Helping Instructors Support Students Independent of Grading and Providing Feedback.

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Abstract

Unbundling faculty roles has been a trending topic in higher education for many years. One unbundling method BYU-Idaho Online Learning is exploring, is unbundling instruction and mentoring from assessment. This model has freed up more time for faculty outreach to students, led to greater job-satisfaction for our online adjunct faculty and teaching assistants, promoted greater consistency in assessment across course sections, and facilitated faster turnaround times for scoring students' work. These outcomes, however, have not come without substantial planning and training. This paper seeks to describe the work being carried out with online faculty to help them understand and thrive within this new, unbundled role.

Introduction

Brigham Young University-Idaho is a private, 4-year undergraduate institution that is sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and is located in southeastern Idaho. The university serves approximately 25,000 residential students and another 20,000 online students. Its online students are taught by 1,500 online adjunct faculty. BYU-Idaho has strategically selected a small and growing number of high-enrolling online courses in which to experiment with the unbundled faculty role (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). Driving the experimentation are three imperatives: 1) raise substantially the quality of every aspect of the student experience, 2) make a BYU-Idaho education available to many more members of the Church within existing resource constraints, and 3) lower the relative cost of education.

At BYU-Idaho, the unbundled model is called *Instructional Teams* because the responsibility for instruction and assessment functions are now performed by a team with more specialized roles for the online adjunct faculty and the centrally-managed grading team. BYU-Idaho online courses employ a standardized curriculum and undergo a specific redesign to become Instructional Teams courses. The courses are designed for increased enrollment caps of 100 students per section (with experiments as high as 200 students) and one faculty member. The centralized grading team scores all manually graded assignments across all sections of the course resulting in faster grading with more consistency and less bias. This model frees online faculty from scoring assignments and directs them to target individuals and groups of students with needed support, feedback and mentoring. Our experience has shown that a great deal of intentionality, focus and change management is required to achieve these results.

Post Unbundling: The New Faculty Role

Effective unbundling is not simply disaggregating faculty functions or even institutional duties and reassigning them to other entities. Unbundling should be foremost student success-focused, but also purpose- and data-driven, and cost-conscious. Reiterating the need to pursue all three university imperatives, the university administration was clear there was no appetite for sacrificing lower scores on key performance indicators (eg. grades, throughput, retention, student satisfaction) in the effort. In the Fall 2020 semester, we focused on engineering an application that would enable highly-efficient first-in-first-out (FIFO) grading within our LMS and on building teams of certified and normed graders. Our initial data shows that our efforts in these areas were successful, meaning that variation in student grades was consistent between treatment and control groups leading us to conclude that the instructional teams model at least did no harm to students taking the class.

With a scalable and effective grading process taking shape, we turned our focus to building out and refining the new faculty role. Faculty in this model can focus their attention on mentoring and outreach efforts. We train them to tactically monitor the gradebook data for student performance trends to help guide appropriate outreach efforts. To support this, we incorporated weekly outreach tasks for faculty that focus their energies on time-relevant, data-driven activities to help students succeed. For example, data analytics models prompted a Week 2 activity where faculty are instructed to identify students who did not earn a B- or higher in the previous week's activities and help these students make a plan for success in coming weeks. We also look for course-specific opportunities to intervene with students by focusing their energy on assignments that carry greater weight or will influence their ability to perform in high-stakes assignments later in the term. Faculty are also able to give feedback on student performance in the course and help students before they submit assignments. Faculty generally report much more connection with their students and satisfaction in these outreach and teaching opportunities than they had when the majority of their time was spent grading.

Helping Online Faculty Make the Change

Change management is a process of identifying needs, implementing interventions, and actively influencing the adoption of change and innovation to achieve the desired results. Structural, political, human resource, and symbolic anchors must be adapted as old ways are replaced with new ways, and changes cannot successfully be implemented in a vacuum as they are parts of larger systems of people, processes, and subsystems with their own needs that must be balanced. Recognizing that change management is something most institutions deal with in one form or another, we found that building buy-in required intentionally-managed and prolonged attention.

Substantial changes to our online faculty role in this new model required equal attention to how the change was implemented. Communication channels among all stakeholders were simultaneously created, and restricted to limit the amount of "noise" the new system and new roles would generate. Additionally, faculty carry an understandably deep interest in student grades and the accuracy of graders' work, but in this new model scoring is no longer a central part of their job duties. Thus, faculty needed to develop confidence in the graders and the grading process so they could let go of the grading role and get out of the way of the graders' work. Letting go of the grading is an important step for faculty because so much of their work previously focused on grading and providing feedback through grading. To fully learn and

embrace the mentoring and instructing opportunities this model affords, online faculty needed help refocusing their efforts on the specific activities that would provide the greatest impact to students. Additionally, the model required targeted improvements in rubrics so graders would be able to work efficiently and effectively, minimizing concern or confusion about grading.

A significant contribution to our efforts in each course in the unbundled Instructional Teams model has been the addition of a new remote faculty leader role. In working with online faculty, these remote leaders' chief responsibility is to support the change-management process. They help online faculty gain confidence in the unbundled model. Remote faculty leaders review online faculty concerns and help orient and reorient them, as needed, to their own new duties in the model. Other key duties of the remote faculty leader include:

1. Facilitate coordination among the Instructional Teams stakeholders.
2. Participate in course assignment and rubric preparation processes prior to a course being piloted in its unbundled form before students and graders interact with them.
3. Filter feedback directed at graders to minimize the noise and the subsequent confusion graders could experience dealing with many individual faculty.
4. Collaborate with the centralized grading team to address any inter-rater reliability issues.
5. Review grading samples to ensure grader consistency with the Course Council's intention for the assignments.
6. Review rubric and grader performance data and bring revision recommendations to the Course Council.

This new remote leader function is proving to be a critical one in the change-management process (see diagram below). To help these remote leaders, they have been placed under the direction of Instructor Managers who can leverage organizational resources or back channels when adjustments are needed or inter-team communication stagnates .

Another piece of making this change was creating a formal communication channel in the system to provide online faculty (and students) opportunities to express concerns regarding rubrics, scoring, design, etc., but then encouraging the faculty to return to their duties with confidence that their concern would be reviewed and addressed as merited. This process has been an invaluable tool in helping surface legitimate areas for improvement in three areas: 1) in change management with faculty, 2) in the scoring process with graders, and 3) in assignment instructions, rubrics, and outcomes with the Course Council.
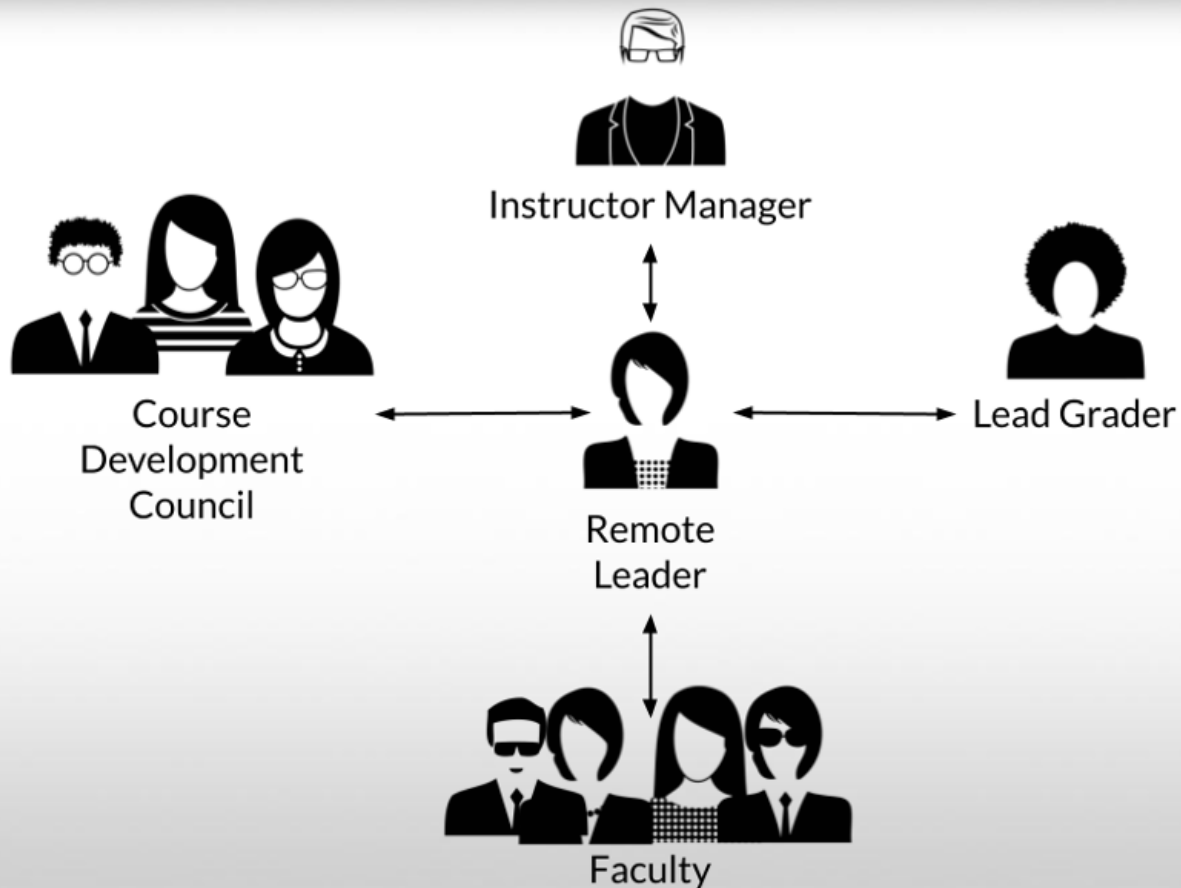
Summary & Conclusion

Building the Instructional Teams model has taken enormous effort and dedication. It is satisfying to see these efforts supported by our data and experience. The future looks bright for our instructional teams model. The majority of faculty in the experiments prefer the unbundled, Instructional Teams model. We have seen some growth towards improving the credibility and reliability of our assessments and consistency in learning across all sections of a course, an additional bonus in our quest to meet the three imperatives. As we find solutions to the difficult questions and work across departments to build buy-in from all stakeholders, we also build unity in our mission. Working together brings the best ideas and broader perspectives that shed light on details and more refined processes to keep us moving forward. The real success of focusing on the instructor role in our Instructional Teams model is in the lengthening of our reach to support students worldwide and give them every opportunity to move successfully through a high-quality educational experience at a very affordable price.

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