

Instructional Design Unit Using Blackboard to Create Courses

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Case Description

The Problem

The Industry School (IS) recently created an Instructional Design Unit independent of the university's larger online program, which it does not believe adequately meets the school's needs. The school also recognized that its faculty—while experts in their respective areas—were not necessarily expert instructors or expert instructors in a digital environment. It hopes the unit will be able to address these two concerns. The unit's new hires operate as broad instructional designers as well as Blackboard technical specialists. They have several tasks attributed to their new role, the most crucial of which are listed below:

- help faculty convert fully face-to-face classes to fully online classes.
- help faculty develop digital aspects of their fully face-to-face classes.
- provide professional development to faculty.
- be technical support for issues that arise while courses are active.

In the four months of the unit's operation, it has done an excellent job of building digital components for in-person classes—which tend to be less technically demanding. Usually taking between 24 and 36 hours to fully build out web-assisted course shells. However, it struggles to meet other aspects of its mandate.

The unit lags on the class conversion scheduled put forth by the Associate Deans. The Deans are also unimpressed with the degree of student interaction designed in the completed courses thus far. One main goal for these online classes is to create a high degree of student-to-student learning. But to date, the Deans do not see the desired level of peer-to-peer interaction that would distinguish these courses from the ones created by the university.

The Learners

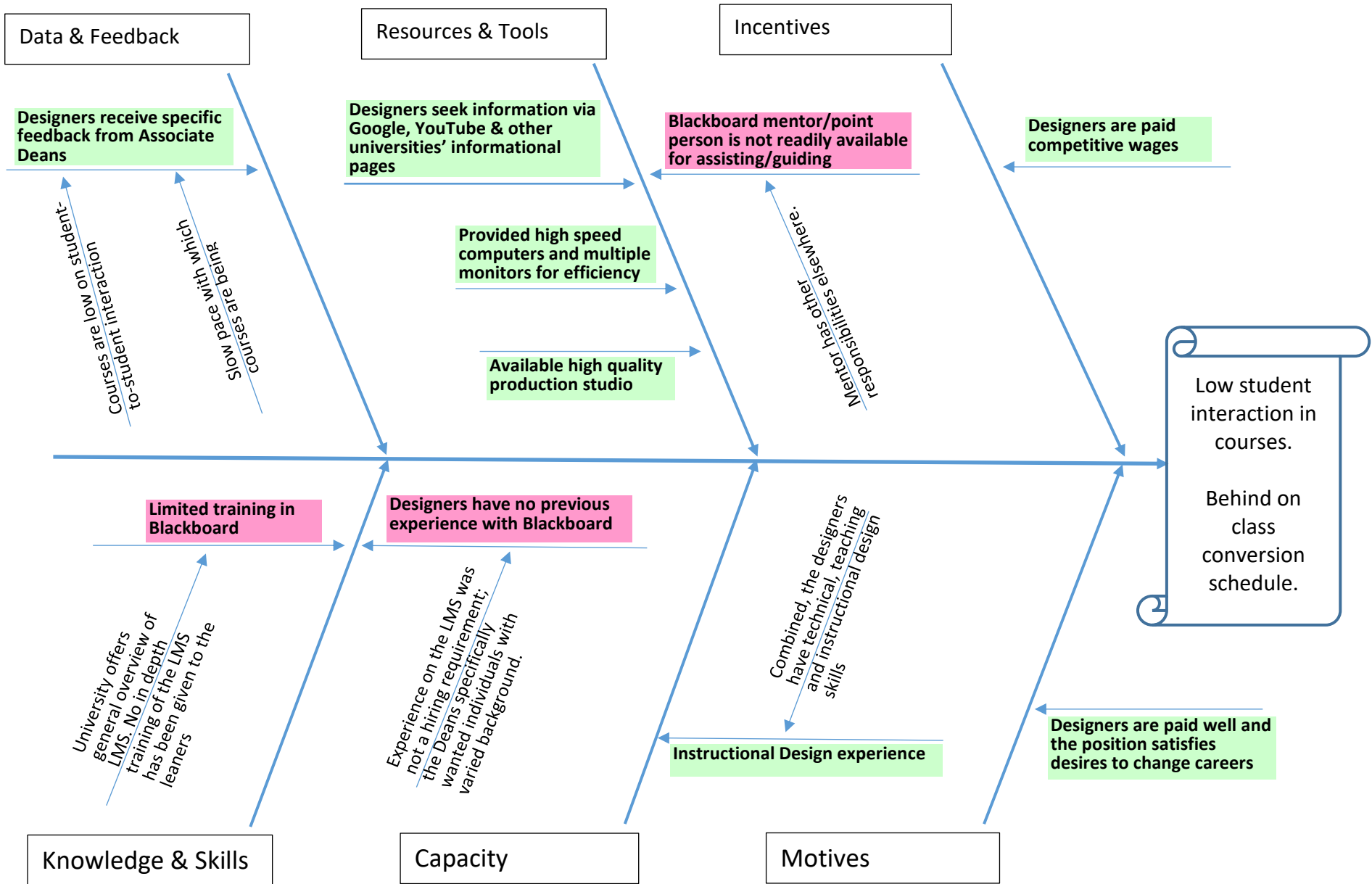
The learners, in this case the designers, mainly interact with IS faculty who are in turn responsible for delivering high quality instruction to students. The faculty's ability to achieve this is largely intertwined with the designers' collective ability to construct robust online products.

The designers' backgrounds vary. An experienced instructional designer who hails from within another organization that used a different LMS; a former K – 12 online instructor who facilitated learning content, but had no hand in creating and building the courses taught; and a former secondary education classroom teacher, who is adept at creating and organizing content but has no e-learning experience. All possess at least a Bachelor's degree and began this project excitedly looking forward to building something new. While still excited, they are overwhelmed and frustrated by the slow progress of their skills acquisition and course conversions. Two things that now seem inextricable related.

Conclusion

A program launch and the reputation of the school and unit are at stake. All three necessitate the unit's performance gap be closed. Additionally, this gap must be addressed to alleviate the frustration felt by the designers.

Causal Analysis



I used Roger Chevalier's (2003) updated version of Thomas Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model (BEM) on Ishikawa's Fishbone structure. I used this as it is a simple and effective way of viewing any situation in its entirety; but also allows for detailed analysis of the situation's fundamental problems. In the BEM above, positive factors are highlighted in green and negative factors in rose. Clearly, the designers have more factors working for them than against. Yet, they still struggle to meet the expectations. It appears these rose-colored roadblocks carry outsized influence on the designers' productivity. As such, they are the key to getting the unit functioning as desired.

Applying Theory

Probing Questions

1. *What is the scope of the training these individuals should receive?*
2. *So far, what has proven to be the least effective training strategy? How so?*
3. *What additional strategy or strategies would be best avoided? Why?*
4. *How may trainees be provided with clear expectations and how may these expectations be useful?*
5. *How can the school, provide concrete on-going experience independent of real/live courses? Somewhere they may try techniques and practice new knowledge continually, and before needed for a course?*
6. *How may designers reap the benefit of a Community of Practice?*
7. *How will the new training methods be different from what has happened before/so far?*

Potential Solutions

Reviewing the completed BEM suggests it is not that the designer have been untrained; it is that they have not been trained effectively. The designers have bungled through various ways to acquire needed knowledge for producing world class online learning events, but even when techniques were accessed, they were not certain when and how each may be best used. Given their collective backgrounds, the problem implies they know conceptually how various aspects of the in-person class could be presented in an online environment, but do not possess the technical skills and/or depth of knowledge in Blackboard's capabilities for these to materialize. Exactly how do we change this?

1. *What is the scope of the training these individuals should receive?*
Training should teach what the designers need to know. Between their initial training, the ones from the university's online program and self-help web search sessions, the designers are proficient on common Blackboard tasks, resulting in their speed getting face-to-face shells operational within days of requests. Therefore, their learning sessions must be more focused on the technology's specialized functions including those that enable student interaction. This will target parts of the job that have been problematic: slow work progress and unexceptional course products.
2. *So far, what has proven to be the least effective training strategy. How so?*
Andragogy has proven to be the least effective strategy. Adult learning assumes people will be driven to seek answers to their questions if they believe the answers can be immediately applied (Iverson, 2011; Stolovitch & Keeps, 2011); this holds true for these designers who actively see information from many sources. However, the answers they obtain do not necessarily meet (all) their requirements, leaving them still somewhat uninformed after independent learning. The designers are learning, just not as quickly and as completely as required.

3. *What additional strategy or strategies would be best avoided? Why?*
 The designers are not experts, but they are no longer novices since they have been using the application daily over the past four months. Overt attempts at activating relevant schema can be bypassed because it is assumed the trainees will be aware of the training's focus and their schemas at the beginning of the session(s) will already be activated. Research shows activating prior knowledge adds no learning for individuals who are not novices (Pass, Renkl & Sweller, 2003). Having said this, we would be hard pressed to find instructors who jump into the training material at minute one. A quick share aloud covering each participant's struggles with Blackboard would function to (a) confirm the things needed to be covered in the training and (b) collectively set the focus of the training.

4. *How may trainees be provided with clear expectations of exactly that which is expected of them and how may these expectations be useful?*
 Using a two-fold strategy, a partial cognitive apprenticeship approach could be successful. One, the designers are given student and designer access to online courses the IS considers benchmark products. This functions to give the trainees a concrete idea of what is possible and expected. Two, ideally, the LMS mentor designers were assigned could be temporarily relieved of his duties so he can spend two to three weeks being physically available in the designers' office. As situations arise, the designers draw on their ideas of a good course while the mentor guides them through creating something the Associate Deans would like (Collins, Brown & Holm, 1991). The mentor's tenure is short because presumable the designers will need him less and less.

5. *How can the school, provide concrete on-going experience independent of real/ live courses? Somewhere they may try techniques and practice new knowledge continually, and before needed for a course?*
 Sandbox courses are course the university's technological service builds so specific personnel can practice any LMS skill. Designer will be issued sandbox courses so they can do just that. For example, if course ACCG-459 appears it could use VoiceThread to set up a one-to-one mock interview environment, the learners can test this mechanism in their sandboxes before building one in ACCG-459. The sandbox works as part tester and part simulation giving them a place to try things while learning from errors that will not be replicated in real courses (Falconer, 2013). Errors that would make a possibly great class a frustrating experience for all parties involved.

6. *How may the designers reap the benefit of a Community of Practice?*
 There is nothing that regulates—more pointedly restricts—how these designers interact with each other. During and after their mentor's tenure, designers can reap the benefit of a community of practice by constantly advising, assisting and learning from each other. Even in communities where all members received the same training, individuals will develop different strengths and weaknesses. The designers can bounce ideas, strategies, designs off each other in order to produce work better than that which would have resulted if each worked entirely alone.

7. *How will the new training methods be different from what has happened before/ so far?*
 In the beginning, the designers were given a basic training, but were largely left to fend for themselves after that. This redesigned approach provides the learners with more direction. Direction in the form of examples, an available mentor, practice, and a community through which guidance and assistance can not only be secured, but also regenerated.

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