
Leadership Through Instructional Design in Higher Education

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Introduction

The function of leadership is to create a vision for the future, establish strategic priorities, and develop an environment of trust within and between organizations. Great leadership is a process; leadership involves motivational influence, leadership occurs in groups, and involves a shared vision (Northouse, 2010). Instructional designers are ideal leadership candidates for institutions of higher education because of their ability to couple technical and conceptual skills while working collaboratively. This essay will provide the reader with a sense of where distance education is heading and what leadership skills will be required for progress. Specifically, this article will highlight instructional designers' abilities to provide an organization with the leadership necessary to move institutions into the 21st century and beyond.

Bringing Education into the 21st Century

The nature of higher education is changing. The traditional four-year brick and mortar institution is no longer applicable (Siegle, 2011). For a high school graduate, attending college for four years is no longer the norm. By the year 2020, students will be taking over half of their courses online (Siegle, 2011). Organizations that desire to succeed in today's global environment, by facilitating changing educational demands, will require learning agility and leadership from instructional design leaders (McBride, 2010).

The delivery of instruction in institutions of higher education is currently in a state of restlessness; distance education models differ greatly and change often (Beaudoin, 2002). In order for higher education to meet the needs of the future student, high-quality courses will need to be designed to meet the needs of the online learner. Effective leadership during a transition from traditional to distance education can lead to institutional success (Beaudoin, 2002). Instructional designers are able to provide expertise and leadership that are required to move an organization into the future of online teaching and learning (Irlbeck, 2011).

Leadership Needs in Higher Education

The leaders of 21st century produce change and movement within institutions of higher education. Leadership within higher education requires a vision and an ability to communicate goals and align people with specific tasks (Northouse, 2010). Instructional designers are able to envision the future of education and provide direction for others when working towards a common goal.

The future of higher education lies in delivering robust and interactive online instruction. The realization of a successful online program will depend heavily on the vision of leadership within the institution (Wang & Berger, 2010). Instructional designers are visionaries that are able to organize and

construct a strategic plan to move an institution into the future of online delivery. The instructional designer can facilitate goal attainment by providing the leadership and motivation that is necessary to orchestrate a large-scale program design.

Role of Instructional Design Leaders

An instructional designer will provide an organization with the leadership and the necessary skill-set to orchestrate the development of high quality online programs. Learning instructional design on the job often does not provide the necessary skills for faculty to become proficient in instructional design (Koh & Branch, 2006). The instructional design leader that provides an institution with expertise in the development of online programs is formally trained in instructional design for online learning (Wagner, 2011). Instructional design is a unique niche that allows for leadership in higher education.

It has been common practice for course design within higher education to be constructed individually by faculty or subject matter experts (Chao, Saj & Hamilton, 2010). However, in recent years, there has been a rise in instructional design participation in course development (Chao, Saj & Hamilton, 2010). The presence of the instructional designer is essential in the development of high quality course design, as instructional designers possess the necessary theoretical background in learning theory and instructional strategy.

Instructional designers can lead online program implementation by communicating a shared vision with stakeholders and facilitating the collaboration of multiple people including administration, information technology support, faculty, instructional designers, and support staff. Leadership of multiple stakeholders requires strong communication skills in order to commit to achieving a project vision. The instructional design leader excels at identifying and communicating project components and breaking down and assigning tasks. Leadership from an instructional designer is required for alignment and guidance during collaboration on large design projects such as online program design and development.

Leadership in instructional design can also provide an organization with consistency in course development procedures. Many institutions of higher education rely solely on faculty for course design (Sasse, Schwering, Docterman, 2008). Faculty provide the necessary content expertise, however, they do not often possess the instructional design background necessary to create effective instructional design. “Designers by assignment have knowledge of their fields and some specific skills to help them accomplish limited design and development” (Irlbeck, 2011, p. 22). Too often, faculty is left to their own devices lacking appropriate leadership, procedures and guidelines in online course development. An instructional design leader is able to construct a procedure for online course development that will encompass instructional design principles. Not only can the designer provide the procedure, but also execute the online program initiative by providing leadership to all stakeholders involved.

Instructional designers can provide much needed leadership during large-scale course design. “By pairing faculty with instructional design and curriculum specialists in an environment that provides project management, process infrastructure, and tools and support systems, online courses can be developed on a large-scale while maintaining high quality” (Parscal & Riemer, 2010, para. 7). An instructional designer is able to provide the instructional design team with the necessary guidelines and project management that are needed in course and program design.

Characteristics of Instructional Design Leaders

The qualities of instructional designers and the necessary characteristics for leadership overlap. Expert instructional designers are highly educated and many possess advanced graduate degrees. Instructional designers are experts in problem solving and critical thinking. Designers demonstrate high levels of professionalism and believe in a learning mindset. In addition, instructional designers commonly have backgrounds that enrich their leadership and design toolkit. For example, many designers have backgrounds in training, technology and education.

Expert instructional designers demonstrate effective leadership skills. Designers excel in problem solving and approach each design task individually for proper analysis and design execution. The instructional designer is able to analyze the problem or instructional situation and the learning need prior to constructing a plan for goal attainment. An instructional design expert is able to retrieve knowledge and apply specific systematic thinking to each new situation or problem (Hardré, Ge & Thomas, 2006). The ability to effectively solve complex problems is a necessary quality of an effective leader.

Leadership in higher education requires the ability to think critically. Critical thinking involves analysis, evaluation, creativity and reflection (Paul & Elder, 2006). Instructional designers are able to synthesize their knowledge and apply critical thinking skills to produce quality instructional solutions. In addition, instructional designers are creative in their approach and utilize imagination and innovative practices to meet diverse demand needs (McDonald, 2011). Looman (2003) posits the importance of reflective leaders in today's workplace and the practices that make them effective in this role, specifically vision and strategic priorities. Leadership vision provides a future image that guides and motivates a group while strategic priorities provide the framework (Looman, 2003). Instructional designers are reflective practitioners that are able to provide vision and strategic framework for higher education. Leadership demands are unpredictable and ever changing, the instructional designer is able to utilize critical thinking and creativity in complex application.

Leaders face great moral challenges in their day-to-day role. Strong, effective leaders are able to model ethical behavior within their organizations (Van den Akker et. al., 2012). Instructional designers harbor the critical thinking skills and knowledge about ethical behavior to objectively evaluate moral challenges and act appropriately. In addition, instructional design leaders are able to model their ethical behavior for their peers.

Leadership requires constant adaptation and learning. Leaders that host a learning mindset are continually developing their craft and are constantly learning and sharing their knowledge with others (Clark and Gottfredson, 2008). Instructional design leaders are actively involved in professional organizations, attend conferences and actively maintain scholarly publications to stay abreast in their field and in the realm of education. The learning mindset practiced and valued by instructional designers will pave the path for the learning leader.

An effective leader is able to effectively analyze where an organization lies in comparison to institutional goals. Today's leaders are constantly required to evaluate their organization and members within the institution. Within higher education, an instructional designer is able to provide leadership to fulfill the organization's vision of delivering content in the online environment. The instructional design leader is able to construct a plan and provide guidance to the institution because they are trained in organizational and program evaluation and therefore, are able to facilitate evaluative leadership.

Instructional designers come from all walks of life, some are former educators, others served or are active in the military, many come from information technology fields, and a number of other organizations. Although instructional designers have diverse backgrounds, the vast majority has experience in the facilitation of learning (Smith, Hessing & Bichelmeyer, 2006). A background in the facilitation of learning and an advanced degree in instructional design create an instructional designer that is robustly fit for leadership within education.

Current Research

The bulk of literature in the field of leadership focuses on business leadership. The empirical data that centers on business leadership identifies leadership characteristics and various styles of leadership. The majority of great leaders have common characteristics that are agreed upon across the scope of the leadership field. Effective leaders are role models, have a vision of the future, share their vision with others, are dependable and honest, and challenge and motivate others to rise to their highest potential (Kotter, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; & Northouse, 2010). Although these characteristics are desirable, the literature does not differentiate between business leadership and leadership applied in areas of higher education.

Little empirical data exists on the topic of leadership in higher education. Beaudoin (2002) identifies the gap of research and lack of leadership guidance that has been provided to leaders in higher education during this time of transition into online learning. The majority of the literature that is available focuses on new technologies that facilitate distance education and not leadership and its impact on the success of distance education (Beaudoin, 2002). In 2006, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* identified four perceptions about leadership in U.S. higher education including autonomy, relatedness, masculinity and professionalism (Allan, Gordon & Iverson, 2006, p. 42). An autonomous leader is one that is independent and often self-serving; masculinity and professionalism fall as sub-sections of the autonomous leader (Northouse, 2010). On the opposite side of the leadership spectrum, is a leader with relatedness discourse (Allan, Gordon & Iverson, 2006). The autonomous leaders fill the role of leadership in the traditional sense and are not likely to facilitate change. The need for strong, effective leadership in higher education has never been greater.

Historically, institutions of higher education make decisions heavily rooted in tradition rather than transition (Beaudoin, 2002). However, leadership in higher education needs to facilitate a learning mindset and collaboration among all stakeholders within the organization. A leader with relatedness discourse serves as a facilitator that works collaboratively to move an organization towards a shared vision (Allan, Gordon & Iverson, 2006, p. 55). The facilitative leader is well suited for a position of leadership within higher education. A facilitator is able to lead by organizing tasks and working with faculty, information technology specialists and administrators to reach common goals.

Literature on leadership from instructional designers within higher education is nearly non-existent. In most cases, an instructional designer remains in the background and is not called upon to provide leadership. Beaudoin (2002) posits that leadership style in educational institutions demands approaches that are not typically characteristic of traditional educational leadership style. Therefore, instructional designers need to come out of the woodwork to provide the influential leadership that is necessary to move organizations into the 21st century.

Recent literature on leadership focuses on the topics of change. With the recent advent of technology, specifically the Internet, an organization's ability to adapt to and foresee change is becoming an organizational and leadership necessity (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008). This new model of

organizational leadership, coined as leadership 3.0 by Clark and Gottfredson (2008), is vastly different than traditional leadership models. Northouse (2010) defines the new visionary and charismatic leadership model as transformational leadership.

Leadership in the 21st century requires openness to continual learning, the ability to engage others in learning, and one that promotes risk-taking (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008). While continual learning is promoted in institutions of higher education, the realization of the 3.0 leadership model is far from adaptation.

The state of higher education is in a period of rapid transition and the demand for change leadership experts is lofty. “It will take visionary leaders and brave policy makers, coupled with dedicated instructors and savvy administrators to create new, viable, and acceptable higher education opportunities for all styles and ages of future learners” (Irlbeck, 2002, p. 3). The future of higher education leadership will require the characteristics of change leadership and learning agility.

Supporting Instructional Design Leadership

Administrative leaders within higher education need to support instructional designers in transition from instructional designer to instructional design leader. As stated earlier, many instructional designers hang in the background. However, instructional designers are needed to lead institutions of higher education into the 21st century.

It is a popular notion that change occurs in higher education at a glacial pace. In order to promote change and progression, instructional design leaders need to be supported in their efforts. Academic leadership can assist instructional designers in their transition by creating a culture of leadership within the institution. Garrison and Akyol (2012) posit that leaders in higher education have begun to make a paradigm shift in their thinking regarding online learning. A progressive movement in higher education will require new approaches to leadership that focus on productive collaboration (Garrison & Akyol, 2012). The advent of online learning demands a change in leadership approach in higher education.

Strong leadership is required in higher education in order for the organization to transition into 21st century instructional design practices. Almala (2006) posits that the stakeholders in online learning must work in a cohesive unit that shares the common goal of providing quality online experiences for learners. Academic institutions need to work collaboratively in order to promote a culture of leadership and achieve shared vision. An organization that is committed to a shared vision allows for multiple levels of leadership (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008). In order to move forward as an organization, academic leaders must work together with instructional design leaders to achieve common goals. The ideal leader for progression is an instructional designer that exudes knowledge of leaning theory, instructional strategy, instructional design principles, models and technical aspects of online course development (Irlbeck, 2011). The instructional designer will also provide leadership in aligning necessary tasks with stakeholders’ strengths and areas of expertise.

Discussion of Research

Educational change is taking place at a rapid rate and leaders in institutions of higher education are attempting to meet the needs of 21st century learners. While the literature has provided some guidance in the need of change leadership in current organizations, very little research alludes to the leadership need in higher education.

The traditional framework for leadership is no longer applicable in today's technologically rich global economy. The same is true for leadership in higher education. Leadership today requires robust learning, vision, and innovation. Transformational leaders who think critically, accept the ideas and feedback of those around them, and utilize the effort and energy of those who are willing and able to do more to attain success are the leaders who will move organizations through ongoing change most effectively. The role of the instructional designer in institutions of higher education is more important now than ever. Instructional designers bring to the table the vision for learning and progression that are desperately needed. Instructional designers possess the necessary qualities to provide the educational leadership that is currently needed in higher education.

Implications for Future Research

The field of leadership is lacking in current research and leadership in education is no exception. Higher education is in need of leadership literature, specifically in topics of transition of delivery models. Instructional design leadership research is in dire need of development. In the years to come, scholar-practitioners will need to contribute to research in the leadership field.

Future research on leadership will need to focus on learning agility and change. It is clear that future leadership topics will revolve around change, transition and learning. The nature of organizations and work are in the midst of a shift; as a result, the literature will reflect a shift in leadership topics.

The future of higher education is at the cusp of a paradigm shift. All areas of leadership in higher education will evolve in the near future; as a result, leaders will look to the literature for guidance. Topics of literature in higher education leadership will focus on change, instructional practices, faculty development, student support, and technology.

Instructional design leadership lacks a collective volume of literature. The future of instructional design and leadership should be the topic of research for all instructional designers. Instructional designers have the potential to promote change in education; the literature needs to reflect the leadership skills of instructional designers. Possible topics of research include bringing a brick and mortar school into the online environment, supporting faculty in the transition to online teaching, and designing instruction for future generations. The topics of instructional design leadership research are endless and all necessary. Hopefully, instructional design leaders are aware of the need for research and publication.

Conclusion

Higher education is in desperate need of a paradigm shift. This shift will involve a transition from the traditional brick and mortar institution to distance education that will take place in the online environment. In order for a true paradigm shift to occur in higher education, transformation through strong leadership is required. An instructional design leader is able to provide a unique niche in the leadership tasks within higher education. Instructional designers are highly skilled in task management, problem solving and online learning; all of which are critical elements in the future of higher education.

Instructional designers have traditionally operated behind the scenes in higher education. Support from stakeholders in higher education is essential for instructional design leadership. A culture of learning and leadership is necessary in higher education for movement into 21st century learning

practices. Academic leaders must promote a common vision and collaboration in order to realize progression.

Technology has forever changed education and society expects institutions of higher education to provide high quality educational options through distance learning. In order to provide robust learning opportunities, institutions of higher education need to look towards instructional designers to provide the necessary vision and framework to move institutions of higher education into the 21st century. Instructional designers will play a key role in the transition of instructional delivery. The designers will not only assist in the design of courses but also provide much needed leadership.

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