How Do We Ensure Course Quality
When No One Seems to Care?

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Abstract

At Tiffin University's Center for Online and Extended Learning (COEL), one simple philosophy drives everything we do. Students, and their academic success, is our *raison d'etre.* Our daily reality, however, is that our collaborators are often driven by diverse motivations that may or may not fully align with ours. Although certainly not unique in these challenges, we have found success creating a structure that overcomes, and in many ways, focuses stakeholders' various and competing priorities toward the creation of quality online courses. By aligning duties and responsibilities with the knowledge, skills, and passion that each of our team members (and their faculty partners) can contribute, we have made significant progress toward ensuring our courses are inclusive, diverse, caring and, ultimately, focused on student success.

Context and History

Founded in 1888, Tiffin University (TU) is a rural, private, coeducational nonprofit institution in northwestern Ohio. TU offers a variety of fully online graduate and undergraduate programs in 7-week terms with six terms each year. In the fall of 2021, TU's enrollment of roughly three thousand included nearly 700 fully online graduate students and over 900 undergraduate students who took at least one online course.

Although TU had been renowned as an "early adopter" in the online arena (particularly with its online MBA offerings), by 2017 our online programs had largely fallen into disrepair. Stakeholders had become disenchanted with and disengaged from our online learning efforts, which came to be regarded as a "necessary evil'' of our academic endeavors. Our "Instructional Designers" had been reduced to glorified note-takers who struggled to make pedagogical inroads with our contracted Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), while quality and rigor were ensured solely through a dubious Carnegie unit audit conducted at the end of each course build. To be sure, TU's online efforts at this point looked a lot like that of many peers: largely faculty driven with virtually no authentic quality assurance process or performance expectations. In short, by 2018 it truly seemed that (almost) no one cared. Clearly, it was time for a change.

Building the Team (and the Culture)

(Dan Clark, Vice Provost for Online and Extended Learning)
The seeds of change came in the form of new academic leadership (TU's first Provost) with a renewed strategic focus to "redesign the distance education unit for best practice in learning delivery methods"

(Tiffin University, 2017, p. 7). To accomplish this, our first step was to build a highly qualified and experienced team who shared a common vision regarding the potential for online education and a passion for improving students' learning experiences and success rates.

Even in these pre-COVID years, it quickly became evident that it would prove challenging to lure a high-performing staff to on-site positions in rural Tiffin, Ohio. Although previous efforts at integrating a remote design staff had met with decidedly mixed success, we were convinced that through a purposeful and intentional recruitment and hiring process, we could find team members, both on-site and remote, who not only fit within our ideology and culture, but could also help us build upon and improve it.

We take great pride in making the COEL a place that attracts (and retains) exactly the type of skilled, passionate, and creative people that we *want* to work with. Rather than a strict hierarchy, we are "organized" around principles of respect, trust, and the free flow of ideas. We believe that our flat, team-driven structure fosters a clear sense of purpose, and every team member is fully invested and shares the responsibility for our ultimate objective: to create the types of exceptional online experiences for students that will help them attain their educational, professional, and even life goals. While functional jobs and roles necessarily vary, each of us is personally committed to working together as multi-disciplined equals, along with external stakeholders (e.g., Department Chairs and Subject Matter Experts), to ensure our courses provide an engaging and successful learning experience. In this way, the team operates more like a software development and design team than a typical higher education office.

Despite the best intentions, a structure where each team member is encouraged to laser-focus their skills and attention on one "piece of the puzzle" is not without challenges. Even while working toward the same goal, team members can find that they are aiming from different directions, sometimes catching each other in the line of fire, and often creating additional work (or rework). Minor frustrations and conflict are unavoidable (and only human). However, we work diligently to minimize the negative effects of these disagreements through constant open lines of communication, transparency, constructive debate, and a healthy sense of humor. As a team, we understand that ideas are like currency, each of us brings a unique skillset to the team, and ultimately, that we are accountable to our students and their success in everything we do.

Caring about Collaboration
(Diane Schmallegger, Director of Learning Design)
As we made progress in strengthening our own team, it became increasingly obvious that many of those who comprised our extended team (Program Chairs, SMEs, Instructors) were not fully bought-in to the new direction. For them, TU's online learning efforts were clearly not a priority, and the tasks associated with supporting it were perceived as busywork in comparison to their "real" jobs, which were dedicated to on-campus "seated" students. Our online faculty were a mixed bag, including a handful with extensive online teaching experience. Some of our senior faculty, though compelling in the classroom, struggled to transfer those skills to the online context. And, of course, our programs were burdened by a small contingent who seemed for all the world to just be looking to exert the minimum possible work for an extra overload stipend. Over the years, efforts to provide adequate training in online pedagogy had

been sporadic, so even instructors who wanted to deliver great online learning experiences had no direction on how to do so.

In order to improve stakeholder buy-in, the COEL team engaged in a purposeful, multi-year process focused on building an effective team, setting expectations for success, creating guidelines and a process for building our courses, and developing a comprehensive method for evaluating our courses. Early on, it became clear that our extended team members each carried their own set of beliefs, opinions, and expectations about what it meant to deliver high-quality online courses and programs. As it turned out, it wasn't that our collaborators *didn't care*, it was that they *only cared about what they cared about*.

To help create a vision for online programs, we worked with each chair to codify what they believed was important about their online programs in the form of a department philosophy statement. Next, we clarified chair responsibilities, expectations, and established regular working meetings (and summer retreats) to discuss, brainstorm, and problem solve various issues related to online delivery and planning, and to establish quality standards for our courses.

Next, we turned our attention to building more fruitful collaborations with SMEs. **According to iSixSigma:**

>A subject matter expert, or SME, is the person who possesses a deep understanding of a particular subject. The subject in question can be anything, such as a job, department, function, process, piece of equipment, software solution, material, historical information, and more. Subject matter experts may have collected their knowledge through intensive levels of schooling, or through years of professional experience with the subject. The SME has a level of understanding regarding their subject that is not common knowledge, making the person quite valuable to an organization. (ISIXSIGMA, n.d.)

While this definition is generally understood, what can be wildly different from one online campus to the next is the role the SME plays in transferring this valuable knowledge to learners. Absent a shared understanding of the SMEs role in creating online courses at TU, we found they all had very different expectations regarding what was needed from them. While they were experts in their field, their online experience was often limited or was quite different from the standards of quality we were moving towards. To further complicate the issue, many SMEs had served TU for several years, and had strong beliefs about what their role (and accountability) was, and wasn't. As would be expected, results were inconsistent at best. Despite the best intentions, we regularly encountered missed deadlines, inaccessible content, or content we didn't have permission to use, textbook misidentification, and outdated course learning outcomes from our SME. Students, as a result, battled with confusing instructions, missing resources, and often elements of pointless, unaligned busywork.

Once again, we used open discourse to develop a shared understanding and find solutions. Through a series of brain-storming sessions, the COEL, along with our Program Chair partners, discussed and debated the most important characteristics needed for a TU SME. After much deliberation, we identified the most important capability factors and quantified them as follows:

- 40%   Writing skills
- 25%   Ability to Collaborate/follow our process
- 10%   Time management
- 10%   Produce content
- 10%   Application of subject/ability to create authentic assessments
- 5%   Interest in online/student advocacy

The relative "exactness" of the above distribution is not nearly as important as the fact that *all stakeholders were in agreement*, and therefore could present a "unified voice" in communication with potential SMEs *before* we contracted with them to help us build courses. A comprehensive SME guide and communication plan was also constructed based around these core concepts. As a result, if a SME is surprised by anything in the kickoff call, they haven't been paying attention.

Caring About the Learning Experience

(Mike McKay, Online Learning Designer)
Video: [SME Course Development Overview](#) (2:36)
The online course creation process considers alignment, program suitability, and usability to be important principles of our course design. The design philosophies collected from each department's chair along with our own department's philosophy help our SMEs and IDs understand how each course fits within a program. This also helps with consistency across all courses leading to better usability. In order for our IDs to introduce these principles and provide the scaffolding necessary to begin a build, we have created a process we find successful for the development of our courses.

Once the Subject Matter Experts are brought on board, the ID sets up a kickoff call in which the chair, SME, ID, and Library Director meet to go over the objectives for the build, clarify SME expectations, discuss chair and department design philosophies, confirm materials and resources to be used in the course, and explore the SME's ideas and whether or not there are any concerns in regard to milestone dates and expectations.

The Course Build Plan helps the ID and SME work together to envision how the course will meet the criteria agreed upon in the kickoff meeting. It is very important for the ID to lead the SME through the process of identifying all of the components in the plan and to ensure alignment of course learning outcomes, weekly learning goals, activities, and provided resources. To provide clear direction for our SMEs, we created a detailed SME Resource Guide designed to walk them through the process of creating a course. Examples are provided, as well as timelines and clear explanations regarding expectations.

The SME and ID collaborate on the Course Build Plan for about a month until a finished version is sent to the chair for approval (Milestone 1). Once suggested changes have been made, the ID prepares the first two weeks of templates used to gather narrative components of the course. The Word templates we provide to the SME are based on our Moodle course template, which we call NextGen. Conceived of following considerable attention to student, faculty, and staff surveys and focus groups, NextGen is

designed to provide a great deal of teaching presence and focuses on the student experience and is structured to include introductions, weekly learning goals, topics, instructions, requirements, sources, tips for success, a conclusion and a section for introducing the next week's topic.

We provide Word templates to our SMEs which highlight required input and provide direction as to what should be written, allowing the SME to concentrate on introducing and explaining the topics for the weeks; adding resources, media assets, and other narratives to support the assignments or discussions. These templates are not provided as homework for our SMEs, to be completed in isolation, rather, our IDs meet regularly with the SMEs to provide guidance and recommendations.

After the ID and SME agree on the first two weeks of provided content, the ID places this content in Moodle, and it is sent to the Program Chair for review and approval (Milestone 2). The ID then prepares and shares Word templates for the remaining weeks and continues collaborating with the SME to create assets, such as quizzes, infographics, PowerPoints, and videos in order to create engaging learning moments with high participation in discussion and interactivity.

Once the entire course is in Moodle and has been reviewed and approved by the Program Chair (Milestone 3), the course is turned over to our educational technologists for an in-depth quality assurance review.

Caring About Course Quality

(Jason Bock, Academic Technologist)

"Attack is the secret of defense; defense is the planning of an attack."
--Attributed to Sun Tzu

Let's face it. Sometimes, we're at war. Quality assurance is a kind of procedural warfare.

There are two camps in this battle: consistency and creativity. A consistent user experience means students can learn where course functionality and resources are located. A creative experience can mean a more interesting and engaging course, if it can be realized.

We're at war on behalf of our students. Our students tell us they want an engaging and consistent experience. Our online students are working. They have children and other obligations. They want a consistent experience.

We're at war with SMEs and faculty who all have their own ideas about what students want or what makes things easy for them.

We're at war with our own team. Our instructional designers get bored and want to try new things. They disagree with each other on what is best.

We're at war internally. When is consistency useful for improving student learning? When is it too boilerplate? Where should we set hard rules and when should we be lenient to allow for creativity?

All of these questions boil down to ownership. Who owns the course? We are lucky at Tiffin in one way—our online courses are developed by SMEs as "work for hire." We don't have to worry about faculty ignoring our standards and expectations. That means we have the mechanisms to enforce quality as a team.

Nevertheless, there are many stakeholders involved in building a course. For us, Department Chairs lead the way with how their courses are developed. Each ID has an opinion about look, feel, and functionality. And our technical support team, ultimately responsible for the Quality Check, have opinions based on student and adjunct support questions.

To make sure we are following our own rules, we instituted a quality check process. We developed our quality check out of a simple link check. It has grown into a 16-page multi-faceted technical and usability check for every course. We look at a wide variety of topics including:

- Technical issues such as links, HTML, activity settings, and third-party integrations.
- Template issues such as weekly subsections, course learning outcomes, weekly learning goals, tips for success, and a weekly significance statement.
- User Interface issues such as instructions for using a new tool, consistent naming of elements and resources, and accessibility/universal design elements.
- Logical issues such as whether assignment instructions make sense.

What is perhaps unique about our quality check is the checker. The check is completed by two of our three-member technical team, not our instructional designers. They are checking the whole course: content, design, and interface, not just technical issues.

The only way you create a quality product is if you measure and review it. Everybody has to be on board with quality. Our entire team has learned our story of quality and makes sure quality happens. Everybody owns a piece of the course.

Our quality check has grown because of three critical unspoken ideals:

1. Every team member's opinion is valued and matters.
2. It's impossible to ignore something important. Comprehensive is a better check.
3. The student is the center of everything we do.

Our boss doesn't take sides very often. Early in the process, the tendency was to run to him and ask what he thought. Sometimes he has strong opinions, but he almost always forces us to work it out for ourselves. Now, instead of trying the end around play, we discuss and debate concerns or changes as a team.

Our team has devoted considerable resources to our quality checks. We changed our course build cycle to allow more time for better checking of courses (and a better opportunity to fix problems).

The quality check process has reduced disaster courses and student complaints. It encourages instructional designers to ask questions early in the build process. It has moved us in the direction of a better template. New and freelance IDs receive more specific training in how we build courses, rather than having to learn by trial and error.

We don't know when consistent is too consistent. At what point do our courses become dreary because they look similar? We're not certain.

On the other hand, we want our courses to be about business, criminal justice, or English. We don't want the courses to be about navigation, learning new tools, and other technical problems. With our quality system, the opportunity exists to create engaging, meaningful courses through creative resources and authentic assessments and activities.

Consistency may be winning the war in the course template, enforced through our quality check. Creativity has to win in the course content.

Conclusion/Recommendations

So, where are we now? Headed by the Vice Provost, our team of eight full-time staff partner with our stakeholders to create, on average, 70-90 online courses each year and manage the delivery of well over one thousand course sections. Student response to our efforts thus far has been extremely positive, and end-of-course feedback shows high levels of satisfaction with our "Next Generation" course design. Retention rates for online students are strong. We are building (and delivering) more accessible, higher-quality courses, and more of them.

So what's the secret sauce? Clearly, we have a great team who have all fully bought into our "students first" philosophy. Beyond that, each of us is encouraged to focus their passion and attention on the part of the system that they think is most important, that they *care* about the most. And like a barbershop quartet, each of our "parts'' combine to make a melodic whole.