Distance Education Training for Distance Education Trainers:
The Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design Project

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More than a technological infrastructure is necessary to effectively encourage and train faculty members to teach at a distance. Other components, primarily focused on providing institutional support to assist a faculty member’s development, such as teaching incentives, instructional design support, and technology training, have been shown to be necessary in creating successful distance education training and development programs (Berge, 2001). Spotts (1999) indicated that if instructors are expected to use instructional technologies, they need technical support and training. Instructional designers and technology specialists need to be knowledgeable about not only the latest technology, but also the educational methods to use that technology (Telg, 1995: Irani & Telg, 2001). A study of 14 land-grant universities (Irani & Telg, 2001) found that 64.3% of instructional designers involved with distance education course development had no prior training or knowledge of distance education instructional design methods before working at their universities. Respondents said they had learned distance education instructional design methods while “on the job.” Instructional designers must be adequately prepared in order to assist faculty, so that faculty can effectively teach distance courses.

In response to this need, six universities – the University of Florida, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, the University of Idaho, the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Iowa State University – collaborated on a project titled Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design. This project was to develop effective materials and innovative approaches to better prepare instructional designers at universities with agricultural academic programs to support distance education teaching programs. The project development team partnered with the Association for Communication Excellence (ACE) and the American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC). This “train-the-trainer” approach provided distance education instructional designers with skills and knowledge to more effectively help faculty members develop distance education courses. The remainder of this article will focus on the development phases – research design, implementation, and evaluation – that were undertaken.

Development Process

Research Design

A needs assessment survey was sent to ACE and ADEC member listservs, to identify key characteristics of this virtual training project. Respondents were generally interested in participating, saw the project as useful, said they would have the time to complete the training program, wanted to be certified as effective instructional designers, and preferred asynchronous delivery methods. Respondents wrote they were most in need of training in the areas of instructional design and development. Most said they had had some technology and software training, but instructional design principles were self-taught. Much of the program’s design was based on this needs assessment.

Implementation
The implementation phase consisted of content development, marketing, and content delivery. The project team developed six content modules, called destinations to go with the Roadmap theme. (See Table 1.) Content was designed and delivered in WebCT™.

Table 1. Destination Timetable and Collaborating Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Timing/Lead Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>September 2003 (one week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Learning and Effective Distance Education Teaching Principles</td>
<td>September 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-time Course Development</td>
<td>October 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Issues in Training</td>
<td>November 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Iowa State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Teaching Methods</td>
<td>February 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Idaho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and Evaluation</td>
<td>March 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Missouri-St. Louis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Administration</td>
<td>April 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M University / Texas Tech University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the content was being developed, a marketing campaign was undertaken to promote the Roadmap program using the ACE and ADEC listservs. A total of 106 people, representing 26 institutions, participated in Roadmap. Since all development and delivery costs were underwritten, participants took the course at no charge. Those completing all requirements received a certificate of completion from Texas A&M’s Center for Distance Learning.

A one-week orientation session was conducted that exposed participants to the types of technology used in later destinations. Content then was delivered on a monthly basis, except for a two-month break during the holidays in December and January. Each destination featured synchronous (chats) or asynchronous (streaming video, narrated PowerPoint™ presentations, threaded discussions) delivery methods to provide participants with examples of how to deliver educational materials in various means. Web-based training materials were provided to the participants to use in the training of their own faculty members. At the conclusion of each destination, participants were asked to complete a microproject – a short assignment designed to show that the participants understood and could apply the content that was presented.

Evaluation

The two components of the evaluation phase – participant evaluation (including certification) and program evaluation – were conducted several times throughout the project. During the orientation, participants indicated their perceptions of how well they knew about or had mastered six core distance education instructional design competencies, identified in previous research (Dooley & Lindner, 2002). (See Table 3.) The destinations’ microprojects reflected each core competency. Fifty participants completed all six microprojects, fulfilling the certificate requirement. At the end of Roadmap, most participants self-reported they had an increase in competency levels through their participation in the program.
Program evaluation data was collected at multiple times. A formative evaluation was conducted of course participants at the end of the orientation module to gauge their time expectations, rationale for participating, and expectations for course outcomes. Respondents said they were participating in the course to improve their skills and develop professionally. They noted that they wanted to be able to apply what they learned to real-world situations.

Focus groups were conducted with course participants at three of the collaborating institutions at various times. The suggestions provided by focus group participants were incorporated into later destinations.
After the first three destinations were delivered in the Roadmap sequence, participants were asked, via e-mail, to describe what expectations they had at the beginning of the Roadmap course and whether the course was meeting their expectations. Several respondents said they expected to learn from being a student in a distance education course. They were used to designing and delivering instruction, not receiving it. One respondent said, “Being on the receiving end of this course has given me a new perspective on what a student goes through – both the good and bad.” Several respondents reported using copies of the materials as handouts to give to faculty and in workshops.

Collaborative Efforts Among Institutions

Throughout the project, collaborating institutions communicated frequently, primarily through e-mail. However, the project team met one hour monthly via desktop videoconferencing to discuss development issues. In addition to frequent communication among partnering institutions, the project development team also communicated with Roadmap participants. The project team maintained frequent e-mail and discussion board communication with the participants.

Conclusions

Participation in this project allowed instructional designers to be more adequately prepared to assist faculty, who in turn, can teach distance courses more effectively. Interest already has been generated with instructional designers and distance education specialists outside of the land-grant university system who want to participate in future offerings of Roadmap.

Based on this collaborative effort of six universities with well-recognized and respected distance education programs, Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design will raise the level of the type of work done by distance education instructional designers. The certification process will continue to play a major role in helping distance education instructional designers raise their own stature for the positions they hold at their respective universities. Overall, this project will better prepare instructional designers at land-grant universities to support their universities’ distance education teaching programs.

References


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Allan Schmidt is the Manager of Instructional Development at the Instructional Technology Center at Iowa State University. Allan coordinates workshops, training, and consultation to faculty and staff with questions related to traditional face-to-face courses, distance learning courses, and online or distributed learning. He also assists with grant proposals that involve the effective use of technology in teaching and learning. Allan has a B.A. and M.A. from Iowa State University.

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