Chapter 8
Designing Online Courses as a Team:
A Team-Based Approach Model

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ABSTRACT

Unlike the traditional "lone ranger" method for online course design—a method that hinges on individual faculty efforts, expertise, and knowledge—a team-based approach (TBA) harnesses the collective intelligence of several experts to design effective online learning experiences. Using learning design (LD) as a conceptual framework, this article describes the experience of a public institution in using a team-based approach to produce a large number of online courses for degree programs. After establishing the relevance of a team-based approach, the author discusses the premises that underpin the model, in terms of process, faculty relationship, and quality assurance. Building on these premises, a cyclical backward design process is described which is intended to (1) clarify course-learning outcomes and align course content, (2) determine acceptable evidence of students' learning, and (3) plan the learning experience. The article is concluded with a few insights and lessons learned from the institutional experience.

INTRODUCTION

Course design and structure influence online students' academic performance (Fayer, 2014; Hart, 2012; Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Lee & Choi, 2013) and therefore require close attention (Saunders & Gale, 2012). Serving as an alternative to the traditional classroom experience, carefully designed and structured courses provide students with an interface to help them navigate the online course content, understand the course expectations, and complete the course requirements. While careful course design and a clear structure provide a consistent visual map for easy course navigation (Ardito et al., 2006), contiguous and logical placement of the course content elements within the learning management system (LMS) reduces online students' frustration and increases their cognitive presence (Rubin, Fernandes, Avgerinou, & Moore, 2010).

In contrast, a disorganized course can negatively influence a student's motivation, satisfaction, and learning (Blaich, Wise, Pascarella, & Roksa, 2016). Unstructured and poorly organized self-paced learning environments are likely to thwart even the most enthusiastic self-directed learner (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Fabry, 2009). Without a clear structure, an intuitive interface, and clear guidelines regarding both course expectations and task completion, an inexperienced student is prone to encounter frustration and confusion and to lose the motivation to complete the learning activities (Al-Samarraie, Selim, Teo, & Zaqout, 2016; Park & Choi, 2009).

Yet, despite the importance of course design in supporting student motivation, satisfaction, and learning, most faculty members have not been trained to design effective courses (Fink, 2003; Gast, 2013; Taylor & Znajda, 2015), let alone to develop effective online course materials. Laurillard and Ljubojevic (2011) remind us that instructors have often been neglected, regarding the development of their learning design skills. While a few instructors are able to develop online courses on their own, others struggle to incorporate the pedagogical, logistical, and technological skills required in designing effective online courses (Caplan, 2004; Hixon, Buckenmeyer, Barczyk, Feldman, & Zamojski, 2012). As a result, the design of strong online courses requires teamwork and collaboration between the faculty member who acts as the subject matter expert, and a team of instructional designers and technological experts (Chao, Saj, & Hamilton, 2010; Moore & Kearsley, 2011; Puzziferro & Shelton, 2008). In other words, effective online course development involves a team-based approach anchored in well-established learning design (LD) and project management practices and tools (Abdous & He, 2008).

Unlike the traditional "lone ranger" design method that hinges on individual faculty efforts, expertise, and knowledge, a team-based approach harnesses the collective intelligence of several experts to design an effective online learning experience. The development team, grounded in a shared understanding of the course goals, with clearly delineated roles, tasks, and expectations, works collectively to produce online courses (Hixon, 2008). As argued by Sharpe & Oliver (2007), this process moves course design from a private, tacit faculty activity to an informed, team-based, and reflective process.

With these premises in mind, this paper shares our experience in implementing a team-based approach to online course development, one that is grounded in learning design principles. In an effort both to document our institutional experience and to inspire other institutions to reframe their online program development from a team-based perspective, we divide this paper into three sections. First, we discuss the premises of the learning design framework in order to highlight the importance of learning activities in course design. We follow this with a look at the merits of the team-based approach over the single faculty-driven approach. Next, we discuss the premises that underpin our design model. Finally, we discuss the backward design cycle that our production teams follow, and we close with a few practical insights gained from our experience in developing a large number of online courses. By sharing our lessons learned, we hope to contribute to the growing need to document team-based course design efforts, a need that remains largely unfilled (Gast, 2013).

Learning Design

As a conceptual framework, learning design draws from various theoretical perspectives, including activity theory, constructivism, and situated learning (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007; Muñoz-Cristóbal et al., 2018). Following a systematic approach, learning design blends theory and practice by organizing the learning process around learning activities, resources, and assessment. By placing learning activities at the heart of the learning process (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007), learning design aims to design discipline-independent

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