

Chapter 4

Using an Evolving Electronic Stylebook as a Touchstone for Online Learning Project Management

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ABSTRACT

For complex instructional design projects, having an evolving electronic stylebook offers a critical advantage in terms of organizing the work for quality and shared understandings. A stylebook may serve as a touchstone, a test, or criterion for the quality of a thing, because it is the documentary record for online learning projects. This chapter addresses the main contents of such an electronic stylebook and the criticality for the evolution of this work as the project parameters change.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning project management, even for a simple project, will involve some complexity. There are a number of “moving parts” in such a project, and to keep track of project expectations and to manage the relevant tasks, requires a clear understanding of the project goals, methods, technologies, roles, and other aspects. For projects that involve multiple team members in various dispersed locations, the work becomes even more complex, with more effort needed for coordina-

tion, discussion, decision-making and scheduling. The competitive advantages of using an evolving electronic stylebook (a work document defining the “style” of an online learning project) will become clear as this tool and its usages (in the real world) is described.

One way to frame the usages of an evolving electronic stylebook is to conceptualize it as a hedge against a number of project risks. Persistent generic instructional design project risks include the general risks of not meeting deadlines and not meeting quality standards for the work—based on the requirements of the stakeholders (in particular the grant funders). Or the work may be over-

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deadline and over-budget. The team members may not have the skill sets or tools needed to actualize the work. Or there may be risks of irrecoverable data loss or unexpected realizations of technological limits or lack of portability. It may be that the learning contents are at risk of technological obsolescence. Or, there may be team and leadership challenges. The classic collaboration challenges aside, there may be further risks—to the actual online learning work.

Risks to an online curriculum could be even more concerning. Some common potential risks include one or a combination of the following. The curriculum may not meet the legal standards of intellectual property. The digital learning objects may not meet federal accessibility guidelines. The curricular contents may be inaccurate. The designed learning may not involve the proper amount of learning for a particular unit (of time or credit or module or some other measure). The pacing may be off for the learning trajectory. The assessments may not evaluate what was taught. Or they may not meet the regulatory requirements for standards for the assessments. The conceptualization of the learners may not be sufficient, and the curriculum may not sufficiently meet their needs. Learners may require lead-in modules (to close the preparedness gap). Or supportive scaffolding may be necessary for the learning. Or it's possible that the main curriculum may require translation or revision for cultural adaptivity.

All the above challenges may be addressed with various management mitigations. Being aware of risks and liabilities early on may enable one to build correct in the first round and not have to return for revisions or retrofitting. The idea is to maximize the pre-development planning in order to avoid poor decision-making and the resultant loss of expensive developer time.

Building online learning projects is a challenging endeavor that requires the mixed expertise of a number of individuals. Such projects involve plenty of real-world complexity. There is usually a subject matter expert or several who

serve in that role of content expert. The unique requirements of the learning situation—the learning contents, learner backgrounds with the subject matter, learner needs, and the technological elements—will mean that planning, design, and development work will have to go into the online learning design. Assessments have to be created that represent the designed learning in the work, and these also have to enhance the learning for the learners, and these have to inform the instructors of valuable information for their own teaching. Learner interactivity has to be designed into some courses not only for learning value but learner retention—in instructor-led (and other types) online courses. Assignments often have to be reflective of how the learning would be applied to real life, and they have to also engage the imaginations of the learners. The e-learning trajectory of an online learning experience has to be smooth: moving from foundational learning to more complex learning incrementally. A curriculum has to accommodate various learners—some who are amateurs and novices, and others who may be experts in the field but need the credit or need further development in particular aspects of a course. A design may include the creation of various deliverables—some of them virtual and some of them physically tangible. Those learning experiences that must transfer to other instructors may require the uses of an instructor's manual or some sort of inheritance document. (Curriculums that are highly diverse and complex may need more supporting materials for inheriting faculty members—because not all of them may be assumed to have the skill set to teach a diverse or complex curriculum the most effectively.)

An electronic stylebook offers powerful value to project managers and the development teams of such projects. These stylebooks are meant to be used in the context of a healthy and mutually constructive workplace, with hand-picked team members based on unique skill sets. A stylebook is the single most critical administrative tool to keep an online learning project on-course not because

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