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DISTANCE AND ONLINE LEARNING

The Value Proposition for Instructional Designers in Online Education

RICK SHEARER
DIRECTOR OF WORLD CAMPUS LEARNING DESIGN, THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE
UNIVERSITY

Whether they are referred to as instructional designers, learning design specialists or educational technologists, this group of professionals bring a key set of skills to the table when designing online courses for distance education. However, as our digital tool set has evolved one could justifiably question the continued need for the involvement of these professionals in the development of online courses. As one that lives in both the design world and as an affiliate faculty member, this is a topic that is often forefront in discussions.

To think through this question, we must first understand what instructional/learning designers bring to the table. This is a group of professionals that have both years of education behind them at the masters and doctorate level, and years of experience. Their educational backgrounds are founded on the underlying theories of how individuals learn, distance education theory, and adult learning theory. Theirs is not necessarily a world of known technology or known delivery methodology,

as what they bring to the table is an in-depth understanding for how individuals learn.

Thus to think of these professionals as the people that build the websites, or know the learning management system (LMS), or the ones that create multimedia would be incorrect. While they do bring these various skill sets along with them, it is not what they ultimately think about.

Also as part of this discussion we need to separate in our thinking what is required for an online course that may simply consist of a syllabus, grade book, some quizzes/activities, and lecture notes from a fully integrated online course. While an individual faculty member can definitely assemble the former without the input from an instructional designer/learning designer, it is almost impossible for one faculty member to craft a fully integrated online course without the guidance and input of an instructional design professional. One

could think of these professionals as the educational equivalent to the fix-it folks that come to our homes. In their bags is an assortment of tools they may need and a creative spirit to solve our toughest online instructional challenges.

Although it is not a topic that gets mentioned often when we talk about instructional design, one of the primary skills these professionals bring to the table is project management. While these individuals will take the lead working with the faculty members to craft the overall look and flow of the course, including establishing the course goals and individual lessons, learning objectives and assessments, they are going to draw on the expertise of many other people to assure that the students have a quality learning experience and the faculty have an enjoyable online experience that doesn't over burden them. The designer will work with multimedia specialists to have simulations developed, or video or audio segments produced of the appropriate length. They will work with the usability and accessibility experts to assure the course meets all ADA requirements and is intuitive in terms of navigation and understanding what a student needs to do from screen to screen. They will work with material and copyright personnel to acquire rights for third-party material (if not covered under the TEACH Act), and to assure intellectual property

agreements are in place. They will also develop a plan for repeat offerings so set up from semester to semester is seamless. While they do not see themselves as project managers, in fact they manage the project and assure it is completed on budget and on time.

Further, what is important to understand is the design and development of a fully integrated online course is a true partnership between the designer, the faculty member(s) and the rest of the team the designer draws upon. It is a partnership that when implemented can achieve outstanding courses for our students studying at a distance. While the faculty is ultimately the final voice in terms of content, sequence of learning and activities and assessment, it is the partnership with the designer and the team they rely on that crafts the course into an enjoyable and challenging experience that can guide the students to a successful end where they can demonstrate mastery of the learning objectives. Also, it is not just the process of design and development that is important, but also the designer's understanding of the adult learner (or those that have the characteristics of an adult learner) the underlying learning theories, and distance education theories that they bring to the table that makes the partnership with the faculty special.

For institutions to think that a

quality online learning experience will evolve if we simply give the faculty a few training sessions on the LMS and some consultation is undervaluing both the faculty and the students we serve. An individual faculty member cannot take on all the roles required to design and develop a quality online distance education course any more than a single instructional designer will be able to handle all the related tasks involved with instructional design. Thus, as institutions continue to pursue online and distance education they need to examine the instructional/learning design resources they can bring to bear on the endeavor.

Strategically, it comes down to the end experience we want our students and faculty to have. It is critical to remember that our online students studying at a distance are always just one click away from going to another institution if they have a negative experience. Further, while we do need to invest adequately in attracting students to our online programs we must remember that overall it is in their courses where students are going to spend most of their time, and the course experiences will ultimately impact the overall impression of the institution for students who are studying at a distance.