

Keys to the Culture: Factors in Successful DL Implementation

Dr. Robert Fulkerth, Assistant Professor
School of Technology and Industry
Golden Gate University
San Francisco CA 94105 (USA)
bfulkerth@ggu.edu

Abstract: Distance Learning has become a standard practice in educational institutions. This paper describes an action-oriented approach to that enables anyone, from faculty members to administrators, to become effective change agents for DL. Five factors are discussed:

- a. Understanding your Institution: change agents understand their institution, often by taking an outside view.
 - b. Designing for “Fit”: successful DL efforts are aligned with an institution’s processes, from curriculum changes to the strategic plans and objectives of stakeholders at all levels.
 - c. Designing for Quality; Faculty as Intellectual Capital: utilizing the faculty throughout the DL implementation process can create faculty buy-in. Faculty also can provide a perspective on the delivery technology chosen.
 - d. Designing for Accreditation: as more programs move online, it is necessary to be aware of the expectations of accrediting organizations.
- Designing for Integration and Acceptance: activities that smooth the way for DL acceptance inside the school are informational activities, publishing, clarifying intellectual ownership, and providing a technology development center.

Introduction

As Distance Learning continues to become a mainstream educational practice, schools are addressing it less as an innovation and more as a challenge to existing institutional cultures. Those who first taught DL classes and designed delivery systems are now becoming spokespersons and advocates to those in their schools who feel threatened, are not convinced, or are simply not interested.

However, the appearance of online courses, certificates and degrees, many blessed by traditionally-oriented accrediting bodies, is creating a new land rush: rather than the question Should we Go Online, the question in many schools has been jump-started to How Quickly Can We Get There? Acceptance by accreditors, combined with the ubiquity of the World Wide Web and other online course presentation and management tools, is creating a race to mount online programs of all sorts.

Such rapid changes can create tension in the culture of institutions. Instead of the meandering pace of change that schools are used to, Distance Learning has seemingly appeared in the US without precedent or warning (its worldwide history notwithstanding), elbowing aside accepted practices of development and delivery. As well, DL is refocusing debate on issues such as intellectual property, course ownership and faculty workloads.

Fortunately, the knowledge level of decision-makers is on the rise. We’re moving from the notion of solitary faculty members designing online courses to an awareness that viable distance programs involve interactive, long-term efforts among diverse institutional constituencies.

This paper discusses an action-oriented approach for DL advocates and change agents to use as they integrate quality-oriented distance delivery courses and programs into an existing school world. After presenting 3 potential DL scenarios, the following issues are discussed:

Understanding your Institution
Designing for “Fit”
Designing for Quality; Faculty as Intellectual Capital
Designing for Accreditation
Designing for Integration and Acceptance

Scenarios

- a. One or a few faculty members create and present courses online, probably in a bulletin board, email, or perhaps World Wide Web environment.
This leads to . . .
- b. The school begins to support the development and presentation of courses, certificates and (increasingly) degrees online, in varied delivery modes. There may be some support, but efforts are still by individuals or small groups.
- c. The school, recognizing the sea change and the potential that distance education represents, builds multifaceted distance delivery into its mission and its long-and-short-term strategic planning. Distance technologies and development are line items in the budget. The institution does not immediately buy into one delivery mode, but understands that tools and approaches continue to evolve. Faculty and development staffs are adequately supported in development and research, and, in return, they operate with reasonable performance expectations. Developers are encouraged to understand and use not only the “new traditional” technologies (conferencing, Web and Web-enhanced), but emerging technologies.

"C" is very probably fantasy. It's more than likely that you and your institution are at a middle point, with perhaps some distance education implementation in place, probably not enough staff and budgetary support, and an undifferentiated sense of urgency at the administrative level that DL programs need to be developed and implemented.

Theoretically, strategic planning drives institutional activities. In reality, projects that are successful tend to be incorporated into strategic planning after the fact, depending on the degree of their success and the fit they find in a given institution. With that in mind, let's discuss a number of activities (and thought processes) at several levels that can help the change agent move her or his institution toward successful DL planning and integration. First, we need to revisit our institutional culture.

Understanding your Institution

Why is understanding your institution important? The development process may be driven by the DL bandwagon, but it's still directed by the many well-known dynamics of organizational change. These forces (resistance, withholding support, differences in expectations between decision-makers and implementers, conflicts among constituents, a “show me” attitude) are well known and must be recognized to be effectively addressed. Since any culture tends to be invisible to those within it, the change agent who is a member of an institutional community should first step back and take a look at his or her school, with, as the comedian Gallagher says, “new eyes.”

Designing for Fit

A subsequent step is to develop meta-objectives for the distance program. Consider the institution's mission and existing programs, and position DL to align with them. This is a fundamental step in creating a long-term support dynamic. Work with stakeholders at all levels, from Board of Trustees members to staff, if possible.

Position any existing DL courses and programs in such a way that they correlate with the emerging objectives of the institutional effort. Ideally, this sort of strategic planning should be addressed before nuts-and-bolts development begins, but in practice, development frequently involves aligning any new programs with an institution's existing culture. Regardless of the situation, the change agent should focus on growing the distance program both within the institutional culture and with an eye toward development and marketing avenues.

Developing for Quality; Faculty as Intellectual Capital

For long term credibility and success, courses and programs should be of the highest quality. Institutional and programmatic quality descriptors may grow out of DL planning, but faculty members should be at the front line of quality at the course content and presentation level. Faculty represent the intellectual and educational capital of the institution, and their contributions should be nurtured and protected as much as possible.

While faculty members are an important resource, they may resist becoming involved with DL for many reasons. An important conflict that invariably arises is the traditional notion that intellectual capital resides with the individual instructor, and is usually manifested in the face-to-face classroom. Expanding this paradigm to fit teaching in the largely unknown territory of virtual space is a complex issue, and it encapsulates other questions of course ownership and intellectual property. Working supportively with faculty is important. It will help resolve such issues, and will demonstrate to the body of faculty members that their contributions to the integrity of the institution are understood and valued.

Another benefit of this perspective is that an intellectual capital approach to planning and design can help forestall the inevitable temptation to choose technology delivery mode over course/program content. If the institution first settles on a delivery mode and provider, (which administrators will tend to do) then content delivery, along with the entire look and feel of your institutional program, will be constrained by the system that is chosen.

If institutional constraints do make it necessary to choose a standardized delivery system, be sure to engage faculty members and developers in understanding how the system allows for the use of technology features as they evolve. Currently, audio/video, web interfaces and the incorporation of course management, multimedia production and presentation are features that are supported by some systems, and not by others. In the near future, any substantial delivery system will have to support video conferencing, interactive database access, streaming media, multimedia, QT/AVI audio/video and World Wide Web access, and users will have to know how to incorporate them into content and course presentation.

Implementing a flexible system is important for another reason. Whatever delivery system is chosen, it will become a traditional organizational entity, which will then resist subsequent intrusions of new technologies and ideas.

Developing for Accreditation

Designing for quality implies attention to translating courses and programs into online environments, not only to attract students but also to maintain standards that will satisfy your school's accrediting body.

Accreditation standards for online programs are still a murky issue, although standards are emerging, and completely online certificates and degrees are appearing. Since institutional accreditation is frequently involved, DL developers should be in close contact with the school's accrediting body. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges, for example, currently allows programs to offer up to 50% of courses in existing programs via online delivery modes before accreditation review is called for. At that point, incremental changes or proposals for online

programs must go before the Substantive Change committee for scrutiny. (These requirements are in flux, and may have changed by the time this is published)

Designing for Integration and Acceptance

This concluding section discusses a number of activities and processes that can be undertaken on an ongoing basis. These are some of the “little things” that will, in the long run, help you to open doors for DL development, and that will grow credibility.

- Work toward incorporating DL into the university’s administrative and financial structure. There should be distinct budget lines for DL support, delivery and design. The DL entity should have representation on faculty and institutional governance bodies, and should report institutionally at the Vice President level.
- Develop a communication process that shares information and invites involvement from the university community. Giving community members ready access to information about development will encourage awareness and buy-in.

Newsletters, flyers, memos and in-house press releases are effective, but more impact will be created by using the technology itself as a primary communication vehicle, perhaps via an institutional Intranet , groupware activities or an electronic bulletin board. A good introductory use of such technology is newsgroups, or perhaps designing online textbook order forms that faculty are expected to use.

- Implement a user Development Center. Whatever form such a center takes, it should be equipped with high-end technology tools sufficient to allow DL developers to experiment, practice and apply technology ideas. Technological and pedagogical support should be provided. Such a center will have practical application, but the real impact will be its demonstration of the school’s commitment to Distance Learning.
- Promote ongoing faculty involvement and ownership of course materials. Placing courses online for the first time usually involves moving existing content to text-based online activities. This is time consuming but relatively easy, and a traditional course can be translated to a reasonably effective online course this way.

Ideally, this first time translation is only the first step in growing a sophisticated online course that utilizes the many technology tools available. Faculty should be involved (and supported) in course development over time. If ownership and subsequent development of online courses are handed off to the distance learning entity as soon as a course is transferred, then quality may flag, because the interest and expertise of the primary instructor will be lost.

- DL practitioners should be encouraged to demonstrate, present and publish, in both local and larger venues.
- Encourage early adopters and innovators, wherever they are found. They are role models for others, and they will continue to demonstrate how technology can be used in obvious and less-than-obvious ways. If they are involved in development or if they use the Development Center, not only their discoveries but also their processes for using technology can be codified and shared with others.
- Share progress internally and in the public community. This can mean providing copy for student and faculty newspapers as well as local media. Schools are notoriously memo-centric, so non-traditional venues for sharing successes should be chosen to ensure attention.
- Value and use technology innovation wherever it is found and whoever provides it. Technology, concept and content skills may be found everywhere in a school community. Integrate the skills and efforts of those innovators into DL program development.

Conclusion

Finding keys to unlock a school's culture is a difficult challenge, particularly when changes are occurring quickly, under the impetus of external pressure. College teachers, staff and administrators who believe in DL are finding that they have to quickly develop and apply new skills outside the envelope of their normal job descriptions. Any expertise they develop has to quickly be shared with colleagues, in order to make cultural changes happen. But Distance Learning, whether we think of it as a new paradigm or one of many extensions of the old, is clearly broadening educational horizons. Advocates for Distance learning who understand its potential can provide the leadership to move their colleagues and schools toward successful integration of this exciting new educational opportunity.