Planning and Managing the Development of Courses for Distance Delivery: Results From a Qualitative Study

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Converting traditional face-to-face course offerings into distance delivery formats is one of the greatest challenges facing administrators and faculty in higher education today. In addressing this challenge, it is evident that there are two primary approaches to managing distance course development. Some faculties opt to develop and deliver courses on their own (Reinert & Fryback, 1997), whereas others work in close collaboration with selected university or college departments to implement this conversion process. The experience of the authors is the latter, that is development and delivery of courses for distance education has occurred in collaboration with other disciplines in the university. This article will examine the experiences of administrators, faculty, and staff from supporting university departments as they struggled with the issues inherent in interdisciplinary course development.

Background Information

In recent years, the development of courses for distance delivery is no longer an option for faculties or departments who wish to remain competitive for students in an increasingly global community. In a western Canadian faculty of nursing, administrators have experienced considerable pressure from licensing bodies, nursing unions, and practicing professionals alike, to establish courses and programs that are accessible and relevant. Course offerings at the undergraduate and graduate level, such as, advanced nursing practice, and intensive care, as well as special programming for rural and northern areas are in high demand. Furthermore, the population of the region is geographically dispersed, making it difficult for many nurses to access university education. Compounding this problem, faculty administration have been mandated by the government to extend its resources to meet a responsibility for all professional nursing education in the province. One strategy to meet this demand has been to increase the number of distance delivery course offerings. To realize this goal, faculty at this educational facility worked closely with other sectors in the university, such as, instructional designers, media producers and technicians, administrators, and other faculty in designing nursing courses for distance delivery.

In light of these demands, administrators and faculty must become more effective and efficient in developing courses for distance delivery. This design process is an expensive undertaking. Many of the true costs are hidden as time spent by faculty on this activity is usually not budgeted for, nor tracked in a comprehensive manner. Sessional faculty are often hired to take on scheduled teaching to free faculty to participate in course design. In addition, faculty generally do not possess the requisite expertise and resources to develop and design distance delivery courses on their own. Consequently, they must seek out and use the expertise housed within their own faculty and other departments of the university. For the most part, these collaborative partnerships have been successful because of the mutually shared goal of producing a quality, learner-centered product.

The development of courses for distance delivery has not been discussed adequately in the literature. In fact, there is a dearth of substantive discussion on the merits of interdisciplinary course development. Much of the modern day thinking around distance education has a philosophical perspective based upon the British Open University (BOU) model. According to Garrison and Shale (1990), "the success of the BOU gave the rest of the world a practical model and an astonishing demonstration of the success of the open education concept" (p. 2). The BOU model uses an interdisciplinary team approach to course development. This approach is based on the notion that developing a distance course is not simply applying an interactive technology to traditional course offerings. Rather distance education should capture what teachers do in the classroom in a way that can be understood by students studying at a distance. Not only does it require an understanding of how students learn, but also how the content should be reorganized so a particular level of student can effectively meet the course objectives. Interaction with the teacher requires different approaches to explain and clarify difficult concepts. It is for these complex reasons that course development requires an interdisciplinary approach. Interdisciplinary education has been defined as "an approach in which two or more disciplines collaborate in the learning process with the goal of fostering interprofessional interactions that enhance the practice of each discipline" (AACN, 1996, p. 119).

In taking an interdisciplinary approach, administrators needs to examine collaborative partnerships with an understanding of the talents, abilities, and strengths of each team member. This notion is supported by Foster (1992) who states, "when a course is created by a team enterprise, there exists, maybe transiently, a culture in which is it hardly possible not to learn from one's colleagues, hardly possible not to acquire insights into their skills, approaches and philosophies in respect to teaching and learning" (p. 196). This "project management" approach is also promoted by Bates (2000) who believes that "resources are used efficiently and that individual team members contribute appropriate skills and knowledge to the project" (p. 68). Bates views this project management model as being advantageous to teachers because the project manager can assume most of the administrative and bureaucratic duties thus freeing faculty to function as content experts.

The planning phase of course design and development is of major importance in distance education. In the absence of attention to course design, instruction has the potential to appear disjointed and teacher-centered. According to Schieman, Teare, and McLaren (1992), what must be avoided is a "standby approach where traditional on-campus courses are re-worked slightly" (p. 61) and then offered as distance courses. This is supported by Eastmond (1994) who states, "when instruction is systematically developed, the course has organization, logical consistency, and wholeness that can engage students and supply the conditions for efficient learning" (p. 96). By examining the roles and relationships of the various stakeholders involved, administrators and educators can build a better model for future interdisciplinary distance course development. The purpose of this article is to describe the issues facing administrators in supporting faculty to plan for and develop distance courses.

Methodology

Statement of the Problem

There is a general lack of understanding regarding the experiences of administrators, faculty, and staff from other departments in the development of distance education courses. The researchers' interest in the problem developed from their teaching and administrative experiences in planning for and designing distance courses. The research questions guiding the study were:

- What are the main issues facing administrators, faculty, and staff in planning and designing distance education courses?
- What organizational structure and resources are best suited for distance education course design?

The research study was approved by the Ethical Review Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, University of Manitoba.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen for the study given the small sample size (n=11) and the absence of information in the literature on the problem. An open ended interview guide was developed to facilitate the interviews. Questions guiding these interviews are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview Questions

- Can you tell me how you went about developing your course for distance delivery?
- Which other departments in the university did you work with when developing this course?
- What was this experience like?
- Did you experience any problems that interfered with or slowed down course development?
- Do you have any recommendations for how the course development process can be improved in the future?

These interview questions were designed to elicit the experiences of the participants in the course development process. However, in keeping with the tenets of qualitative research, these questions served as a guide only, allowing the researchers to pursue the data as they emerged. Interviews of approximately one hour in length were conducted. Detailed notes were kept during the interviews. Content analysis of the interview notes was conducted independently by each of the researchers. This independent review enhanced the confirmability of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001)). Once the initial analysis was completed, the researchers identified the major themes that emerged from the data.

Participants

A purposive sample of eleven participants was interviewed. Selection of a purposive sample was in keeping with the goals of this study in that the experiences of these particular participants were integral to the research. Eight faculty members taught in the Baccalaureate Program for Registered Nurses (BPRN) and/or the Graduate Program. Three members of the Distance Education Department (DED) who participated in the study worked in an instructional design or administrative role with nursing faculty in the course development phase. These DED faculty were members of a separate university unit within the Continuing Education Division. Triangulation of multiple sources from two different university units added credibility to the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This study was conducted within one educational institution, and therefore, the findings are not transferable to other settings. The findings and recommendations, however, may be useful to other administrators who are struggling with the issues inherent in planning and managing the development of distance education courses.

Findings

Several major themes emerged from analysis of the data. The authors have extrapolated and presented those findings that impact specifically on the planning and management of distance course development. The major themes include: i) faculty workload, ii) administrative models, iii) ownership of course materials, and iv) administrative costs.

Faculty Workload

All faculty participants agreed that designing distance courses was time consuming and impacted upon their ability to fulfill other scholarly responsibilities. As one faculty respondent stated, "My workload wasn't adjusted. It's more work than designing an in-class course". Most faculty reported that designing courses for distance delivery was carried out in addition to their regular teaching assignments. A related issue which affected faculty receptiveness to take on course conversion to distance delivery was the belief that this activity was not fully recognized or seen as a priority for promotion and tenure purposes. Not surprisingly this issue was a major concern to untenured faculty who are under pressure to be productive in the area of research and scholarship. A final workload issue cited by faculty was they would have appreciated collaborating with those faculty who had previous experience in designing distance courses. Without exception, faculty working in a more independent fashion described the trial and error approach used in the design phase. In their view, working with more experienced faculty would have ameliorated this labor intensive approach to course design.

Faculty workload was also a concern for administrators. As one administrator cited:

> *Designing distance courses is so time consuming, faculty are often working for less than minimum wage.*

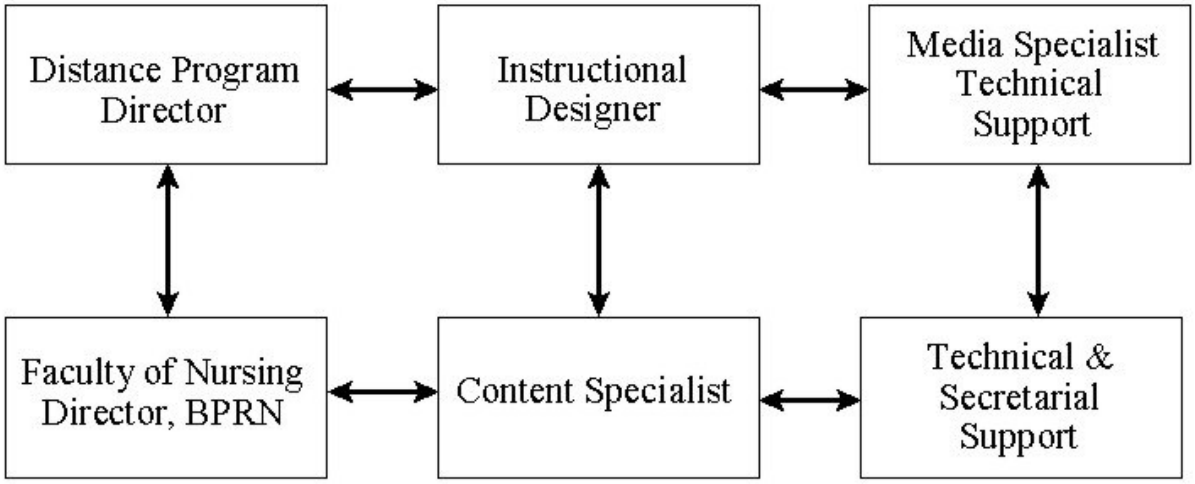
One faculty member, a former administrator, recommended providing faculty with "release time" from their regular teaching assignment if designing distance courses. In that way, faculty time for research and publication would be

protected.

Administrative Models

This study revealed there were two distinct ways in which course planning and development took place. The first model uncovered was labeled the Parallel-Linear Model (see Figure1).

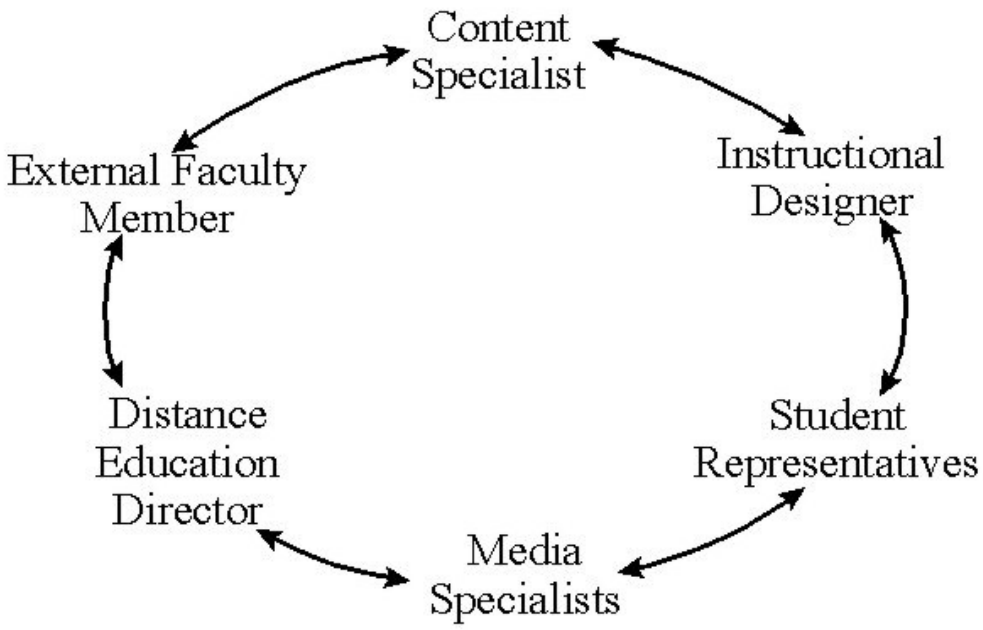
Figure 1: Parallel-Linear Model



This model was most evident in the BPRN. It included two parallel structures operating simultaneously. Within the DED, the participants in the design process included a program director, instructional designer, and media/technical support staff. From the Faculty, participants in the design phase were the Director of the BPRN program, faculty as content specialists, and technical and support staff. Although this model provided the opportunity for frequent exchanges among the participants, the interaction was limited to any two individuals meeting together at one time. The frequency of these meetings was a function of the faculty member's teaching experience and comfort with the development of his/her course for distance delivery. At no time did all the participants in this model come together to discuss the developing course. This approach is consistent with the "Lone Ranger Model" described by Bates (2000). Bates believes this model for planning and developing distance courses contributes to a poor use of technology, sub-standard production of educational materials, limited applicability of the finished product, and an inappropriate use of faculty time.

The second model was described as an Interdisciplinary Team Model (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Interdisciplinary Team Model



This approach was found to be successful particularly in developing courses in the graduate program. In this model, the various participants met as a team on a regular basis to develop the course, problem solve, and discuss issues as course development unfolded. This team approach seemed to be particularly well suited for courses incorporating advanced technology in distance delivery, such as, web-based courses. Membership on the team was comprised of faculty members with expertise in course content, a coordinator of the overall project, and technical support personnel. The strength of this model was that team members learned from one another, broadened their knowledge base, and appreciated the strengths which the other members brought to the table. The team continued to meet after the course development phase was completed to deal with issues as they arose during course delivery.

Ownership of Course Materials

Faculty respondents identified course ownership as a major concern. Ownership was defined as giving up copyright and control of course material to another university unit. The Parallel-Linear Model in the BPRN was such that DED contracted the services of faculty to develop and teach the nursing courses. Faculty stated they preferred having the same independence and control over their courses as they did with traditional approaches. Faculty highlighted ownership issues such as: i) assignment of course materials copyright to DED, ii) the right to revise their own courses independently, and iii) DED control over programming and course design decisions.

From the perspective of the DED, ownership of course materials was viewed as necessary for two reasons. First, if faculty owned the copyright, changes and re-assignment of the course to another faculty member would be problematic. Secondly, it would be difficult for the DED to fulfill their commitment to lease courses to other Canadian universities.

Administrative Costs

Faculty and administrators who developed clinical practice courses for distance delivery identified administrative

costs as an issue.

> *There are unanticipated costs in clinical courses that were not budgeted for. Distance Education didn't expect these costs and I didn't know about them.*

Although the faculty knew the time needed for planning would be protracted, they had no idea how long it would actually take. In contrast to a theoretical course, one participant had to design separate course manuals for the theory and clinical portions of a course. Furthermore, issues such as administrative contracts with health care agencies and letters of consent for clients had to be developed. In the delivery phase, compensation costs for faculty were considerably higher related to both the increased time spent with students in the practice settings and the number of faculty required to mentor students in the clinical practice component of the course.

The data revealed that the cost of maintaining distance courses was higher than originally anticipated. This was directly related to the rapidity of change in nursing knowledge and the need to keep course materials current. The Faculty of Nursing has been required to update course materials every three to four years. This is a significant cost to the unit, both in financial and human resources, for these revisions.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have raised several suggestions to improve the administration and delivery of distance courses. These recommendations include:

Develop a Strategic Plan

Senior administrators in universities and colleges must invest in a strategic plan for distance education. Management must provide leadership in developing this plan for the institution as a whole. Unit administrators (Deans, Directors, Department Heads) can then adopt the strategic directions that best suit their needs. According to Bates (2000), this "plan should be concrete, with a detailed vision statement, goals identified for action over the next three to five years, action steps or implementation strategies, and measureable or easily recognizable "deliverables" or outcomes, all clearly specified" (p. 56). The strategic plan needs to build on the unit's strengths and minimize its limitations. Once established, the strategic plan should be shared widely with faculty and staff. It is this dissemination and participation which contributes to acceptance and adherence to the future directions of the unit.

Adopt an Interdisciplinary Team Model

The interdisciplinary approach actively involves more stakeholders during both development and delivery phases, thereby ensuring continuity and avoiding overlap of roles and responsibilities. There are several advantages to the Interdisciplinary Team Model. This strategy is dynamic in that team members can be brought in and out of the team as needed. The respective capacities of the team members become transparent as the team works together, thus defining roles and responsibilities for both development and delivery phases. The model provides a supportive environment in which all constituents can learn from the strengths of one another. This approach is consistent with the work of Foster (1992) who advocates for the use of the collective strengths of team members. In contrast, faculty operating within the Parallel-Linear Model remain at a distance from the technical expertise housed in other departments. Therefore, there is a tendency to sustain the lack of technical familiarity within the faculty and thus become disheartened with the intensified workload.

Institute Faculty Development

The walls of higher education in the 21st century will be lowered or become nonexistent. As such, administrators and faculty need to shed the "techno-peasant" persona. Generally faculty are unaware of the capacity of technology. They are more comfortable using what they know and a fear of the unknown makes them averse to change. There is a sharp learning curve when faculty participate in developing distance delivery courses leading to an increase in workload. Faculty need to assume a commitment for becoming more conversant with technology so we can become more informed team participants.

Administrators must be cognizant of and work within the boundaries established by collective agreements. In higher education, it is clear that administrators are restricted by "technology clauses" in faculty agreements that require faculty members' consent before they can be assigned to develop or teach a course using advanced technologies. It is apparent that faculty development activities will help ameliorate resistance by faculty and facilitate the development

of distance courses. These faculty development initiatives must be included in administrative budgets. The initial costs of these activities will be neutralized by the long-term return on this investment.

Mentoring new faculty is essential to the production of courses for distance delivery. The Interdisciplinary Team Model can address this issue. Inexperienced faculty can be brought into the team prior to assuming responsibility for course development and delivery. The team can be supportive and mentor inexperienced faculty early in the process, ultimately facilitating their work and decreasing frustration in the development phase. Once again, the up front costs of this initiative will be minimized by the long term gain.

Adjust Faculty Workload

The commitment and willingness of senior administrators within the institution are essential to effective development of distance programs. In response to faculty comments about the amount of time required, a method must be identified to factor development of courses for distance delivery into workload assignments. A reasonable approach for calculating workload would be to assign distance course development a factor worth three credits hours of classroom teaching (3 hours per week) for theory course development and six credit hours (6 hours per week) when developing a clinical practice course. This suggestion is based on the experiences of faculty regarding the amount of time spent in course development. Release time for faculty to develop distance delivery courses has resource implications. "Funding is an issue for distance learning programs " (Reinert & Fryback, 1997, p. 424). In their study they found that three of the seven programs they investigated had to find financial support for the program out of their baseline budgets. However, they concluded that faculty must receive financial support if the distance education offerings are to succeed in the long term.

Revise Tenure and Promotion Criteria

There undoubtably will be increasing demands on faculty to participate in distance delivery development related to increased pressure for access to courses. This pressure will be driven by student demand, as well as the increased capacity of technology. However, distance delivery is a time-consuming task and, as such, needs to be valued within the university system. Faculty, especially those who want to advance through the university ranks, will be reluctant or will not participate in distance delivery because of the lack of rewards for this activity within the university system. In Reinert and Fryback's study (1997), faculty reported having little or no time for research or publications when they were involved in developing courses for distance delivery. Therefore, recognition of developing or teaching in distance delivery courses as creative work, must be included in the criteria for tenure and promotion. Administration must ensure that processes are in place to have this issue sufficiently addressed by tenure and promotion committees.

Address Ownership Issues

The issues related to intellectual property and ownership of educational materials developed for distance courses are complex and sensitive. The explosion of distance technology warrants a careful examination of this issue. Administrators must attend to the following questions: what is the institutional policy regarding intellectual property; what happens if the course author leaves the institution; can the faculty member sell or lease the course to others; and, can other faculty be assigned to teach the distance course designed by another (Link & Sholtz, 2000).

A supplementary partnership arrangement would see the Faculty of Nursing taking the leadership role in the development and delivery of distance education degree courses. This would maintain ownership of course materials within the unit. Expertise from supporting units could be purchased as needed. This would necessitate the creation of an infrastructure within the Faculty of Nursing to manage the day-to-day operations of course delivery. Such an arrangement would continue to value the strengths and contributions of each partner, while at the same time allow the Faculty of Nursing to respond more quickly to issues which arise in the development and delivery of distance education courses. Administrators will need to think carefully about this approach as it will impact on both the financial and human resources of the unit.

The ownership debate will continue to escalate in higher education as educators choose to incorporate web-based strategies into their courses. The recent introduction of sophisticated educational technology is forcing administrators and faculty to re-evaluate traditional models of ownership. Burk (1997) contends that faculty who create course materials will want "to preserve their academic integrity" (p.10) and assign copyright to this material. On the other hand, colleges and universities have a vested interest in securing copyright on "their" product to curb the migration of these materials to competing institutions. It is evident that the ownership and intellectual property

issues have and will generate much discussion. The issue of clear allocation of ownership is paramount to avoid administrative or legal disputes from occurring.

Conclusion

One of the biggest challenges facing administrators and educators is to rethink what constitutes education. The university or college of the 21st century will not be a repository where students come for learning. It has become increasingly clear that students are capable of learning without the physical presence of a teacher. Advances in educational technology are forcing administrators and faculty to contemplate different modalities for course offerings, especially distance delivery. In a highly competitive, global market place, students are no longer limited or confined to local universities or colleges. To continue to be relevant and accessible, higher education must be creative in and receptive to alternative approaches to education.

Designing courses for distance delivery requires careful thought and a strategic plan. There are workload issues that must be addressed before faculty will be receptive this new initiative. To engage and influence faculty of the importance of distance education, administrators must give attention to what is valued and rewarded within an academic environment. This requires re-thinking the criteria used for tenure and promotion purposes. Faculty, administrators, and supporting units need to work together, not only in the development of distance delivery, but also in establishing scholarship criteria related to this development. Working collectively in interdisciplinary teams maximizes resources and motivates faculty to be productive. Instituting faculty development activities will enhance the learning potential of faculty and contribute to their support of distance education. Finally, administrators must attend to the need for establishing clear guidelines related to intellectual property rights.

This study has captured the experiences of those involved in development of courses for distance delivery. Although the results of the study are limited to the participants and should be interpreted with caution for use in other settings, the findings are relevant and useful for consideration by teachers and administrators who are concerned with the delivery of quality distance offerings.

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