

Background and Skill Set of Instructional Designers Questioned in the OPM-University Business Model

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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 framework was used to direct inquiry and analysis. Results show a serious lack of consistency in the ID services provided by the ID firm outsourced by this OPM. The faculty needs and background were not considered by the OPM. The OPM partnership model does not consider tailoring the ID needs to the specific university environment.

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 - 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 the larger community in which the activity occurs. The most appropriate unit of analysis in a system is "activity" (Jonassen & Rohrer-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). It requires 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 (Boling et al., 2012; Fetherston, 2001; Hardy & Bower, 2004; Oliver, 2002). 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). Furthermore, use of technology in this field demands a shift from a teaching-centered to a learning-centered paradigm (Boling et al., 2012; Fink, 2013a; Fink, 2013b).

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 (Chittur, 2018; You, 2010). 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 they can encourage and provide training for use and adoption of these features and processes. Most faculty seek to work with IDs for technical support and help (Chittur, 2018; You, 2010). 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.

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; Chittur, 2018; Lin & Jacobs, 2008). 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 (Barczyk et al., 2010; Pan et al., 2003).

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; additionally, they 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: (a) market/lead generation, (b) enrollment management, (c) student services, and (d) 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 (Kim, 2019). There is a need by most of these higher educational institutions to get selected services on an a-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 (Kim, 2019; Riter, 2017). 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 (Kim, 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, since 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; Educause.edu, 2010; Hone & Said, 2016).

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 case study was exploratory in nature (Yin, 2018). It 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.

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 co-developed courses with the assistance of an instructional design firm and a media production firm (outsourced by the OPM). These faculty members began receiving training from faculty support services (in-house) provided by the OPM. Administrative and technical staff at RU worked with the OPM to integrate learning management and student management systems.

Activity Theory

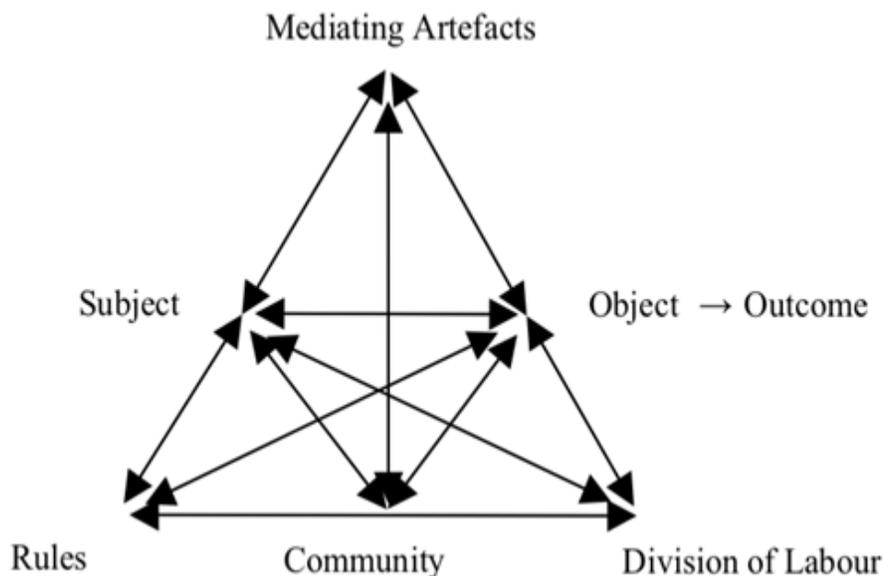
Activity theory (AT) was used as a framework to describe and analyze the entire work/activity system that involved the RU faculty and community, and the OPM. Activity theory is an umbrella term for a range of social science theories and research originating from Soviet psychologists Lev Vygotsky, Alexei 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 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).

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

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



leads, OPM managerial staff, the instructional design firm (IDF) 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 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 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

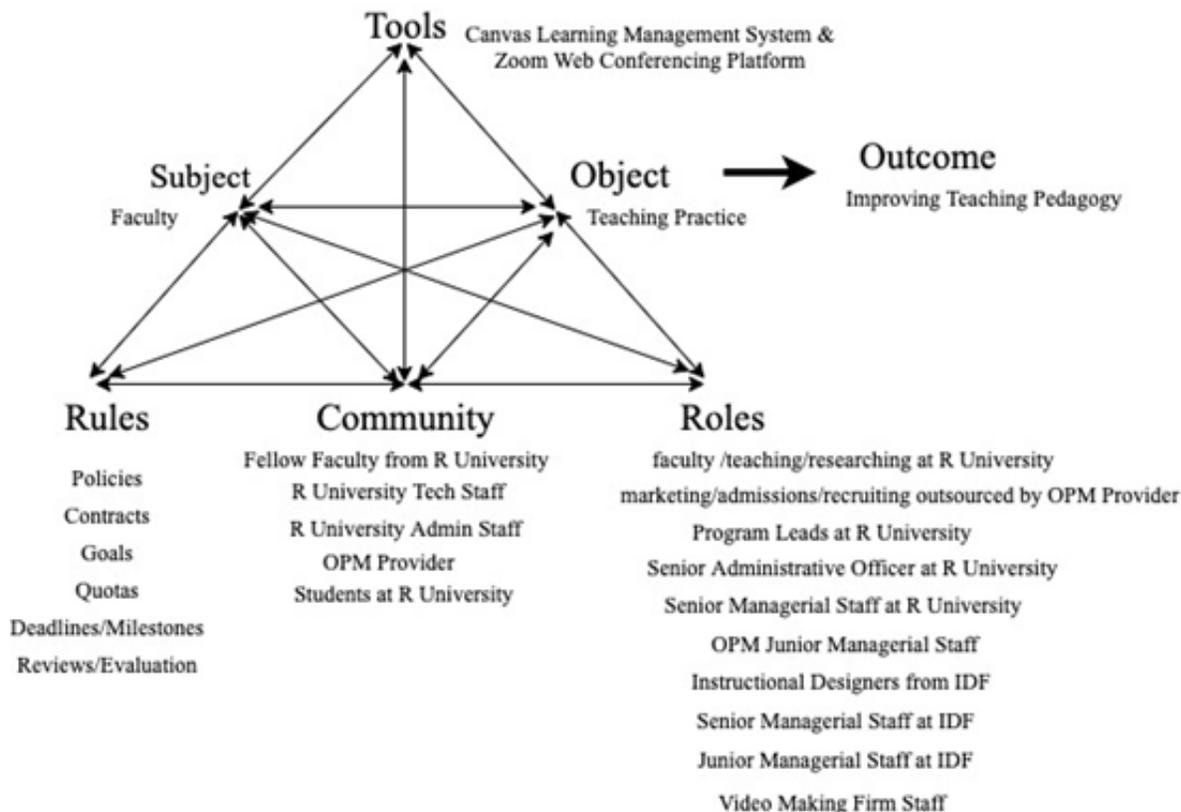
teaching design when they experience all the activities related to developing and launching online programs with an OPM provider. AT is also very useful because its assumptions are consonant with those that impact teaching design, faculty training and support, instructional designer and faculty interaction, 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, and 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” (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. See Figure 2.

Research Design

The key informants were RU faculty members, RU staff, OPM staff, and instructional designers from the outsourced IDF. The first author had professional

Figure 2
 Activity System Context for the RU and OPM Business Partnership



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. Fifteen faculty members were interviewed. The researcher also interviewed one senior manager and two junior managers from the OPM provider who were overseeing the instructional design process to participate. The researcher interviewed the junior instructional design manager and four instructional designers from the instructional design firm.

Data Collection Procedures. Interviews, participant observation, and documents were the primary sources of data collection. Meetings between the faculty and instructional-OPM staff were observed. In addition, 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 on-going data gathering. After reading and reviewing the interviews several times, the author began to identify patterns. During the initial phase and the middle phase of the analysis, the author communicated with many participants to collect additional data as more patterns and insights were found.

The activity theory framework was used to uncover prominent themes in the experiences of faculty as well as how they were being influenced by each role, rule, technical tool, and everyone in the community. The vertices of the framework were used to uncover prominent themes in the project management process. Activity theory was used as a vehicle to explain the dynamic of the social and collaborative work environment.

For this study, data triangulation was used to analyze the instructional design process and some parts of the instructional delivery process of the online programs.

Results

The data analysis showed that there were issues and concerns with the background and skill set of instructional designers from the IDF; furthermore, the IDF course quality assurance procedure created a question mark on the quality and reliability of the courses created and on the faculty's professional development and pedagogical knowledge. Figure 3 shows that the flows of tension is bi-directional when issues and concerns arise with the background and skill set of the IDs and the course quality assurance procedures provided from the IDF side. Mutual conflict takes place between the faculty and the ID from IDF, hence arrow 3 is bidirectional. Three out of five IDs who participated in this research study had never worked directly with faculty in a higher education environment. Most of these IDs had recently joined the IDF and were mainly on a contract basis with the firm. Moreover, there was a serious lack of consistency in the instructional design services provided by this firm. Some faculty complained that their IDs were disorganized, did not present them with creative pedagogical strategies, and that they mostly had to consult for ideas on pedagogy with their junior managerial staff from the IDF and OPM in the instructional design meetings. According to the senior managerial staff at RU, the IDF did not provide instructional design services up to the level of quality required and also had several issues with the quality assurance of all the courses. Thus, this leads to questions about the quality of the entire instructional design process and the quality of the online courses created at RU. The lack of proper instructional design services from the IDF also affects the quality and reliability of faculty pedagogical professional development that was possible via this business partnership. Thus, arrow 3 represents issues and concerns on the quality of the instructional design process due to the lack of expected background, skill set, knowledge, and experience of all the IDF IDs participating in this process, as well as the issues and concerns with the quality assurance procedure of the online courses that went into production. Faculty also faced a difference of opinion on the suggestions provided by their respective IDs. Therefore, arrow 3 is bi-directional. Both arrow 1 and arrow 2 are bi-directional because of the contract between the three firms. Lack of instructional design background, experience, and skill set questions the quality of the instructional design process from the IDF staff side. The outcome (on the faculty as an actor) is that there is a

question mark on the quality and reliability of the online course designed and developed out of this ID process.

The IDF junior managerial staff is a regular employee at the IDF and not on a contract basis. This ID also has prior work experience directly working with faculty in a higher education environment. For this ID, this was their very first experience in the OPM model:

Me personally, this is my first experience working with an OPM. ... I have a lot of experience working directly with faculty to develop courses for a university without working with an OPM. There are many similarities, but there are also differences. The main difference is that when you work with an OPM, there is an additional level of review. In addition to getting feedback from the SME, ID team, and university leaders, feedback and guidance is provided by the OPM. As an ID, you have two key customers: the university and the OPM. If the university and OPM have conflicting viewpoints or priorities, it can be challenging. Ultimately, we are all working toward a common goal: providing the best student learning experience possible.

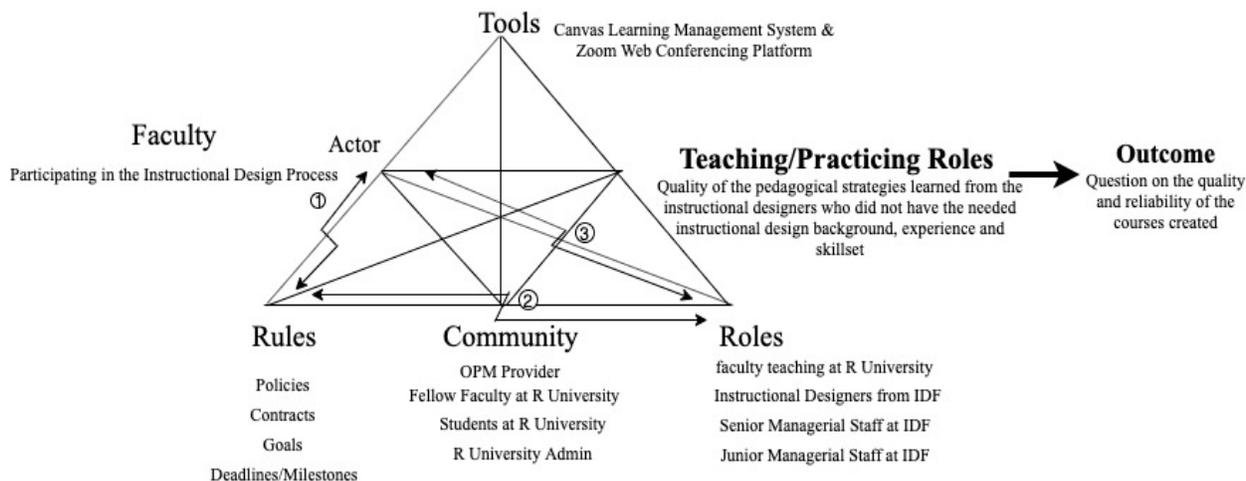
Three out the four IDs were on a part-time contract basis with the IDF but did not have any prior experience working with faculty in higher education. They mainly worked in the corporate environment before joining IDF. They also never worked in an OPM environment like this. One ID had prior experience working in a higher educational environment and in an environment similar to the OPM-university model, but this ID also was with the IDF on a contract basis.

According to the senior managerial staff at RU, the IDF provided via the OPM was not efficient and did not meet the expectations of the faculty. IDF had several technical issues from the course development side and their teams were also distributed across varied geographical locations which added problems to the communication. IDs from this firm had a lack of creativity in instructional design ideas and suggestions. There were some serious issues with the quality assurance department of this firm. Their process management just did not fit with the OPM-university model where the IDF was outsourced separately.

So ummm I think it's a variety of things and I want to say, you know, that IDF was working towards, you know, a shared goal with us. You know they were working towards refining their processes both, you know, objectively to make them cleaner and clearer, and more efficient and also subjectively of matching them better to R University expectations ... so they were making some progress ... the issue is I think is there were a lot of factors that you mentioned kind of came all at the same time. There were technical issues which were because the teams were distributed, there was a gap in response time...

Figure 3

Activity System Context for Issues and Concerns with the Background and Skill Set of Instructional Designers from the IDF



because the IDs themselves were often part-time and independent contractors they may have not felt as empowered to work as thought partners with our faculty ... So the creativity level of the actual instructional design suffered. I do think as you have pointed out the background and the skills of some of the individual instructional designers was not necessarily the best fit for the content and the context here at R University. I think that the ummm...the approach that they took to the instructional design process to develop the process was just a little bit too distributed to really work when layered on top of the OPM contractor role and finally I think they had some regrettable deficiencies in the QA department. I just think they were not consistent or careful enough in their process of ensuring quality and accuracy in the product. And I think when you combine all of these factors it was just too much to deal with to think that we could solve all of those problems. And then they could have addressed some of them as when we were making progress for some of them, but I don't know if we could have addressed or solved all of them. (R University Senior Managerial Staff)

Many faculty were also not completely satisfied with how their IDs worked with them or their skill set. For one faculty, their ID only had good organizational skills, but it was only the IDF junior managerial staff who actually provided pedagogical ideas and suggestions:

So yeah. So, this ID is really good. The thing that is needed is you need IDF junior managerial staff who could do all of that stuff plus this ID had ... ID did not have ideas about how to, you know,

okay, you want to do this thing in the class ... what's the best way to do it.

Another faculty also mentioned that their ID did not have good organizational skills:

I think this ID tried to do best. But at the same time one common thing I saw is that, for example, when this ID would connect via Zoom, this ID would connect to their desktop. His or her desktop would have at least 13-15 tables opened up. So clearly if I have sent this ID a document, then this ID had put it somewhere else. Like one day I saw another R University program area document pop up in my course. So that should not be happening. They should take care. So, then I had to point that out.

For one of the faculty, he or she did not like the idea that their first ID pressured this faculty not to care about his or her notes which this faculty completely relies on to teach this course:

Well, motivation or pressure, I was pressured to not care about my in-class notes, which got to the point of making me sweat a little bit.

IDs from the IDF had lack of knowledge or proper training in pedagogy. According to the literature, however, IDs should be 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). IDs need to have a strong knowledge of the science behind learning and why certain pedagogical strategies need to be implemented in course design. Based on the faculty interviews, the ID staff pushed a lot to implement various pedagogical strategies like multimedia videos, scaffolding, effective feedback, and so on. But it seemed like the IDs from the IDF and the OPM junior managerial staff were not able

to provide the logical reasoning behind why to use these pedagogical strategies because it appeared their knowledge or training in pedagogy was lacking. They were not able to provide logical or evidence-based reasons to faculty regarding why they should implement these pedagogical strategies. For example, one of the main pedagogical reasons to design and develop multimedia videos instead of just having text-based materials is the universal design for learning (UDL) perspective (Ableser & Moore, 2018). But based on the faculty interviews and observation of Zoom video recordings of the meetings between the faculty and the ID staff, it seems like the sound pedagogical reasoning about this has not been provided to faculty. Because of the lack of proper explanation of logical reasoning behind why to use these pedagogical strategies, the instructional designers were not able to motivate faculty to implement these. So, conflicts between faculty and the IDF staff ensued.

For one Faculty, upon being asked whether their instructional designer provided reasons or proper explanation for why they were being asked to implement these strategies, said that it was not explained. For example, the ID staff did not explain the sound cognitive reasoning of why effective feedback should be provided. This faculty added:

Vaguely. They said that they have a software like RP now or something which monitors the people's screens. I don't understand why solutions have to be linked with the testing procedure. ... But feedback isn't that the instructor's job, isn't that my job to grade it and provide them with feedback? If they have a proper model, they can compare and contrast. They were not very clear on that.

Many faculty were pushed to develop multimedia videos and considered them to be as an undergraduate way of teaching, but they were not provided the proper reasons for doing so. For example, another faculty mentioned that they had the discussions for having multimedia videos for appearing flashy:

And one of the things that did come up with my discussions with my ID is that there was an OPM, I don't want to say requirement, but a push towards videos and multimedia and basically my question was why? What's the real reasoning behind doing that and beyond being flashy and it was basically just being flashy. So that definitely came out in mid discussions.

Upon being asked if they gave a pedagogical or psychological reasoning behind using multimedia videos, this faculty replied:

No pedagogical reason behind it.

After being asked about the explanation behind the pedagogies, another faculty replied that they did give an explanation; however, based on what this faculty replied (see below), there is still no explanation or talk about

universal design for learning (UDL), which is the most important aspect for cognition in this perspective. One of the main reasons to have multimedia videos in terms of good pedagogy is for having multiple forms of representation so that it is accessible to everyone.

No, they did. OPM said that that's okay first of all ... they gave ok you use YouTube videos ... what if on the week of the module that YouTube video gets taken off YouTube so you are left with nothing. So the more material that is ours ... you know that's developed for the course itself then you don't ... you are not going to run into those problems. So, I think that was one of the major reasons. Another major reason was that they could reuse some of the ... say let's say ok let's say they get another client that does [topic] and they made a couple of videos about how to work in teams or whatever they could take those and offer those to the next client and say we don't charge you for this except you know we will charge a fee to have you license them from RU or whatever. So there was some way to make or re-use the material. That was the second reason. So there was some push that way. You know the other thing is ... they have to make those decisions that I told them what I thought would be good ways that they could use multimedia for us and they were ... they just didn't seem interested in what my idea was. So, I modified the idea you know blah blah

Discussion

Three out of five instructional designers provided by the IDF for RU never worked directly with a faculty in a higher educational environment setting. Most of these IDs had recently joined the IDF and were mainly on a contract basis with the firm. There was a serious lack of consistency in the instructional design services provided by this firm. Some faculty complained that their IDs were disorganized and did not present good pedagogical strategies and suggestions; and they mostly had to consult with their junior managerial staff from the IDF in the instructional design meetings for ideas on pedagogy. However, the junior managerial staff from the IDF was overseeing all the IDs on this contract and could not be present to participate in all the meetings. According to the senior managerial staff at RU, the IDF did not provide instructional design services up to the level of quality required, and RU had several issues with the quality assurance of all the courses. If something important needed to be changed, it took 3 days for the IDF firm to process and implement those changes.

The IDF firm had the responsibility to ensure that the courses were error free when they were presented to students, but that was not done properly. There were complaints from the faculty, especially in the first term, that there were errors in assignments that were given to

students and there was an error in the release of some information to students in advance of what was planned for an examination. Things were frustrating or difficult for faculty who were working within the course shells and sometimes they felt as if their hands were tied as far as their ability to get in and make some changes on their own. The beginning of the semester was marked by a late release of a significant amount of content because it had not been properly quality assured in time beforehand. There were technical issues and because the production teams of the IDF were distributed (within the United States and in a foreign country), there was a gap in the response frame. The approach that the IDF took to the instructional design process was just a little bit too distributed to really work when layered on top of the OPM contractor role; moreover, they had regrettable deficiencies in the QA department. This raises a question on the quality of the entire instructional design process and the quality of the online courses created at RU. It also raises a question on whether the quality of faculty professional development was successful or not. With all the concerns with the IDF, it can be said that the faculty were not provided with instructional design ideas and suggestions up to the level of their expectations and needs.

According to Kim (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. 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). The results from this case study emerged as a result of discovering that there were several issues and concerns with the ability of instructional designers and in the course build quality assurance procedures. The majority of the instructional designers provided by IDF for R University had never worked directly with faculty in a higher education environment setting. Most of these IDs recently joined IDF as contract workers for the partnership. This seems to have created a serious lack of consistency in the instructional design services provided by this firm. Thus, this study shows that the faculty needs and background were not considered by the OPM. This study showed that the OPM partnership model may not consider tailoring the instructional design needs to the specific university environment.

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' backgrounds, and how the ID firm hires its 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.

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.

Further Research

Based on the current study, it was clear that the OPM and outsourced ID model made it difficult to establish a foundation of trust and collaboration between the faculty and their IDs. This could be because of time limitations, as there was no time for building an explicit collaborative culture. The IDs and faculty in this model are first introduced to each other with several other staff from the OPM and the IDF. IDs seemingly did not get enough time or opportunities to look at faculty needs and requirements individually. A lot of communication happens in the presence of other junior and senior level managers. ID training also focuses on technical things rather than on soft skills, such as how to establish trust; what explicit and collaborative communication is like; how to listen, observe, and respond to emotions; how to understand the client culture; and so on. It could be possible to convince an OPM to support an action research study that would train IDs in the skills mentioned above, and to measure their effectiveness in working with faculty.

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