

Collaborations Toward Quality: Facilitating Student-faculty Partnerships for Online Course Design: A Pilot Study

Dan Clark, PhD
Director of the Center for Academic Innovation
Western Oregon University

David Bentz, PhD
Director of Distance Learning
Montana Tech of the University of Montana

Kristin M. Mauro, PhD
Center for Academic Innovation
Western Oregon University

Brief Abstract:

The purpose of this project was to explore the potential for creating and facilitating student - faculty collaborations in the design and development of online courses. The project was jointly conducted at two different institutional types in the Western United States. Although results indicated that various implementation barriers nullified participants' initial enthusiasm to participate and prevented the pilot program from fulfilling its promise, the outcomes and 'lessons learned' have informed the development of a new consumer-driven design paradigm and model.

Introduction:

Recent U.S. Government data suggests that as of 2012, 25% of college students were enrolled in *at least* one online courses (Ginder & Stearns, 2012). As this population continues to grow, so to has instructional designers' efforts to authentically assess students' experience(s) in this new learning environment, particularly as it relates to student dissatisfaction (Peters, 2001; Woods & Keeler, 2001; Arbaugh, Duray, & Nagao, 2001; Rovai & Jordan, 2004), and feelings of isolation (Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006; Schwartz & White, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2010). However, a review of the literature suggests that to date, there has been little if any research conducted whereby the students themselves have been *actively engaged* in the development of online courses, which begs the question: *Why aren't we asking those we serve what they want and how they want it?*

From manufacturing to Hollywood filmmaking, industries have long been engaged in the simple process of asking their consumers what they want, and responding to those wants and needs. The entire discipline of Human Factoring and Ergonomics (ISO, 2004), for example, is centered on a quest to establish principles of design and process that take into account human interaction with the items they use. From the Coca-Cola bottle's gentle taper for ease of holding to the ongoing evolution of the keyboard and mouse, human factoring has made an impact in virtually every aspect of our daily lives.

Furthermore, consumer related industries understand the importance of meeting their customer's expectations and have constructed numerous mechanisms and avenues of research in how best to understand their consumer's needs. These range from the countless examples of Web_2.0 facilitated consumer to the formal process of market testing that commonly determines the final edit of the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Consumer feedback, and industry's response to it, has helped shape the world we live and interact in.

In the last twenty years, higher education has seen a flood of new, and repurposed, educational theories, models, and rubrics intended to improve online course quality, increase social interaction, and guide research in the field toward greater understanding and awareness. Still, the question: *what do students want and how do they want it* remains largely unasked. As the marketplace for online courses and programs becomes increasingly competitive, research and conceptual modeling dedicated to a design process that actively engages students in a collaborative role with faculty to assist in course design and provide usability feedback is critically needed.

Context:

Founded in 1856 in Monmouth, Oregon, Western Oregon University (WOU) enrolls roughly five thousand undergraduate and a thousand graduate students in over six dozen academic programs. WOU typically offers roughly 100 undergrad and 50 grad online course sections per 10 week term. Of its Master's Degree options, five are offered fully online, while zero fully online undergraduate degrees are offered. Central Wyoming College (CWC) is a comprehensive two-year institution in Riverton, Wyoming that enrolls roughly 2300 students. CWC typically offers 25 online course sections per 15 week semester, and has two fully online associate degree programs.

Since 2014, WOU's Center for Academic Innovation has offered both Summer and Winter *Online Teaching Institutes*; faculty cohort programs to assist full-time faculty in the creation of effective and dynamic online courses. The Institutes, which consist of two initial half day workshops supplemented by several weeks of as-needed individual consultations and a final peer-evaluation/sharing session, blend a structured development timeline with presentations and peer work-shopping sessions. This structure allows faculty to share ideas, challenges, and motivation in a supportive environment while taking full advantage of personalized instructional design consultation and development support. Course developments follow the *Tailored Instruction* principles for effective design. Several design and development tools (such as the Intentional Design Framework and the TEC Course Design Guide) are made available to faculty to ensure their courses foster effective learning experiences. Faculty who participate in the Online Teaching Institutes explore new ways of teaching and learn to use relevant technology to promote student engagement.

Implementation:

In the Summer of 2015, a collegial partnership was established between WOU and CWC to offer the Summer Online Teaching Institute (SOTI '15) as a collaborative effort, with a SOTI held at CWC the week of June 1st, and at WOU the week of June 15. This collaboration included the Directors of each institution travelling to participate in the other's SOTI event, serving as guest lecturers, and providing as-needed consultation throughout the event.

To better reflect CWC's student-engaged 'active learning' culture, the structure of the CWC SOTI was adjusted (and improved) to include significant student participation in the event. This participation consisted of student-provided academic technology demonstrations and an open question-and-answer student panel. Furthermore, CWC students were assigned a faculty 'partner' to assist and support throughout the entire design and development process. Participating faculty and students were surveyed to provide feedback about their experience in the CWC SOTI. As this feedback was decidedly positive, the WOU SOTI '15 was augmented to also include a student panel question-and-answer session.

At the conclusion of WOU's SOTI '15 event, faculty were surveyed for their feedback regarding the student panel. They were also asked for their initial reaction to the CWC 'student development support' model, and whether or not that felt that a similar program should be implemented at WOU. Additionally, faculty were asked if they could foresee any challenges to the model, and what specific tasks would be most appropriate (and inappropriate) for students to perform. Finally, faculty were

asked to contribute any additional comments regarding the potential implementation of the ‘student development support’ SOTI model at WOU.

In light of the overwhelmingly positive response from both CWC and WOU faculty, a pilot implementation of the ‘student development support’ model was implemented at WOU’s Winter Online Teaching Initiative (WOTI’15) event on December 14th and 15th. As with the summer institutes, WOTI consisted of two initial half day workshops supplemented by several weeks of as-needed individual consultations and a final peer-evaluation and sharing session, held on April 8th. A variety of recruitment efforts resulted in the participation of five Graduate students from the WOU M.S. in Ed. Information Technology program. These students partook in an hour-long open question-and answer panel on December 15th and were invited to stay for a casual meet-and-greet with faculty over lunch. Student-faculty partnerships were established rather informally; after students were excused, faculty suggested the student they would most like to work with. This informal pairing resulted in one student being asked to partner with two different instructors (who were developing similar courses), while one student was not ‘chosen’ to participate.

Participants:

In all, a total of 19 faculty and 11 students participated in the project. The following tables illustrate the distribution. *The number of faculty and students who participated in an actual development partnership are in parentheses.*

Summer 2015 Teaching Institute at CWC

Dates	Facilitators	Faculty Participants	Student Participants
June 1 & 2	Bentz and Clark	3 (2)	3 (3)

Summer 2015 Teaching Institute at WOU

Dates	Facilitators	Faculty Participants	Student Participants
June 16 & 17, September 24	Bentz and Clark	8 (0)	3(0)

Winter 2015 Teaching Institute at WOU

Dates	Facilitators	Faculty Participants	Student Participants
December 14 & 15, April 8	Clark and Mauro	8 (5)	5(4)

Results:

In March and April of 2016 qualitative data from WOTI ‘15 participants was gathered both via survey and in-person interviews to better understand their perspectives of participating in the *Student Development Partner program*. When this data was combined with feedback collected from participants in the previous CWC and WOU SOTI sessions, several themes clearly emerged, and are presented below.

Finding one: *In general, both WOU and CWC Faculty embraced the concept of the Student Development Partner program.*

This sentiment was clearly evident in the responses of participants. However, it was also interesting to note that while many faculty were excited at the prospect of help in general, as demonstrated by comments such as “I truly appreciate the availability of support and the quick

response of the graduate student to any issues,” and “Knowing that the student was there and could provide super useful help for me,” some were more thoughtful and seemed to recognize the *pedagogical* potential of the program. Comments such as “I think it is great idea to pair the students with faculty. It gives each a view into how the other is thinking and why some areas are necessary and why some are not,” “I think it would be great to have student input during the design process,” and “In order to teach my students I need to know my students. Our conversation helped me understand [our] students a bit more.” clearly demonstrate that in theory, at least, faculty felt that this program showed great potential.

Finding two: *Students were excited and enthusiastic about participating.*

Of all the findings, this one was perhaps the most unambiguous. Students in the program were unmistakably encouraged at the prospect of playing a role in the development of courses. Stated reasons for this enthusiasm ranged from purely technical; “...I learned aspects of Moodle I did not know before,” to more design-based: “I enjoyed reviewing a course ...from the student perspective to determine how the faculty’s voice was being used.” Finally, some students viewed it as an opportunity to practice their intended profession: “I was interested to participate because I am interested in course creation and was looking to put that into practice.”

Finding three: *The actual implementation, unfortunately, failed to fulfill the initial promise of program.*

As demonstrated above, both students and faculty were initially excited at the concept of the program and the prospect of participation. In practice, however, the program fell far short of expectations. Several students made their frustrations clear in responses such as: “My faculty member only wanted to exchange emails, I did not have an opportunity to talk to them, I would have liked to talk to them about their expectations of me,” and “I wish I had been asked to do more.” Faculty responses in this area were more succinct. One faculty mentioned that “I’m not used to having help, so I never bothered to ask for any help.” Another commented that they considered the students “...most valuable as a safety net that I did not use.” Finally, one faculty (only half-jokingly) summed it up this way: “I never asked [the student] to do anything. I’m bad.”

Discussion:

As described above, an initial review of the response data clearly revealed that while participants from both institutions were enthusiastic about, and embraced the concept of, *the Student Development Partner Program*, the implementation fell short of expectations and failed to fulfill the initial promise of the program. A deeper dive into the response data also provided clues to possible factors that contributed to program’s modest success, as well as avenues for further exploration.

Implication one: *A clearer definition of the scope and “boundaries” of the partnership is needed.*

Responses from both students and faculty indicated that many participants in the program were unclear of expectations, and what types of collaborations were “allowed.” One faculty stated that: “I might have asked for help if I was told the kind of help I should ask for.” Similarly, one student reported that “It was difficult to plan because I did not know what I was planning for,” while another reported that “Faculty did not seem to know what they wanted or needed...” Interestingly, these responses seemed to echo an earlier comment by a faculty member who indicated that they would not be interested in participating in the program: “Actually, I think that [it] would be awkward. While I think

students have a lot to add, they are unfamiliar with the larger pedagogical issues that faculty members confront in designing and delivering courses. So, while their input might be helpful, it could create unforeseen problems for faculty in the process of development.”

Implication two: *Faculty might benefit from more structure and “enabling constraints” throughout the design and development process.*

While the above comments clearly indicate uncertainty with the “rules of engagement” of this new design process, responses also seemed to underscore a deeper reality. The SOTI and WOTI programs are unmistakably rooted in the philosophy of a faculty-led “give them tools and let them build it” model for course development, with loose, individually defined milestones for achievement and individually monitored accountability. This perspective assumes, among other things, that faculty will self-monitor and make continuous progress throughout the development timeline. While one might expect that faculty, particularly those who volunteer for an optional, incentivized program would possess the self-direction needed to make appropriate, regular, and meaningful progress in the development of their course, this has often proven not to be the case. Furthermore, even if the faculty member is able to “cram” to ultimately meet the overall development deadline, this approach is not conducive to the continuous feedback cycle intended in the *Student Development Partner* program.

Several faculty respondents reported that their courses were “not developed yet” or “not ready” for review by their student partner. This fact that often left their student partner confused: “I could have done more, if I had been asked, the course was not complete when I reviewed it.”, or frustrated: “I did not feel comfortable [trying to motivate] my faculty partner, I felt it was their responsibility to reach out to me [when ready].” These responses give clear indication that course development programs/ efforts, particularly those intended to employ a *Student Development Partner* approach, would benefit from more explicit and rigid development timeline and structure.

Implication three: *Purposeful selection of partnerships may be required to more closely reflect the intended “consumer-driven” paradigm.*

The open “casting call” for interested student participants for this project unsurprisingly resulted in a population of student volunteers who had a vested interest in the instructional design process (i.e. M.S. in Ed. Information Technology majors at WOU, pre-Ed. Majors at CWC). While one may assume that there would be significant benefits to having participants with backgrounds and expertise in pedagogical theory and course design, these students are not, by definition, “consumers.” As such, these partnerships were incongruous with a core tenet of the consumer-driven design paradigm: that students who assist in the design of these course do so from the perspective of potential future “patrons” of the courses. As one student put it: “I did not approach the tasks from the viewpoint of a student of the course, but as a student of *instructional design*. The tasks were not unlike a class assignment in our program, so I approached them in that manner.” Similarly, another student added: “I looked at things more like what I would do if I were teaching the course rather than how I would like to see things if I were a student in the course.” Comments such as these are indicative of the frustration expressed by budding “experts” in the design field not being asked (or allowed) to contribute to the design process in a “meaningful way.” While logistical and policy challenges (e.g. academic honesty considerations) will most certainly arise related to using Student Design Partners who could potentially enroll in the very courses they help design, these challenges must be addressed (and overcome) to authentically test the effectiveness of this new design approach.

Conclusion:

Although results of this effort indicated that the initial excitement and enthusiasm of both students and faculty for this program largely failed to result in unilateral meaningful design improvements for the courses involved, the outcomes and 'lessons learned' from the project will inform several ideas for further exploration. Among others, more research and effort is required in the following areas: refinement of an associated ID model representation of the consumer-driven design paradigm, identification of “enabling constraints” that would be beneficial to the faculty-led design and development process, exploration of potential risks versus rewards of intentional pairing protocols (e. g. Education majors as Development Partners for Education courses), and techniques for encouraging faculty to make use of the opportunities this (and other) programs provide. As the literature shows, or more precisely, doesn't show, we are just scratching the surface of actively and purposely engaging students in the course design process. Much work remains if we are to fulfill the promise consumer-driven design, and remain relevant in an increasingly competitive higher education marketplace.

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