A Concierge Model for Supporting Faculty in Online Course Design

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Abstract

Individualized approaches to online course design benefit faculty in numerous ways. Using a "concierge" model approach, this paper describes the working principles and steps used in course development. The general approach directly addresses many inherent problems with instructional design processes, which often highlight discrepancies in preparation and background between instructional designers and faculty as "subject matter" specialists. The concierge model outlined re-centers the course development process around the unique qualities of individual faculty, their academic and professional knowledge of the course "content", and the body of skills and knowledge introduced by a partner instructional designer. All members of this partnership stand to gain in positive ways, as faculty can share their passion and depth of knowledge "translating" traditional course material to online teaching formats with the supportive skills and insights of the partner course designer. To guide this interaction, the paper provides "10 Concierge Keys of Supporting Individualized Online Course Development". Together these offer a manifesto to guide academic instructional design support staff and units responsible for course development.

Introduction

One approach to facilitating design of online courses can be to gather faculty into large group training workshops. This approach can prove to be a mechanistic experience not to mention a nightmare to schedule given perpetually busy and overloaded faculty schedules (Mullinix, 2006). Equally problematic are static, "self-serve" online materials that, while ever available and timely, only go so far and can leave faculty disengaged or confused (Centra, 1978; Riegle, 1987; Steinert, 2000; Howland & Wedmen, 2004). Given the limitations of these approaches, one model that may hold promise, though less common in higher education, is an approach of personal support services modeled on the hotel concierge; a model that has been successfully adapted to healthcare settings and private industry (Michelau & Lane, 2010). Shifting models of teaching and training have also caused us to reconsider the "*en masse*" approach in favor of more highly personalized models, which employ some aspects of adaptive learning processes and acknowledge the ever increasing role of information and communications technologies such as highly personalized mobile devices (Tyre & Von Hippel, 1997; Schwartz, et al 1999; Martin & Carro 2009).

As faculty and faculty developers, we recognize that teaching is a highly individualized and personal process, which intersects the individual faculty member's own perspective, content knowledge, and expertise. Further, course development is a complex and longer-term prospect. Outlaw and Rice (2015) reported on the benefits of an individualized, 6-phase model of course development. As such, we need an approach that honors both the faculty unique perspective and the complexity of the

course development process. Which brings us to the Concierge Model of Faculty Online Course Development.

Concierge Model of Faculty Online Course Development

Concierge course development and faculty support is a "just in time" model, recognizing the unique circumstances that guide the specific needs for technology and course design support. It is a highly individualized and personal response, with an instructional designer or course developer (Concierge Course Consultant or "CCC") working with one faculty member at a time. The following document outlines the consultation steps to use (independent of course content, prior training, or location of the faculty member). Good teaching is good teaching, and a strong course design is strong whether technologies are employed in the process or not. So, while this protocol and guide is aimed at the online course development process, in truth it is applicable to any course improvement process where faculty are working with others at their institutions, whether others are peer faculty or staff working in instructional design or teaching excellence centers.

With our combined experiences in faculty development, we created a more personal and individualized response to course and faculty needs. As former faculty, we recognize that teaching is a highly individualized and personal process that intersects the individual faculty member's own perspective, content knowledge and expertise. Every teaching professor has a unique passion for teaching, individual style, and habits of communication. The basic steps below are offered as a model and guide for faculty and staff engaged in supporting online course design and individualized faculty development processes.

CONSULTATION STEP 1: The Course Appraisal

Part 1 - Preliminary Appraisal and Preparation

Prior to the first meeting with the faculty member, the faculty member provides the Concierge Course Consultant (CCC) a copy of a traditional course syllabus and completes a Course Appraisal Questionnaire. The CCC reviews the syllabus, poses clarification questions reflect on the faculty's level of self-efficacy (new online instructor, a seasoned online veteran, or somewhere in between). The CCC prepares for the first meeting with during the first meeting the faculty to address the desired elements or "instructional darlings" that need to be kept or dropped in the transition. Question topics covered include:

1. Primary Course Type/Focus: Lecture? Reading? Lab? Project-based?
2. Main goals and learner outcomes/objectives clearly stated in the syllabus?
3. Content sources: Traditional texts, web-based, media, proprietary software... or some combination?
4. Interaction & Activities: Designed into the traditional course? Desired in the online course?
5. Assessments: Clearly outlined? Related to each learning outcome?

    a. What types of assessments are being used for each assignment?

    b. Do assessments encourage formative, as well as summative assessment? *(Note: importance of this in online courses where face-to-face interactions are non-existent or limited).*

The CCC (instructional designer/consultant) schedules a time with the faculty member to meet them at their desired work location.

Part 2 - The Initial Interview

The first meeting proceeds in a conversational style, guided by the collected information and questions. The conversation should revolve around the following guiding points:

- The general topic, focus and scope of the course
- The faculty member's motivation to teach this course (i.e. their passion for the subject or content; its relationship to any research interests)
- Any additional/relevant information not yet collected/shared during the preceding appraisal process

CONSULTATION STEP 2: The Initial Work Plan

Based on the Appraisal Process and Interview Meeting in Step 1, an Initial Work Plan is drafted reflecting the appraisal assessment, agreed upon new elements of the course design, and a timeline for overall completion along with checkpoints to monitor progress. It includes specific suggestions for improvement or development as agreed. This can be formalized as a "learning contract" or not. The goal of this step is to arrive at an agreed upon targets for specific improvements to the course. A work plan will contain the following:

- A list of the agreed upon tasks and goals (left hand column).
- Associated checkpoints, and outcomes/evidence (next columns).
- A realistic timeline for completion (last column) - Sufficient time estimated for successful completion of each task, including negotiated checkpoint and final review dates determined by faculty and CCC schedules (considering other commitments, scope of the task, etc.).

Each activity should be specific and achievable so that the faculty member can work on it independently and be able to make sufficient progress between checkpoints. By providing activities and timelines, this plan serves as a clear guide to the process and can also be tracked and monitored for accountability.

CONSULTATION STEP 3: Periodic Progress Reviews

Checkpoint 1 - Progress Reviews and Consultations

With the clarity of the Initial Work Plan to reference, both the CCC and the faculty member can monitor progress and work both independently and together to build specific course elements according to the goals and activities outlined in the work plan. Periodically, the CCC and the faculty meet to review progress, discuss successes and challenges and develop strategies for overcoming any obstacles. These reviews allow for regular communication and just-in-time support, as well as appropriate adjustment of the agreed workplan. The number of meetings is variable, with some faculty needing just a little guidance and direction, while others may require more direct input and assistance. It is still important to meet regularly even if the only focus is to congratulate each other on good progress and admire the work done so far.

CONSULTATION STEP 4: Final Reviews

Checkpoint 2 - Final Review

At some point after any number of periodic reviews and consultations, a target time point or benchmark is reached and it is time for a final review. This review should be conducted in person, with ready access to the course documentation. At this point, the Consultant and faculty member will agree whether the conditions of the workplan have been met, or if further work is required for satisfactory completion. This part of the process may also require a re-evaluation of the initial/evolved workplan and revision of the targets to support continued work, or to accurately reflect the joint work and accomplishments.

Checkpoint 3 - Peer Review, Internal and External

For workplans that involve more complete course re-designs or revisions, some additional review by internal, external (or both) reviewers can be beneficial to conclude the process. Reviewers should have access to original rubrics and outcomes of the workplan to conduct their reviews. Both faculty and Consultant should consider how best to incorporate the findings and recommendations of the review. A detailed report back to reviewers regarding the related course adjustments may or may not be needed, but an acknowledgement and appreciation of the reviewer's ideas and input is always a good idea. In general, this step may not be necessary or desirable when it comes to more specific and targeted improvements, or where timeframes are condensed or quite short.

Guiding your Concierge-Style Consultation

A word about foundations and approaches to facilitating consultations. Essentially this process is one of change, on a personal, psychological level and on a cultural, social level, both for the faculty and for the course development consultants. Elements of self-efficacy, ego, beliefs and values, internalized and externalized behaviors abound in the domain of teaching. To address course improvement without considering these issues is folly. Applying tools, methods and "best practices" outside the context of these inter and intra-personal realities can be ineffective and de-humanizing. The indignation that some faculty express at the idea of "faculty improvement" is understandable as many course development activities are based on a deficit model, focusing on assumptions about what faculty lack in perceived skills, rather than building on what they already know and do. A concierge, a good one anyway, serves a simple function: understanding where 'the guest' has been, where they want to go, what they want to do, and pointing out to them the best match in services or directions to get them efficiently and pleasantly on their way. In the same way, the Concierge Course Consultant should keep these ideas in mind and be ever-aware of the key principles that guide their interactions with faculty. We offer ten 'keys' to keep close and help facilitate the course redesign journey.

10 Concierge "Keys" for Supporting Individualized Online Course Development

We like to point to Wes Anderson's humorous film *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) and its *"Society of the Crossed Keys"*, as the inspiration for our model. The 10 "keys" to the concierge model listed below present the central concepts of this approach:

1. **The Course is Being Developed, Not the Faculty.** Shift the focus from "faculty development" to one of "course development." Naturally, the faculty member will "develop" during the process, as they must and will learn new skills and approaches, but the focus on course development allows us an objective basis for construction and reference.
2. **Meet Faculty Where They Are.** Reach out to faculty *in situ* whenever possible or convenient, not just physically in their space, but where they are in terms of their practice. This helps faculty learn new skills and techniques in comfortable and familiar surroundings, increasing the likelihood that they will be able to replicate any demonstrated behavior.
3. **The Faculty and Course are Unique.** Listen carefully and identify the essential content and suggest appropriate, tailored tools and design elements. Avoid presenting a "one size fits all" response. While templates and common formats may be helpful, each course and faculty member are individual and unique. Some content may suggest or lend itself to being presented in specific ways: through text, media, or demonstration. Ultimately any course designed is a complex confluence of the individual faculty member - with all of their unique characteristics as human beings, personality, history, proclivities, and habits, both good and bad - and the course content and activities.
4. **Keep it Simple.** Keep suggestions about things to change simple, and specific. Suggested course improvements should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-sensitive (SMART). . Online teaching uses different processes of communication, presentation of content, and assessment, which are often complex and unfamiliar. A faculty member may

spend years learning what works for their classroom-based course, but may be expected to adapt those processes to an online environment in a matter of weeks. The changes should be implemented in a visible, manageable way, one at a time.

5. **It Takes Time.** Redesigning a course for online is a serious and time-consuming undertaking. Faculty and instructional designers are busy people and time is always considered a precious commodity. There are no real easy or quick ways to redesign a course for online delivery, so having a clear plan and getting a firm commitment from the outset is important.

6. **It Will Change Them, and You.** Redesigning a course should leave both the concierge designer and the faculty member enriched, smarter, and wiser. Course redesign is a reflexive process that starts with a current course, explores and interrogates directions, desired outcomes and goals, and then moves to build a unique learning experience. As a Concierge Instructional Designer, we are privileged to be able to peer into the content and teaching of an individual course and engage the mind of the faculty member at work. At the same time, we consider ourselves as students, so that we may see the course through the student lens. In the best interactions, the course, the faculty and the designers are all changed by this process.

7. **Rubrics are Our Friends.** Incorporate rubrics to provide clarity and direction to the student and demystify the content and assessment of learning. A well written rubric, faithfully followed, yields good results. Rubrics take several forms, but the main intent is letting students know the details and form of successful responses to assignments. Exemplary course assignment instructions should include well-defined descriptions of levels of expectations, performance, and/or skills reflective of and in rubric criteria.

8. **What to Keep,** *and* **What to Let Go.** Ask what elements or qualities of the traditional course are essential and should be kept at all costs. Have the faculty member identify the course foundations that should not be lost in the transition? These become the critical aspects of the course experience that need an effective online equivalent. Whether a specific bit of content or a communication process, finding the appropriate online equivalence becomes an opportunity for the faculty member to re-assess the usefulness of assignments or activities in the new environment.

9. **It is "Their Course", Not Yours.** Remember your role in the overall exchange of ideas. Humility is a valued trait. As an instructional designer you may well know more about course design, however they have to teach it. That said, while the faculty author may "own" the course, the course concierge offers insights that can make a course an effective online learning experience. Melding experience and ideas can ultimately make the course a more effective learning experience for students; which is, after all, the primary goal for all.

10. **There is Always More to Do.** A good course is never finished as course development is an ongoing process. Look for new ways to improve some aspect of the course, and also recognize and leave intact those elements that provide evidence of success; "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". The process of renewal should always be part of good course re-design, making each course an "always in beta" project.

With these 10 keys in mind, approaching online course design can be a constructive and collaborative team effort.

Closing Thoughts

We continue to refine this manifesto for faculty developers and course designers, building on both on our experiences and the concepts and guidelines shared above. The emphasis on an individualized approach does not necessarily negate the benefits of interprofessional education (IPE) and collaborative learning, widely promoted in the healthcare professions (Baldwin, 1996; Bridges, et al 2011). Rather, we believe that a highly individualized approach to *course* development can strengthen the individual faculty member's ability to engage and collaborate with peers in professional communities of practice.

In keeping with the "Society of the Crossed Keys" (Grand Budapest Hotel, 2014), we continue to engage our colleagues and revise the model and keys based on in-presentation feedback at conferences (including the 2016 Teaching Professor Technology conference in Atlanta and the DLA 2017 conference at Jekyll Island, GA) and invite ongoing reflections and suggestion. Together, using our own network and "Society" of faculty and course developers, we can develop a concierge-inspired model tailored to the reality of our respective institutional settings to best support faculty development of quality online courses and learning experiences.

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[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)