Identifying a Gap in the Project Management Approach of the Online Program Management and University Partnership Business Model

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Abstract
As the number of online courses increase in higher education, many higher education institutions outsource online course development to an Online Program Management (OPM) provider because of a lack of budget, staff, and technology. Current research indicates that OPM providers often do not have instructional design (ID) services tailored to a specific university. This research uses a case study to analyze a business partnership between a research university and an OPM provider. The Activity Theory conceptual framework was used to direct inquiry and analysis. Results show a miss of the "Empathize" (first stage of Design Thinking) phase in the project management approach from the OPM provider side, which made the process appear more like a start-up company and caused some faculty to lose motivation about the instructional design process. A complete Design Thinking approach from the OPM provider and the university partner are very important to reap the most benefits from this relationship.

Keywords: OPM-University model, Activity Theory, instructional design project management, Design Thinking, empathize

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Many higher education institutions believe that they must adopt online programs to better serve their constituencies, but making this decision requires faculty to adopt a new mode of teaching. Higher education institutions can build infrastructure to support their online program initiatives, or they can partner with management organizations (Online Program Management Providers [OPMPs]) that offer some or all of the services needed to make online programs successful. These services include marketing, admissions, and instructional design. This paper presents a case study that describes the interactions between the faculty at a research university, an online program management provider (OPM), and one instructional design firm that was outsourced by the OPM. The case exposes the problems that can arise during the instructional design process when none of the organizations practice effective process management.

The case study is rendered through the lens of Engeström's (1999) Activity Theory. The Activity Theory framework is a descriptive meta-theory rather than a predictive theory (Engeström, 2000). Analyzing human activity should not only involve examining the kinds of activities people engage in but also who is engaging in that activity, what their goals and intentions are, what objects or products result from the activity, the rules, and norms that circumscribe that activity, and also the larger community in which the activity occurs. The most appropriate unit of analysis in a system is "activity" (Jonassen & Murphy, 1999). In this paper, the activity is the instructional design process within the context of developing higher education online programs. Online learning uses a different platform, builds communities in different ways, demands different pedagogies, and requires different choices for curriculum as compared to face-to-face courses and programs (Morris & Stommel, 2016). They require more effective teaching principles and practices so that students do not get overwhelmed or experience excessive cognitive load. Many studies show that teaching online requires a different pedagogy and skill set as compared to the traditional classroom (Fetherston, 2001; Hardy & Bower, 2004; Oliver, 2002; Boling et al., 2012). As such, online teachers are faced with new pedagogical issues including student interactions, course content design and delivery, multiple levels of communication, new types of assignments and performance expectations, and different sets of assessments and evaluation techniques (Boling et al., 2012). This necessitates adaptations in teaching practices. A persona change occurs when a faculty member transitions from face-to-face teaching to the online classroom (Phillips, 2008). Use of technology in this field demands a shift from a teaching-centered to a learning-centered paradigm (Boling et al., 2012; Fink, 2013; Fink, 2013a).

The next section of this paper provides more information about instructional design, OPMs, and the relationship between them and higher education institutions. The following section describes the basics of Activity Theory and orients it to this case study. It also describes the data collection process. The penultimate section of the paper presents the data analysis, and the final section summarizes the conclusions and presents the practical and academic implications of the study.

Literature Review

Instructional designers and the instructional design process in higher education

Instructional Designers (IDs) are professionals who support faculty in colleges and universities in the development of online courses through training and consultations (You, 2010; Chittur, 2018). Instructional Design is "a collection of theories and models helping to understand and apply instructional methods that favor learning. Instructional Design as a method or a process helps produce plans and models describing the organization of learning and teaching activities, resources and actors' involvement that compose an Instructional System or a Learning

Environment" (Paquette, 2014, p. 661). IDs are familiar with technological features and learning processes of online course design and can encourage and provide training for their use and adoption. Most faculty seek to work with IDs for technical support and help (You, 2010; Chittur, 2018). Faculty and administrators sometimes think of IDs as technologists and learning management system specialists; however, they are experts in the area of learning design and can play an important role in the design process to advocate an appropriate mix and sequence of student-centered activities in the online course being developed (Chittur, 2018). Use of IDs in converting courses into an online format may cause professors to rethink their roles as teachers and maximize student learning. With the help of IDs, faculty will find themselves shifting focus to learning objectives and designing activities that can help students master those learning objectives (Chittur, 2018).

IDs operate within a community of practice and work with instructors, technologists, academic staff, and other administrative staff in their institution. IDs play a very important role in creating a change among faculty and motivating faculty to implement good teaching design. They should be comfortable with change and should be willing to act as agents of change (Pan et al., 2003), as well as help faculty reassess their knowledge about pedagogy if the interactions between them are successful.

Theoretical models in this field are derived from research based on how people learn and not from the application; hence, they are not grounded in practice (Schwier et al., 2007; Chittur, 2018). The Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement and Evaluate (ADDIE) Model is a commonly used process model for developing instruction in this field (Molenda, 2003). Many instructional design models replicate and extend the concepts of the ADDIE Model (Molenda, 2003). The ADDIE Model was first implemented at Florida State University for the United States Army (Forest, 2014). It is best understood and used as a conceptual framework for instructional designers to organize their activities into categories and to observe and analyze (Bichelmeyer, 2005). Novice or inexperienced instructional designers tend to align more closely to the ADDIE Model or another instructional design model as they begin to work, while more experienced IDs describe their work in broader terms (Schwier et al., 2007). The ADDIE model is a "top-down," behavioristic, and SME-driven approach to instructional design rather than a more collaborative and learner-based approach (Gayeski, 1997). Step-by-step procedures are too linear and time-consuming to work with subject matter experts and the cycle time to develop course materials is very long (Gayeski, 1997). The traditional ADDIE model does not offer any feedback until later in the cycle and so the most critical problems cannot be addressed until then (Gayeski, 1997). Modern implementations tend to integrate an agile model into ADDIE to provide feedback during development and piloting (Peterson, 2003; Campbell, 2014). Therefore, instructional designers follow an iterative approach during the evaluation process to collect feedback on learning designs before releasing the course into final production (Gayeski, 1997).

Instructional Designer and Subject Matter Expert (Faculty) Interaction

Instructional designers require proper interpersonal and communication skills to effectively manage interactions with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). Successful IDs are those who have collaborative skills to work with faculty and create an atmosphere of mutual respect (Armstrong & Sherman, 1988; Lin & Jacobs, 2008; Chittur, 2018). IDs build rapport with faculty by developing a sense of respect for the professor's teaching style and by limiting the number of suggestions to improve the course design. IDs communication should be managed in a way that the professor or faculty does not feel micromanaged (Chittur, 2018). IDs should not hold themselves out as experts of content matter (Pan et al., 2003; Barczyk et al., 2010).

The relationship between an ID and a faculty member is dependent on mutual respect and trust. Professors are more likely to make changes in pedagogy when they anticipate improved learning outcomes (Chittur, 2018). Faculty members believe that their instructional designers need to have a better understanding of their content areas (You, 2010). Experienced faculty who are new to teaching online can get anxious thinking that they may lose their identity as experts and hence resist teaching online (McQuiggan, 2007).

At times, the interactions between the ID and the faculty member can be difficult and problematic. This can happen especially when the ID tries to emphasize and recommend structure, but the faculty member is focused and used to handling the class session flow through personality and on-the-spot decision-making (Russell, 2015). The relationship between ID and SME is dependent on the strength of their trust in one another (Pan et al., 2003).

Online Program Management (OPM) Providers

Some higher educational administrators outsource the development of their online programs to third-party vendors (Springer, 2018). These third-party vendors are known as "Online Program Management" (OPM) providers (Springer, 2018). Universities need a substantial financial investment to develop their online programs internally (Springer, 2018). OPM providers are for-profit companies that invest some or all of the necessary capital up front to create the infrastructure for an online program, and also provide various services related to online program management for partnering with a college or university in exchange for a percentage of the revenue generated from the program (Springer, 2018). These OPM providers offer help in four core service areas: market/lead generation, enrollment management, student services, and course development and delivery (Springer, 2018).

Colleges and universities need to design and launch higher quality online courses (Riter, 2017). For these universities and colleges, building high-quality offerings and getting thoughtful instructional design support for their institution's faculty from OPM providers is most important (InsideHigherEd.com, 2019). There is a need by most of these higher educational institutions to get selected services on an à la carte basis and pay a fee for that service instead of going with the revenue-sharing bundle or package (Riter, 2017). Most OPM providers do not have economic sources or expertise to tailor the instructional design for a particular institution, program or course. Lack of budget, staff, resources, and familiarity with technology creates operational challenges that make outsourcing the development of online courses and programs to OPMs very appealing. However, most of these OPMs maintain only a small number of instructional design staff and place the main duties and responsibilities of the work on an institution's faculty (Riter, 2017; InsideHigherEd.com, 2019). Most OPM providers do not invest in instructional design because the underlying economic arrangement does not reward or benefit them by tailoring or suiting their approach to a particular college or university (InsideHigherEd.com, 2019).

Faculty of these institutions have a concern about the academic integrity from the commercialization of their intellectual property. Enrollment of students in online programs and not instructional design is of utmost importance for OPM providers as well as the institutions. Online enrollment drives revenue growth for both (Riter, 2017). As a result, most of their resources go into marketing and not into designing highly effective online programs. However, the potential cost of not providing effective course design can be lower completion rates and reduced satisfaction (Bawa, 2016; Hone & Said, 2016; Educause.edu, 2010).

Method

This research follows a qualitative approach using an interpretive case study to help understand the social and cultural contexts within which people live and work. This study focuses on

understanding the individuals and organizations involved in instructional design. Human decisions and actions can only be understood in context, and the context helps researchers "explain" why someone acted as they did (Myers, 2013). The researchers carried out detailed analyses of the decisions and actions taken by faculty within the context of a university and its business relationship with an OPM provider. Qualitative research does not base its process on sample size, and as a result, qualitative researchers generalize to theory rather than populations (Myers, 2013).

Sources of Data

This case study included a private research university (herein called RU or R University) that had recently joined a partnership with an OPM to develop and offer online Master's degree programs. The name of the university, the type of online programs, and the name of the OPM provider have been removed to maintain anonymity.

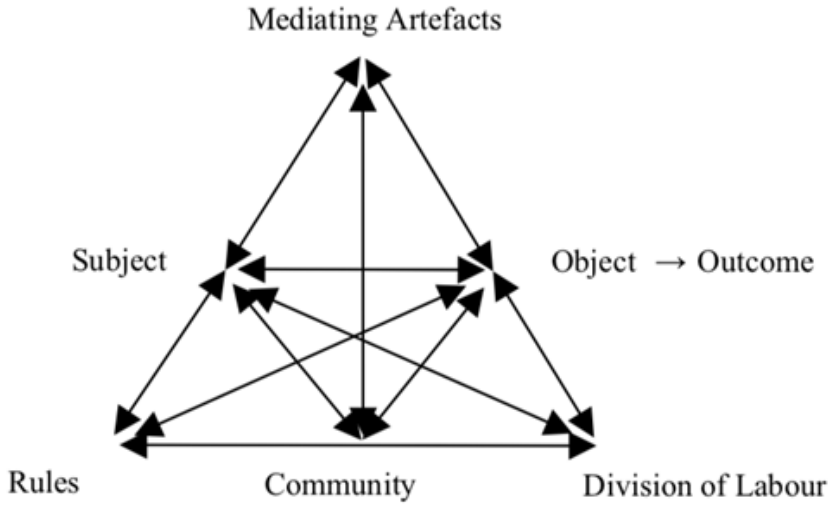
Faculty scheduled to teach in the fall semester codeveloped courses with the assistance of an instructional design firm and a media production firm (outsourced by OPM). These faculty members began receiving training from Faculty Support Services (in-house) provided by OPM. Administrative and technical staff at RU worked with OPM to integrate learning management and student management systems.

Activity Theory

Activity Theory (AT) was used as a framework to describe and analyze the entire work/activity system that involved the RU faculty and community, and OPM. Activity Theory is an umbrella term for a range of social science theories and research originating from Soviet psychologists Lev Vygotsky, Alexei Leont'ev, and Sergei Rubinstein (Cole & Engeström, 1993). Activity Theory is specifically useful in qualitative research methodologies (e.g., ethnography, case study) in providing a method for analyzing and understanding a phenomenon, finding patterns and making inferences across interactions, and describing and presenting phenomena through a built-in language and rhetoric. Activity Theory offers an external perspective on human practices (Arnseth, 2008). An activity cannot be understood or analyzed outside the context of which it occurs (Jonassen & Murphy, 1999). Analyzing human activity should not only involve examining the kinds of activities people engage in but also who is engaging in that activity, what their goals and intentions are, what objects or products result from the activity, the rules and norms that circumscribe that activity, and also the larger community in which the activity occurs. These are all parts of the activity system (Jonassen & Murphy, 1999).

Activity System. The most appropriate unit of analysis in a system is 'activity' (Jonassen & Murphy, 1999). The components of any activity are organized into activity systems (see Figure 1). The production of any activity involves the subject, the object of the activity, the tools (mediating artifacts) that are used in the activity and the actions and operations that affect an outcome (Jonassen & Murphy, 1999). The subject of any activity is the individual involved in the activity or the group of actors engaged in the activity. The object of the activity is the physical or mental product that is created. The object is acted on by the subject and is a representation of the intention that motivates the activity. Tools can be anything that will be used in the transformation of this process. The use of specific kinds of tools will shape the way people (or subjects) act and think. The tools alter the activity and are in turn altered by the activity (Jonassen & Murphy, 1999).

Figure 1
Engeström's (1999) Model of an Activity System



The AT model includes the following vertices moving in a clockwise rotation from mid-left: subject, mediating artefacts (tools), object, division of labor (roles) that influence the subject, community, and rules (Bradford et al., 2011). This model sets the actor and target action (or behavior) within the frame of the key factors having an influence on the actor and target action. Adjusting the model to the case of faculty and their teaching practices when launching online programs via a business relationship, the faculty is the subject with teaching as an object of active learning with an outcome target of new competencies. Teaching here implies anything related to the practice of teaching. It can also be improvements or new skills learned by the faculty member. Examples include a new approach to curriculum design, multimedia (audio or video) instruction, discussion forums, scaffolding, etc. The influences on the instructional process include current faculty roles, such as teaching and/or research, marketing, admissions, recruiting, leads, senior administrative officers, senior managerial staff, program leads, OPM managerial staff, the IDF (Instructional Design Firm) managerial staff, learning leads, and Instructional Designers working to support the object target outcomes (Bradford et al., 2011). Fellow faculty are part of the RU community. The community also includes technical and administrative staff from the RU. Fellow faculty (colleagues of faculty as actors) also impact other faculties as actors in the community section in this model. The community section also includes the students at RU. Students are part of the community in this model because the faculty provides educational experiences for their students. Policies, contracts, goals, quotas, deadlines, milestones, reviews, and evaluations are the rules that influence the faculty approach to teaching design. Finally, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), a Learning Management System (LMS), synchronous technologies, and other software that are used are the main tools to support online teaching for faculty and also help them design pedagogy. All kinds of technologies like data management integrations and other support systems from RU, the OPM provider, and the IDF are also part of the "Tools" section, and also impact faculty approaches to teaching design. In this framework, pedagogical knowledge and development gained by faculty can be considered as a mediator to reach the object by the actor (impact on teaching design by

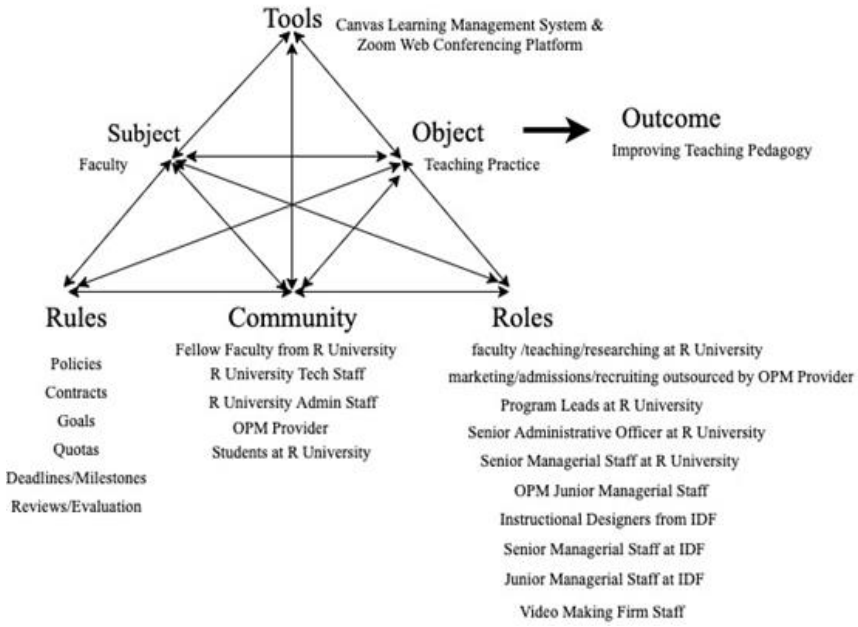
faculty). The resulting model incorporates the key actors playing a role to make an impact on faculty approaches to teaching design.

Activity Theory is a powerful framework for analyzing how faculty change their approaches to teaching design when they experience all the activities related to developing and launching online programs with an OPM provider. AT is also very useful because its assumptions are consonant with those that impact teaching design, faculty training and support, instructional designer and faculty interaction, pressure from the college community, student feedback and evaluation, faculty and technology interaction, policies and contracts with regards to R University and the OPM provider, the amount of time involved in designing online courses, and peer pressure (competing with other faculty members).

According to Bradford et al. (2011), activity theory can be used as a framework for an organization to self-evaluate its "Technology-enhanced learning" (TEL) or online learning practices. "The purpose of such a framework is to permit organizations a method by which they may examine their support for sustained innovation" (Bradford et al., 2011, p. 163). AT will support analysis in this case study by observing faculty and the community, roles, tools, and rules all the way from the start when faculty received training on course development and shifted to some on-ground teaching, and how the partnership between the two organizations managed the process. Figure 2 shows how this model fits into this case study situation.

Figure 2

Activity System Context for the RU and OPM Business Partnership



Research Design

The key informants were RU faculty members, RU staff, OPM staff, and instructional designers from the outsourced Instructional Design Firm (IDF). The first author had professional contact with one of the Program Leads of the online programs at R University who acted as gatekeeper. The Program Lead contacted the upper-level management of R University and the OPM provider managers to get the required permissions and formalize the study. The upper-level management

of R University and the OPM provider managers granted permission because they felt that this study was important to understand how the relationship affects faculty professional development. The Program Lead sent out an email to all faculty who were going to participate in developing or teaching online courses and was able to motivate all colleagues to participate. An email was sent to all faculty by the first author as a follow-up informing them about the project and inviting them to participate in an interview. Out of 16 faculty members involved, 15 agreed to participate. The Program Lead also sent out an email to the OPM provider managers to motivate them to participate in this study. The first author followed up with one senior manager of the OPM provider and two junior managers who were overseeing the instructional design process to participate and schedule time for interviews. There was only one senior manager and two junior managers overseeing the process with this university. The OPM provider had outsourced their instructional design services with another firm. The Program Lead also communicated with this instructional design firm and encouraged them to participate. Upon their agreement, the researcher followed up with the junior instructional design manager to participate and schedule an interview. There was only one junior instructional design manager from this outsourced IDF overseeing the process. The first author communicated with this junior instructional design manager to connect with all the instructional designers involved with faculty. Four out of five instructional designers agreed to participate in this study. The first author sent an email to these four instructional designers as a follow-up to participate in this study and schedule an interview.

Data collection procedures. Interviews, participant observation, and documents were the primary sources of data collection. See Appendix A for interview questions. Meetings between the faculty and instructional OPM staff were observed. Canvas course blueprints and university web pages were used as documents to verify data. The study was considered as "Exempt" by the RU Institutional Review Board.

Data analysis. The objectives of this study were met through a rigorous interpretive analysis process guided by Activity Theory. The first step involved the preparation of the data for analysis and becoming familiar with the data. The recorded interviews were transcribed. Analysis of the interview data was concurrent with the ongoing data gathering. After reading and reviewing the interviews several times, the researcher could begin to identify patterns. During the initial phase and the middle phase of the analysis, the researcher communicated with many participants to follow up on additional data as more patterns and insights were found.

The initial coding was done using Strauss and Corbin's (1994) coding method. An effort was made to uncover prominent themes in the experiences of faculty as well as how they are being influenced by each "role," "rule," "technical tool," and everyone in the "community." Looking at each of the vertices of the Activity Theory model, the researcher uncovered prominent themes in the project management process during this launch of online programs. Activity Theory complements how to explain the dynamic of the social and collaborative work environment. For this study, data triangulation was used for the instructional design process and some parts of the instructional delivery process of the online programs.

Results

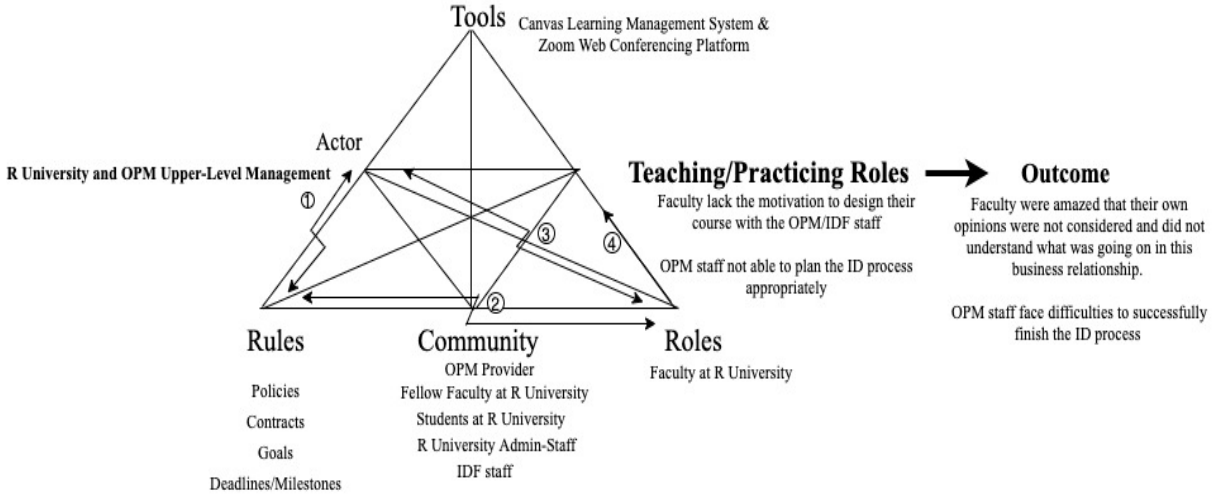
The result of using the Case Study and Activity Theory method is a recognition that the project planning process the OPM team used included flaws that resulted in a number of tensions that were quite varied. There are many approaches to assist with the planning and management of projects; for example, the Design Thinking approach that is used in a variety of fields when it comes to managing projects involving many firms just like in the case here (Scheer, Noweski, &

Meinel, 2012; Cassim, 2013; Koh, Chai, & Wong, 2016). The most commonly followed instructional design project management approach is the ADDIE Model (Gayeski, 1997). Step-by-step procedures of the ADDIE model are too linear and time-consuming and the cycle time to develop course materials is very long (Gayeski, 1997). IDs tend to follow an iterative approach during the evaluation process to collect feedback on learning designs before releasing the course into final production (Gayeski, 1997). They tend to integrate an agile model into ADDIE to provide feedback during development and piloting (Peterson, 2003; Campbell, 2014). One example of an agile instructional design methodology is the Successive Approximation Model (SAM) process.

For this business partnership, the project management approach the OPM team used, or as was perceived by the faculty working with their respective IDs and other OPM managers, seems to have missed two initial parts of structured project management: in the case of Design Thinking, the first two phases, "Empathize" and "Define," appear to be missing in the planning steps of the leadership team's project management planning. For the ADDIE or Agile models, the first two parts of these project management approaches, "Analyze" and "Design," also appear to be de-emphasized or missing. These two phases regardless of any project management approach used have been taken for granted by both RU and the OPM. This project planning or communication misalignment emerged as a result of this case study using Activity Theory analysis. Due to this misalignment, faculty were very frustrated and were not able to understand why they had to follow upper-level management decisions without even considering their opinion in this process. Figure 3 shows the flow of tension as bidirectional as faculty do not understand the decisions made by the upper-level management staff in this business partnership and their opinions were not taken into consideration. This figure shows the result pertaining to what was found.

Figure 3

Activity System Context for OPM/RU Incomplete Project Management Approach



Faculty are bound by a rule, i.e., a contract between RU and OPM (IDF outsourced) and a contract between themselves and RU. This is represented by arrow 2 and arrow 1, respectively.

Arrow 1 in Figure 3 represents the contract. Arrow 2 represents faculty bound with the contract between themselves and RU. Both arrow 1 and arrow 3 are two-sided to present the roles as they are influencing these players in the activity system. The actors (subject) for this activity are RU and OPM upper-level management, and faculty in this activity system play the "Role." The upper-level management were unable to first understand their faculty audience clearly before bringing in IDF and starting the instructional design process. There was no set of formal surveys, interviews, observations, or focus groups of faculty when this business relationship was considered. This led to lack of motivation among faculty as they did not understand why certain things were already decided without asking their opinions.

Arrow 3 represents frustration among faculty as they do not understand the policies and the reasoning behind decisions made for this business relationship. There was a mutual conflict between the RU faculty, and RU and OPM upper-level management, who were involved in managing and organizing this partnership. Hence, Arrow 3 is bidirectional. Arrow 4 is unidirectional representing the faculty's approach to their teaching and outcomes due to lack of proper planning. The impact on faculty pedagogical knowledge and development is that they lack the motivation to design their course with the OPM/IDF staff. As a result, the outcome was that faculty were surprised that their own opinions were not considered and they did not understand what was going on in this business relationship. As such, the OPM staff were not able to plan the ID process appropriately. The outcome for faculty is that OPM staff faced difficulties to successfully finish the ID process because of the lack of understanding their faculty audience prior to beginning the process for this partnership.

OPM provided options for two instructional design firms before starting the ID process. These firms did presentations, and RU faculty and staff selected IDF because they considered its approach better compared to the other instructional design firm. According to the Senior Administrative Officer at RU:

> Yeah, so OPM got IDF and another company called ABC. They had narrowed down those two as the best options for us. They then did a day of demo, with our faculty and our administration and so we got to meet with them, talk to them about how they approached what they did. … the instructional designers were also present. And so they gave us demos on how they build some courses and what they could do for us and how they approach what they do. And the faculty chose IDF.

All faculty were invited to come to these presentations and help to decide, but not all of them were able to come. All of the program leads did attend.

There were issues in the quality and skill-set of the IDF instructional design staff. They did not bring an instructional design firm that was tailored to fit the needs of RU. OPM staff missed on the "Empathize" and "Design" phases of this process. They did not understand the RU faculty in terms of their background, what they like to teach, and their assumptions about pedagogy and technology in teaching. RU upper-level management missed on the "Empathize" phase because they did not understand the background and needs of their faculty audience. There were no formal meetings, surveys, discussions, or interviews that would help to understand faculty needs and wants. No faculty personas were developed. Many decisions were not communicated to the faculty effectively. The quotes below show how some faculty were amazed that their own opinions were not considered and/or they did not understand the details of the partnership.

One faculty member felt that they should have been consulted about marketing as expressed in the following.

> A lot of OPM staff would come to campus and talk to us about ... how they were going to … you know I will give you an example. We realized that the target market after the first semester of advertising was probably the wrong target market. We are going after older people, and we wanted to shift towards millennials. … if I would have caught it earlier I could have said certain things and instead at these meetings I am presented almost finished products you know … And I said wait a minute … don't you think it should have a little bit of this…they said we didn't really think of that…you know that kind of thing. So, if you have a meeting just for the sake of it and you are showing what you are doing without collecting input from your faculty who were on the frontlines, especially if they are marketing people, then you are not using your time well.

This faculty member also complained that OPM people appeared disjointed and without any kind of substance during their annual meetings, and also stated that they should have allowed all faculty to express their opinions and have them express how the process should have gone. This faculty member complained that the instructional designers did not even open their minds to first listen to what the faculty had to say.

Another faculty member was concerned that decisions like the timings for synchronous classes were all taken by the leadership of OPM. Upon being asked if there were any meetings among all faculty within their program to make any decisions or communicate important things, this faculty member mentioned there were none of these.

> No I don't think so. There have been very few meetings where all faculty have been together with all the people you just mentioned.

Yet another faculty member corroborated this concern.

> Very informally. Like over lunch break and how things are going and so on. But no formal meetings or anything like that.

Upon being asked if the upper-level management took any survey, yet another faculty member stated that they were not aware of one.

> I have never participated in anything like that. Quite the opposite of that. I want to be able to modify the pieces of my courses as I see fit. You know I actually have those skills. I know how to build webpages. I know how to write code. You know it's not that Canvas is rocket science. It's sort of really just basic stuff … So you know….I am kind of cynical. I think that OPM views [it] as their course.

Some instructional designers complained that there were no set procedures and guidelines provided by the OPM side. According to one ID, they were not even provided any background of the faculty they would be working with and that they had to search on their own on social media.

> Yes. The briefings mainly on the faculty background were left to us to kind of research from their bio page or from LinkedIn or something like that. We certainly were alerted to the prestigious background of [RU] and that these certainly were experts in their field. And that ultimately if the faculty said that they wanted something done a certain way then that's the way we were going to do it. … So I think the relationship from the beginning was very clunky and very awkward because as I said I worked for IDF not OPM and so it would be like talking to your boss's boss is going over your boss to talk to someone. And so that relationship wasn't very clear.

This ID added:

> But certainly they did not have things in place in order to hire someone else to do what their vision was. I will say that. Whatever their vision was, they did not have the tools in place that would enable a clear path to work with faculty.

According to a junior managerial staff member of IDF, RU was one of their first projects along with three other universities. This means IDF never worked with OPM earlier. OPM was, in effect, testing this firm with RU. This junior manager also said that expectations were unclear for both IDs and faculty and things got better in the second build.

> … maybe for the first set of courses, the expectations were not set as clearly with the faculty or with the ID's. I don't think it was clear how many hours the faculty were expected to put in. And I don't know if the faculty knew that.

As mentioned earlier, OPM did not first study and understand the faculty before beginning the term 1 build. IDF and OPM were not even aware of faculty schedules and vacation plans. The junior manager also noted that they were unprepared. They did not know what course examples to show to faculty due to the lack of proper understanding of needs and expectations of faculty.

> … [as] we were developing the first set of courses there were still decisions being made about how things will be built in Canvas, what the homepage will look like, like all of those things were still being decided. So I think there was rework. But … most of the rework impact [was] on the ID and not much the faculty, I hope.

IDF was asked to match the instructional designers with faculty based on their subject matter expertise. No other information about faculty personas was given to IDF. A junior manager with OPM noted that:

> … we asked IDF to find people who have expertise in certain areas to try and enhance it. Of course, we can't guarantee that we can find instructional designers with expertise in certain content areas, but we do push for that. And then, we are not involved in the vetting of instructional designers …
> This junior manager also mentioned they did not start anything until the kickoff meeting.

The kickoff meeting was the first time when all the OPM staff, IDF staff, and faculty met for the ID process to start.

> It's just really hard to match people, you know, when they don't know each other and when you haven't. Like for example, we hadn't met a lot of the faculty until the kickoff and the problem we ran into is at the kickoff meeting, what do you start building? You have to have the IDs assigned so they can start working together. And so there's that lack of your, you kind of, you're doing your best to assign the instructional designers with very little information.

OPM staff was not well prepared to present to faculty with course examples and multimedia. The OPM junior manager considered this meeting as their training. Another OPM junior manager also mentioned that when they first joined, faculty were trying to understand what this process meant for them and lacked the knowledge and skills to complete the process. This shows that the assumptions of what faculty already know about pedagogy and technology had not been clarified.

> So, I definitely say the gaps were in organizational understanding and organizational effectiveness and then of course the knowledge and skills both from the SME's, meaning the faculty who are building, and some of the ways in which leadership were able to help them.

The training for faculty by OPM staff was not handled properly. OPM staff considered the faculty orientation as a training session. For the orientation, faculty were told how to work with their ID without first clarifying their current assumptions and knowledge. There was no formal training designed when they started working with RU faculty, but it was in process.

One of the main goals for RU from this business relationship was to help faculty grow in their online teaching knowledge and practice. Based on the interviews with faculty, IDF staff and OPM staff, there were no formal data collection procedures to first understand what the faculty knows, what they do, their plans for the course build, their personality characteristics, and so on. In other words, OPM did not first "Empathize" with the faculty. At most, OPM acquired the basic information about the faculty, in general, from the management staff at RU. The upper-level management of RU also did not first understand their own faculty and hence was not able to communicate this information properly to the OPM staff. This lack of empathy meant that the IDF staff, outsourced by OPM, was also not able to get enough information about the faculty with whom they would be working.

By not addressing the "Empathize" phase of the Design Thinking project management approach, OPM was not able to correctly address the "Design Phase." The result was that the partnership felt like a startup company without having all the procedures and guidelines in place. Some faculty considered this process to be disorganized and they lacked the motivation to participate fully in the ID process.

Discussion

This study is one effort to understand the project process management between a university and an OPM provider. Based on the analysis and interpretations of this study of a newly formed business relationship between an OPM provider and a research university to develop online programs, while there was an opportunity for faculty professional development, some

management decisions seem to have limited the expected results. This was because OPM and R University did not take enough time to understand faculty motivations, why the faculty were participating in this process, what their current knowledge and experience with regards to online teaching were, what their personal circumstances were, and so forth.

The upper-level management for all sides of this partnership did not consider the importance of the "Empathize" and "Define" phases in the Design Thinking Process. "Empathize" will help managers to understand the faculty audience. This could be done via a questionnaire, interviews or focus groups to build faculty personas that would be used to potentially differentiate the training and instructional design processes, and also match the ID staff accordingly. In addition to demographics, this step should ask faculty for their goals from participating in this process; their intentions to participate in this process, their schedule, and the amount of time that they could give to this instructional design process based on their other personal and professional responsibilities; their background in pedagogy and technology; their physical, social, and technological environment; and so on. In other words, the "Empathize" phase of the Design Thinking Process could have helped to facilitate the "Define" phase which would have identified the core needs of the faculty at RU and hence helped to improve the instructional design process for all stakeholders. Faculty can have a positive influence if all things are properly planned. According to the literature review, most OPM providers do not invest in instructional design because the underlying economic arrangement does not reward or benefit them by tailoring or suiting their approach to a particular college or university (InsideHigherEd.com, 2019). Enrollment of students in these online programs and not instructional design is of utmost importance for OPM providers, as well as the higher educational institutions. Online enrollment drives revenue growth for both (Riter, 2017). As a result, most of their resources go into marketing and not into designing highly effective online programs. However, the potential cost of losing the effectiveness of course design can be lower completion rates and reduced satisfaction (Bawa, 2016; Hone & Said, 2016; Educause.edu, 2010). Thus, this study shows that there are some glitches in the partnership process management where a lot of information was not communicated to the faculty, and the faculty needs and background were not considered. This study showed that the OPM partnership model may not consider tailoring the instructional design needs to the specific university environment.

In terms of limitations, this research is only based on one case study at a research university in the United States. There is a possibility that the interview answers from OPM staff and IDF were biased due to the fear of not wanting to give out any information that has a negative impact on their own organization. There were also time constraints as it was not possible to follow the partnership through more than two terms and the programs for this study were only for Master's degrees

Implications for Practice

OPM Provider Managers. OPM providers play a very important role in offering the best instructional design services to faculty at their partner university. Every university faculty audience is different. An OPM provider should first analyze individual faculty backgrounds before assigning a specific instructional design firm to the respective university. OPM managers should be very careful in the selection of ID firms. They should look into ID firms' strategies, mission, and instructional designers' skill sets, instructional designers' background and how the ID firm hires its instructional designers (permanent or contract positions). OPM providers and

their partner universities should carefully check the experience and skills of these instructional designers and analyze if they could fit into the OPM-University Model.

OPM provider managers should meet the instructional designers before aligning them with the faculty and communicate and train them on what the OPM's strategy is and how things will work. Training and communication of strategies for IDs will be very important. When outsourcing the instructional design firm, it is important to communicate strategies, resources, and planning of activities before jumping straight to the meetings with faculty of the university involved. This research showed that there were serious concerns regarding the coordination of the OPM staff and IDF staff especially in the very beginning, namely the term 1 build. During a new relationship, OPM managers should be very careful regarding coordination between staff from both the OPM provider and the IDF, and plan ahead to avoid errors and misunderstandings that can have a deep impact on faculty motivations to participate in this process.

In the study reported here, there were transitions in positions of the junior managerial staff of OPM as well as several transitions of IDs and some ID managers at IDF. These transitions within a single term build can create a negative impression on faculty perspectives of the OPM provider and IDF management and planning. OPM providers should make sure, to the extent possible, that the same people work for all the staff positions until the entire term build is over.

OPM providers should clarify with the university administrators regarding details of their faculty. OPM administrators should collect faculty data from the university they work with via surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations. They should try to develop faculty personas for the respective universities with which they work. This faculty data collection should include faculty job title; major responsibilities; demographics; goals and tasks; their physical, social, and technological environment; and their personality characteristics. They should also share this data with the instructional design firm, if outsourced.

Higher Education Administrators. Higher Education administrators play a very important role in the online program management partnership model. They should communicate effectively and clearly all the design decisions through events and meetings regarding the timings, hours required, number of weeks, implementations, organizations involved, and the goals for each and every stage, not only with the program leads, but also with all the faculty involved in teaching online. They should also provide incentives so that faculty participate in such events and meetings. If communication is only done with the program leads, it can be misinterpreted when it is communicated to all the respective faculty by their program lead. Lack of proper communication makes it difficult for faculty to understand why they are doing certain things a certain way or why they are doing those things at all.

All the efforts involved in an online program initiative should be merged with the strategy of the university. This intention should also be properly communicated to all the faculty who are participating. This will help the faculty to get to know the reason why this online initiative is going to help their university. This was one part of the communication process for which RU was successful.

College administrators should also first try to understand the characteristics of faculty who will teach online. They should try to "Empathize" with their faculty by understanding what their faculty audience needs and demands are, how much time and how many resources they have access to, and where their faculty currently stand in terms of their pedagogy and technological knowledge. They should also consider faculty who participate in the instructional design process to also teach their course online, or if that is not the case to codesign with a faculty member (e.g., an adjunct) who will be teaching the course online.

Further Research

We encourage other researchers to determine whether Activity Theory can help a budding partnership be successful. Because higher education managers and administrators have significant involvement with online teaching, especially with respect to OPMs, Activity Theory may prove to be a very useful technique to help them analyze and quickly solve problems in online education; for example, problems in relation to faculty schedules, instructional designers and subject matter knowledge, faculty training in pedagogy and technology when getting into online education, etc.

This study shows the importance of the first two phases of a project management approach like Design Thinking (DT). Further research could also explore how DT might provide new knowledge about project management challenges in partnerships. Such studies could further inform the field (ID, private sector-academia, etc.) of opportunities to improve complex projects like this one reported here.

Declarations

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Questions were framed based on the activity theory framework adjusted to process.

Faculty (Including Program Leads)

This is an overall list of common questions for faculty. Every interview was different. Many questions pertaining to situation came up during this interview process.

List of Questions:

1. What is your position at R University?
2. How were you brought into this process of online course design and teaching?
3. What are your thoughts and reasons for R University to get into online degree programs?
4. How did you decide which courses to put online or which online degree programs to put online?
5. What changes pertaining to the degree program did you'll go through when moving from residential programs to online programs?
6. What courses do you teach face-to-face and which ones are you going to teach online?
7. Did any of the leadership upper management people put any restrictions on course objectives or program objectives and anything related to the curriculum design process?
8. Anything related to marketing level that made you change your teaching design/practice or objective of program or course level?
9. Can you elaborate your experience on the instructional design process provided to you by OPM and IDF?
10. Online Teaching is completely different than traditional teaching. Online courses require a complete redesign and different pedagogical strategies. Pedagogy behind online teaching is completely different and completely changes compared to face-to-face traditional teaching. So how did the relationship between OPM or the ID's provided by IDF in collaboration with OPM impact changes in your approach to teaching design or pedagogical knowledge and development?
11. Have you ever taught online before?
12. So when you will be developing your future face-to-face or future online courses are you going to take any of their suggestions?
13. Can you elaborate on each of those like any of these strategies you just mentioned?
14. Do you feel there is going to be a bit change with teaching online? Are you nervous? Or Are you excited?
15. When in this design process do you eventually think when you go back to teaching face-to-face class are you going to implement the suggestions provided by the ID's?
16. Which are these strategies?
17. When you have a conversation with your ID's or anyone in the community like upper management, provost, community and say that I think we should change this or that because I think students are going to learn better this and it will be better for them? Say for example you have a discussion with ID do you ever suggest them or ask them to do it this way because you think your students are going to learn better in this way and not that way? Converse that this way of teaching is going to be more effective? Converse with ID, OPM or upper management or community anyone?
18. Has there been any communication with fellow faculty and any strategy they have been using has influenced you?

19. In this process does any admins staff or IT team from R University come into contact during this process?
20. Has there been any strict regulations of anything related to deadlines during the ID process?
21. Are there any deadlines from the upper level management?
22. Does marketing impact anything related decision about courses?
23. Do you have any specific requirements for your teaching practice from the marketing side?
24. Are you using anything related to this to the marketing strategy in your course designs?
25. Has the upper level management set any goals for this program?
26. Are there any specific number of student enrollment that is required?
27. Has the contract between OPM and R University made any impact on the overall online program or any of your teaching practice?
28. Have they forced you to do something related to pedagogy or coursework according to that way or this way or that way?
29. Are you creating all the materials or are the ID' creating it for you?
30. Has any of your research background impacted this to balance between research and preparation for online program?
31. Does your research practice create a conflict with teaching practice?
32. What about anything in relation to yourself and R University has impacted your teaching practice? For example, to save time anyone from upper-level management has come up and say that you have to design your assignments in this way or objectives...and so on ...?
33. Are you happy with the technical tools provided?
34. Were you involved in selecting these technical tools?
35. What is your overall experience with ID's? Can you elaborate on the ID process experience as a whole? And what do you think the university, OPM, and IDF could have done to improve the process?
36. Can you elaborate more on how much technical training were you provided and by whom? And what more was needed? Anything related to Zoom required something more detailed especially that was related to pedagogy? Anything that required more related to Hands-on training right before teaching?
37. Did you have a TA for your course? How helpful was the TA? Please provide very much in detail? Did the TA help in this online course development process?
38. There were no manuals on Canvas or Zoom for students in the blueprint version sent to me on Canvas. Nor did I see any videos training them on how to go about working on Canvas or Zoom. According to Quality Matters, this information is really important. Did this come up in the instructional design process? How important do you think it is for your students? Do you think if you had this technical information on how to use technologies it would be beneficial for your students? Does this impact your teaching?
39. Online and residency classes are bounded which is students cannot interchange, Students have to follow one track either take the whole program face-to-face or take the whole program online- Did this bother you in your teaching or course design?
40. Technical Constraints: Changes to course materials after publishing are fixed from IDF end. So once the course is published and while you are teaching if you want to change anything or face issues on course content you have to create tickets that are to be sent to IDF in a foreign country to fix- Was this an issue in your course design and teaching?

41. Design Decisions—Changes as to what you were teaching in the residential section of the program—1. Synchronous session in the evening at 5–7 pm—2. Only 2 hours live teaching—3. Shorter no of weeks—Did these Design Decisions from R University and OPM impact on your teaching or course design factors?

Instructional Designers

This is an overall list of common questions for IDs. Every interview was different. Many questions pertaining to situation came up during this interview process.

List of Questions:

1. Compared to other faculties you have previously worked with - what were the easy/enjoyable parts of the process, what worked well and why do you think it worked so well.
2. Did you see any growth or a lessening of faculty knowledge about pedagogy and/or motivation to change/improve their teaching? Especially also, did you see any transfer of things learned about online teaching to applications or intentions/interest to apply the same to their face-to-face teaching among faculty?
3. How much did R University and/or OPM help you before they started working with faculty - were there briefings on faculty background, expectations, potential areas of challenges so you had some kind of pre-alert?
4. How much did R University and/or OPM engage with the ID-Faculty interaction - were any interventions or R University/OPM input needed within the ID-faculty development/design process? Or R University/OPM sources of essential information that you had … i.e., in any way was R University / OPM really useful in your work with faculty?
5. Do you have any previous experience where you have worked with faculty WITHOUT there being an institution-OPM partnership model - i.e. where you worked directly within an institution, or work was contracted out from an institution to the ID company - if you have this experience, how does that compare to working with faculty within the umbrella of the institution - OPM partnership. I want to know if this makes a significant difference or not.

OPM Staff

This is an overall list of common questions for faculty. Every interview was different. Many questions pertaining to situation came up during this interview process.

List of Questions

1. Can you tell me first, what is OPM's core model approach for online program management?
2. So how did the R University partnership came up? Did they call you? How did the process really start? Do you remember? Were you part of that?
3. What exactly is your position at OPM?
4. Can you provide the OPM Organizational Chart? Can you elaborate which services are being outsourced and why?
5. So can you elaborate on what exactly belongs to you and what is being outsourced? All the services that you run?
6. Were there any specific number of student enrollment required to, for the program to continue running or?

7. Can you elaborate more on the kind of training services for faculty that are involved in this process?
8. Can you elaborate on the video making services provided by the Video making firm?
9. What relationship does it have with OPM? Why did OPM think that this service was needed?
10. Can you elaborate more the faculty support services for R University provided by the OPM?
11. Can you elaborate on the Student Support Services provided by OPM for R University students?
12. Can you provide details on the kick-off meeting or orientation provided for faculty by the OPM to introduce on the instructional design process?
13. Can you elaborate on the training sessions provided for faculty till now?
14. What more training services are being planned?
15. What role does OPM play when the dynamics between the ID from IDF and faculty from R University do not work well?
16. Is this the first project OPM is working on with IDF? Is R University, IDFs first client from OPM? Or have you'll work with IDF in the past with any other university?
17. What was the most important communication or terms and conditions between OPM and IDF when you confirmed R University as their client to work with them?
18. How deeply does OPM check with the skills of ID's that IDF is providing? Did OPM check with IDF regarding how do they hire ID's? How rigorous are their hiring processes and do their ID's have past experiences working with faculty specifically in higher ed? And most importantly how do they match their ID's with the faculty? Do you'll check all this?
19. What role does OPM play if the dynamics between the ID from IDF and faculty from R University do not work very well?
20. What do you think of this process overall? How has everything been?