Considerations of Rank and Niche in Distance Education

Evan S. Smith, Ph.D.
University and Non-Credit Coordinator
University of Missouri-Columbia
Center for Distance and Independent Study
smithev@missouri.edu

Abstract

Independent study professionals have grown out of a largely clerical environment and are sometimes not part of upper hierarchies. Though mid-level within distance learning administration, their educational and technical competencies afford a certain power over curriculum content and format, also suggesting an important place in establishing institutional niches in an era of burgeoning distance learning.

Introduction

In the growing field of distance learning, the roles of employees and the institutional niche of branches such as independent study are not always clear. Staffing can be important in niche statements. To see how this is so, let us first look at the status of independent study professionals and other staff, including some historical considerations, and then relate that status to current distance education competencies.

Where do Independent Study Professionals Fit In?

Levidow (2002, pp. 236-237) notes that, in North American universities in general, courses are conceived of as standardized "instructional commodities." Administrators control electronic courses, per Levidow. This should be interpreted to include editors' and instructional designers' control of print and online courses. Independent study is very specific and technical. In today's world, students become consumers of an educational product; in the case of independent study, this product had been edited, sometimes extensively, prior to student consumption. Indeed, at awards ceremonies, winning courses are often seen as author-editor successes, downplaying contributions of administrators, department chairs, and others. Quality comes from many sources, including the academic institution and its faculty, and is often a team effort.

An editor observed, after attending a conference, that editors were not even considered part of independent study (K. Brown, personal communication, March 1990). It is ironic that an educational field would not more overtly recognize good writing, production values, and problems in converting teaching to another medium. This problem stems from administrative unfamiliarity with this form of editing and sensitivity to independent study's emendations of faculty writing. In course awards, how much credit is given to editors vs. authors, and how much to the team or overall staff is often a function of diplomacy and politics. Many independent study courses (and awards) give credit primarily to author, editor, and graphic designer, unless an acknowledgements page adds more detail, implying that a course is a publication with almost no administrative, political, or economic context. Ind ependent study professionals review awards submissions in "content fields" as diverse as literature, engineering, and nursing, utilizing their

knowledge of good writing and instruction.

Office Practice

The definition of jobs in distance learning depends on factors such as the institution's size, the media used, "the effect of technology on work roles," and the effect of traditional broadcasting or publishing structures on work structure (Rumble, 1986, p. 120). Both e ditors and designers do what they are instructed to do within their office system or what they decide to innovate as they meet their counterparts elsewhere; some of the resulting ideas become office practice. If the system stresses a particular pedagogy, then they will follow that. Otherwise, their work is likely to be instinctive and eclectic. Crook (2002, p. 121) notes that the classroom discourse is often deliberately at odds with the precision and explicitness of educational software, i.e., we can extrapolate from this that teachers imbue the classroom (or distance/online course) with interactivity and other human inexactness just to make it all more interesting.

Training

Computers and desktop publishing changed relations between editor and typist-wordprocesser, blurring some job distinctions (Houdek, 1990, p. 22). Everyone came to use keyboards more often in the 1980s, so the dividing line between editor, proofreader, typist, etc., all of whom might emend text, became blurred. At at least one Midwestern university, editors were classified as clerical in the 1980s, ranking only slightly above typists/wordprocessing clerks, even when those editors had advanced degrees; personnel classifications naturally enter into perceptions of status.

Indeed, computers and desktop publishing changed independent study from a hierarchical, top-down concept of "administrator procures manuscript for staff to (re)type" to a more democratic or horizontal concept of "administrator or other staff member procures document and ensures that it is edited and formatted." Format matters more now than in the past, so recruiting course authors involves what will and will not work in the office's system rather than merely having staff "type up what faculty produce in draft form." Further, faculty are more computer- or even Web-literate and more familiar with the electronic synchronous classroom, bringing expectations into agreements signed with independent study. They are no longer just novice study guide writers for hire. They sometimes expect or even rely on frames, Blackboard (from Blackboard, Inc.), PowerPoint (from Microsoft®), or other electronic options.

One problem is that editors are often trained to ensure that the course exhibits good literary or journalistic writing and clear instructions rather than good assessment and learning objectives. Trainers and staff vary in perspective. No one goes to school specifically to be an independent study editor; editors do not all read the same books and journals and take an examination on them. The amount of instructional design, as opposed to "good writing," is dependent on the independent study office's pedagogical views, sensitivity to "rewriting" faculty prose, freedom afforded to editors, existence of author's guidelines, and philosophy of staff training. The role of instructional design has grown with the rise of computers, but we should remember that instructional design applies not only to the Web, but to all distance courses of any format. Course editors are more than just educated word-processing clerks. More importantly, unless one stays in independent study for many years, one often does not feel part of the profession anyway, and one may well move on to other employment. There is no guild of independent study editors nor, for that matter, industry writers available at a moment's notice.

Since modern learning is learner-centered, both the editorial and instructional design staff have to

empathize with students as they work on courses, looking for trouble spots that can be alleviated. The very name "independent study" refers to the student's role, not the teacher's or administrator's. Serving students is inherent in independent study, if only because of its clerical origins, both in helping students enroll and improving course content with objectives, study questions, or other features. Over a decade ago, Gaines and Houdek (1992, p. 218) asked, "Are we 'surrogate students' in helping course writers meet the needs of our students?" Presumably, the answer is yes. Cheurprakobkit, Hale, and Olson (2002, p. 257) say, "Although faculty are content specialists, sufficient technological understanding is necessary for the success of Web-based course development. Individuals' willingness to learn must also be considered."

Niche and Skills of Editors and Instructional Designers

An emerging middle class has often been overlooked by independent study. Gaines et al. (1992, p. 191, citing Markowitz, 1988), note that histories of independent study overlook editors. The coming of computers, desktop publishing, and the Web only exacerbates the problem—designers are technological staff who often are different in education and skills from much of the rest of the staff.

Historically, independent study generally had only university-level courses from the immediate campus, and the academic unit made all pedagogical decisions. The independent study staff was almost entirely clerical (Markowitz, 1992). In fact, a "correspondence secretary" or "secretary in charge of correspondence" ran the operation in the early 1900s, with professionals entering in the late 1920s-1940s (Childs' 1987 article, as cited in Markowitz, 1992, p. 174). Now there are many professionals in independent study. If the professional vs. clerical legacy is still with us, we must consider the role of mid-level employees. An overall increased professionalism was evident in independent study as of the 1980s (Markowitz, 1988).

The presence of editors and instructional designers represents the emergence of a new middle class, especially when staffing shifts from a binary administrator-staff model to a multilayered administrator-coordinator-editor-clerical model. In European history, the middle class uprooted feudalism. Luke (2002, pp. 254-255), citing the ideas of Foucault (1979), analyzes traditional university teaching as feudalistic, attempting to preserve personal, F2F sovereignty over the student, the classroom being much like a court; he notes that online learning is often considered a potential loss of professorial power.

Designers and editors, who shape and modify faculty writing, often in differing ways, stand to contribute to this loss of professorial power. Yet, when operating diplomatically and supportively, they also stand to enhance the course and its outreach to students, which could increase the professor's power, just as an in-class teaching assistant might do. This is typical of the middle class, supportive of but potentially critical of a higher power base, by virtue of being in the middle.

Fuller (2003, p. 16) relates a story of serving as "gatekeeper" to those seeking rank by publishing manuscripts. As a physicist, he rejected manuscripts by laypeople and others who were attempting to rewrite theories of physics but failed in notation and other areas; consequently, he stopped even reading some manuscripts to devote more time to his colleagues' work, concluding that "Judgment, discrimination, and ranking go to the heart of any human endeavor that aims at excellence" (p. 16). Editing or reviewing manuscripts, presumably including distance learning courses, thus discriminates against poor workmanship and inherently critiques quality, implying a hierarchy of editor/reviewer over author.

Consider some changes that have occurred over the years: high school programs have arisen (a different type of editing could be needed, as secondary school teachers are often not researchers and writers by trade); desktop publishing has developed (see Gabriel, 1989, pp. 116-117); a heavy administrative workload is in place, all creating a need for mid-level, educated, but non-administrative, staff (editor, instructional designer, curriculum coordinator). They modify manuscripts, have a greater role in education, but are not graders or directors. Sometimes they work in teams to produce the study guide (Pittman 1987, p. 199).

There is potential for confusion over instructional design and how it fits in with computer staff, clerical staff, and editing. It is easy to think that it is new or simply too arcane, a generation-gap-maker, and so not give it credence, or they might simply rely on co-workers to hire the necessary staff. Parhar and Mishra (2000), noting specific competencies for instructional design, show that while instructional design is not new, there are Web-based competencies that are essential for good learning materials. Among these competencies are developing behavioral objectives, long known to be important, but often poorly presented in classroom teaching, and thus a sensitive issue in editing faculty study guides or Web-based courses.

Instructional design includes knowledge of general education theory, teaching strategy models, and learning style and theory, in addition to the more obvious HTML technical skills, whereas media publisher/editor involves knowledge of Internet skills, graphic design, and media attributes (Williams, 2003, p. 53). Higher education and technical skills are in high evidence, compared to previous eras.

A big-picture viewpoint stands to underestimate the importance of details such as well-edited text and perhaps independent study in general. Independent study needs to communicate to administrators what form its learning materials take and how they come about, or no one will ever understand its mission and niche. Independent study resembles a factory to the outsider, but it also provides student service, some of which can happen only with high-quality course materials. Planning is at odds with the intimate detail that editors deal with in study guides; image is at odds with consistency; thus administrators and editors stand to be far apart (Zuckerman, Evenson-Hirst, Joseph, Rigby, Robinson, and Smith 1993). Independent study courses in online format are often very different from other online courses (see Smith, 2001, pp. 55-56). Thus administration must understand the time and process involved in writing what amounts to a book on the Web, as opposed to teaching via chatroom.

There is also tension between academic freedom (viewpoints of faculty, often not trained in educational theory) and learner-centeredness (often the view of newer independent study instructional designers and administrators). Faculty are not used to having their lectures or other classroom activities scrutinized or permanently written down for all to see (J. Dodd's comment in Kaye and Rumble 1981, p. 85, cited in Schlosser and Anderson, 1994, p. 34). This is another polarization of faculty vs. student; administrators and editors may each have doubts about faculty achievements, leaving those who hire faculty in the middle. The implication is that we either hire faculty sympathetic to educational theory, or we prepare for extensive orientation of authors and subsequent redesigning and editing of their courses. All of this is easier said than done.

We have seen that there are distinctions between and among editors and instructional designers and that faculty course authors can be simply labeled as content specialists. While the publishing side of independent study cannot be denied, neither can it be overrated. It gives staff control of quality, but quality takes time, even online, and that attempt to achieve quality must be recognized by administrators.

Niche

Just as we try to create a niche for staff within the office, so niches within the institution are important. Independent study's part in online education and distance education must be understood at least partly in terms of staffing: outsourcers (in-house vs. freelance editors or designers; print courses in addition to online; asynchronous and synchronous courses; courses counting toward a degree at the home institution. Many factors are at play. The specificity and technicality of independent study can both help and hinder. Independent study can look like just another shop that produces goods and services, or it can look like a body of professionals who provide quality distance education. When compared to group learning, independent study can look out of step by serving the individual student, yet it provides special attention to students in so doing. If independent study is a mail-order business, it is one with years of experience, and more importantly, an office with professionals who enhance course content that in turn serves students. This surely outweighs print vs. online issues.

Collaboration and Competencies

Cohorts and chatrooms have come into some independent study programs (Hancock, 2001). If this practice continues, how will collaborative learning and e-mailing to peers reshape matters? There is often less text to edit or just a different type of text to monitor (student-instructor dialog). Further, any institutional niche that specifies synchronous courses can include independent study if and when independent study adopts cohorts and chatrooms.

At least as early as Peters (1993, p. 50), we have heard the prediction that distance learners would be less likely to be solitary and more likely to be part of group learning. Collaboration, both as team effort by staff and peer learning by students, will be increasing in distance education. Chatrooms and synchronous courses will require new types of expertise, especially new ideas on how to shape or reshape course materials, given that students must give significant input. This can only enhance learner-centeredness: staff must define roles and be ready for a course that has a very open-ended component: student-instructor-student interaction.

Competencies

As Queeney (1997, p. 4) notes, traditional notions of competency include *knowledge, skills,* and *performance abilities,* which combine into ***technical capabilities*** (emphasis original). Queeney (1997, p. 5, citing Long and Vickers-Koch, 1995) identifies professional job holders as a *package of capabilities* (emphasis original). These capabilities and the projects that professional enter into all result in problem-solving teamwork. Queeney, p. 11, further highlights teamwork by noting that individual and group performance may be units of assessment in the future.

Many have noted the need for overall competencies in distance education (Williams, 2003; Parhar et al., 2000; Thach and Murphy, 1995), including teamwork skills. If independent study courses move from monolog to dialog (cf. Perraton, 1988, also cited in Simonson, Schlosser, and Hanson, 1999, p. 69), staff development should also involve interaction among professionals. This will foster both a team approach and more understanding of staff roles.

Other examples of competencies are:

- Downes (1997): Software integration, collaboration, student management, integration of multimedia, custom courses (possibly constructed of many interrelated modules), and community learning centers are anticipated skills or topics of concern for the future distance educator.

- Hill (1998): Curriculum development is among seven areas of experience needed in a distance learning staff. Hill does not establish any hierarchy of skills. Teaching experience, instructional design, or taking courses in curriculum help achieve curriculum development goals.
- Perraton (1988): With the team approach and the facilitator role for instructors, a more democratic and less hierarchical view of job roles can emerge.

Collaboration and teamwork were important in both outputs ("[p]roduct, service, condition, and/or information resulting from performing role") and competencies ("[a]n area of knowledge or skill critical to production of outputs") for job titles such as instructor, instructional designer, technology expert, and administrator in Thach et al.'s study (1995, pp. 67-69). Instructional designers today have many competencies, often exceeding those of classroom instructors. When they have advanced degrees, they stand to be peers of faculty but below the rank of other distance learning administrators.

Conclusion

No matter how much more evolution distance learning staffing undergoes, we cannot exclude mid-level or professional staff from consideration in independent study nor in distance education overall, even knowing that independent study began with a largely clerical staff with great deference to academic departments. The historical origins of the "middle class" of employees are apparent and so not easily forgotten in institutional memory. Further, the educational background of both editors and instructional designers is often very high, suggesting room for continued advancement. No matter how collaborative or hierarchical the office is, nor which competencies are prevalent in a given program, administrators must understand the concrete, publishing aspects of independent study/distance education for these purposes:

- to appreciate staff productivity and course quality
- to appreciate faculty-administrator-editor interaction in distance education curriculum
- to establish niches.

References

Cheurprakobkit, S., D.F. Hale, & Olson, J.N.. (2002). Technicians' perceptions about Web-based courses: The University of Texas system experience. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 16(4),* 245-258.

Childs, G.B. (1987). Independent study: Then and now. *American Independent Study,2(1),* 3, 8-11.

Crook, C. (2002). The virtual university: The learner's perspective. In K. Robins and Webster, F. (Eds.), *The Virtual university?* (pp. 105-125). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Downes, S. (1997). Re: Future skills needed for distance educators. E-mail to DEOS-L listserv, April 9. Retrieved April 9, 1997 from DEOS-L listserv.

Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison.* New York: Vintage.

Fuller, R.W. (2003). *Somebodies and nobodies: Overcoming the abuses of rank.* Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

Gabriel, M.R. (1989). *A guide to the literature of electronic publishing: CD-ROM, desktop publishing, and electronic mail, books, and journals.* Greenwich, CT: Jai Press.

Gaines, N. & Houdek, E. (1992). Editors in distance education programs: Their characteristics and roles. In B.L. Watkins & Wright, S.J. (Eds.), *The foundations of American distance education: A century of collegiate correspondence study* (pp. 191-229). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Hancock, J. (2001, November). *Running in two tracks at once: A nuts-and-bolts approach.* Paper presented at AACIS Ninth Annual Conference, Athens, OH. Retrieved December 2001 from http://www.aacis.org/conferences/aacis_2001/Jane_hancock.doc.

Hill, M. (1998, spring). Staffing a distance learning team: Whom do you really need? *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration,1(1). Retrieved October 15, 2002 from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/hill11.html.*

Houdek, E. (1990). Managing distance education courses. *The Guide Series in Continuing Education.* Urbana: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Kaye, A. & Rumble, G. (1981). *Distance teaching for higher and adult education.* London: Croom Helm.

Levidow, L. (2002). Marketizing higher education: Neoliberal strategies and counter-strategies. In K. Robins & Webster, F. (Eds.), *The Virtual university?* (pp. 227-248). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Long, C. & Vickers-Koch, M. (1995, summer). Using core capabilities to create competitive advantage. *Organizational Dynamics,* 7-22.

Luke, T. W. (2002). Digital discourses, OnLine classes, electronic documents: Developing new university technocultures. In K. Robins & Webster, F. (Eds.), *The Virtual university?* (pp. 249-281). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Markowitz, H., Jr. (1988, March). *The role of instructional developers and editors in independent study.* Keynote address at Independent Study Division Workshop, Developing instructional materials, Dallas, TX. (Appeared in *American Independent Study,3(1),* June 1988, 7-10.)

Markowitz, H., Jr. (1992). The education and training of independent study professionals. In B.L. Watkins & Wright, S.J. (Eds.), *The foundations of American distance education: A century of collegiate correspondence study* (pp. 173-189). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Parhar, M. & Mishra, S. (2000). Competencies for web-based instructional designers. *Indian Journal of Open Learning9(3),* 415-422.

Perraton, H. (1988). A theory for distance education. In D. Sewart, Keegan, D. & Holmberg, B. (Eds.), *Distance education: International perspectives* (pp. 95-113). New York: Routledge.

Peters, O. (1993). Distance education in a postindustrial society. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education* (pp. 39-58). London: Routledge.

Pittman, V. (1987). Correspondence study guides: An academic cottage industry. *Scholarly*

Publishing, 18(3), 197-203.

Queeney, D.S. (1997). Redefining competency from a systems perspective for the 21 st century. *Continuing Higher Education Review, 61,* 3-11.

Rumble, G. (1986). *The planning and management of distance education.* New York: St. Martin's.

Schlosser , C.A. & Anderson, M.L.. (1994). *Distance education: Review of the literature.* Washington, DC: Association for Educational Communications and Technology.

Simonson, M., Schlosser, C. & Hanson, D. (1999). Theory and distance education : A new discussion. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 13(1),* 60-75.

Smith, E. (2001). Writing Web-based distance education courses for adult learners. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 15(2),* 53-65.

Thach, E.C. & Murphy, K. (1995). Competencies for distance education professionals. *Educational Technology Research & Development, 43(1),* 57-69.

Williams, P.E. (2003). Roles and competencies for distance education programs in higher education institutions. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 17(1),* 45-57.

Zuckerman, J., Evenson-Hirst, K., Joseph, L., Rigby, D., Robinson, R. & Smith, E. (1993, November). *The author-editor-administrator relationship.* Panel presentation, AACIS First Annual Conference and Workshop, University of Missouri-Columbia.

Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume VII, Number III, Fall 2004
State University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center
Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents