to share ideas and plans, as well as disagreements regarding responsibilities, timelines, and interrelationships among responsibilities. These negotiations led to shared decision-making and consensus building. This created avenues for interaction that allowed community members to build trust, respect, and a conscious commitment to individual and group goals, leading to shared vision, risk, and ownership of course development. The importance of facilitating effective communication among team members cannot be stressed enough. At R. Pollow and K. Pratt stated in Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace, "The keys to the creation of a learning system and successful facilitation online are simple: honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness, and empowerment." J. F. Donaldson and C. E. Kozoll, the authors of Collaborative Program Planning, concur and note that interpersonal communication and social processes play a key role in effective collaborative groups. The processes lead to socially constructed meaning that is shared by the community members. However, it is important to note that in collaborative organizations, the psychological and social environment can vary constantly throughout the development process. They also are strength ened by the extent to which the social satisfaction, reputation, and identity of participating organizations and individuals are benefited. Additionally, the success of collaborative projects depends upon the perceptions of fair dealing, the considerations of individuals, and the perceptions of their roles.

Benefits of Collaboration

One of the benefits of the collaborative course development was the accomplishment of shared departamental goals. The cost of the development of the classes was shared by the three schools of nursing, thus decreasing the costs for each school while developing courses for all three. Collaborating was also a better course design and development than what the individual schools could have produced. None of the faculty had any experience teaching online, and few had experience teaching from a problem-based learning perspective. Nevertheless, collectively they were able to communicate what they wanted to be able to do from a teaching and learning perspective, and the instructional designer and the technology team were able to help translate the pedagogy into the new environment, creating courses that were more learner-centered.

The broader exchange of new information within the collaborative community increased intellectual exchange and stimulation for faculty and ultimately for students. Although faculty were experts in the courses they were teaching, individual areas of research differed slightly. This collaboration enabled the faculty to successfully carry out the team sub-tasks and to cooperate in the collaborative development of the course. The outcome of the collaborative development effort was an improved understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and benefits of collaboration.

Lessons Learned

Three specific lessons resulted from this collaborative effort. The first pertains to the selection of faculty to participate in a collaborative project. Administrators discovered that there was a direct correlation between that the more experience faculty had in teaching online, the better their collaborative experiences (either inside or outside the work environment), the course development process went much more smoothly. The second lesson was a more careful match of faculty to future collaborative development activities. The second lesson aligns with the current national dialogue regarding intellectual property rights. In future projects, team members will complete a memorandum of agreement regarding rights and responsibilities. The agreements will conform with legal and University of Missouri guidelines. This will hopefully standardize the process within collaborative courses.

The third lesson relates to ongoing support of the collaborative development community. The community members may change over time, which will not have a detrimental impact on "recreating" the sense of community. Because of the departmental shifting of instructors, facilitation and support for collaboration have to be increased.