Interpersonal Consulting Skills: Building an Effective Relationship with Your Faculty

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Background

As new developments in digital technologies rapidly influence our society, higher education organizations are under increasing pressure to utilize new instructional methods and technologies to educate students (Educause, 2005; Phieps & Wellman, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The task to integrate these tools into teaching and learning experiences of higher education students generally falls within the responsibility of faculty (Tessmer, 1988). Although experts in their content areas, faculty often lack the time or expertise to explore and research new technologies and their potential (Nowrie, 2009; Tessmer, 1988). Recognizing the need for additional support, universities have established teaching and technology centers where faculty can turn to experienced Instructional Technology Consultants (ITC) to collaborate on instructional projects, such as online course design. In this supporting role, ITCs provide the expertise in the latest technology developments and pedagogical implications for the classrooms (Nowrie, 2009; Privateer, 1999).

To fulfill their responsibilities effectively; however, ITCs must also meet many of the unique demands in higher education, such as limited time or technology knowledge of faculty, and often need to quickly develop a comprehensive understanding of a particular project to determine appropriate steps that lead to successful implementation. Perhaps most importantly, ITCs need to be able to extract information regarding the characteristics of a faculty’s particular instructional needs (pedagogical objectives, learners, and context) in an efficient and effective manner.

In his literature review on consultation practices in higher education, Tessmer (1988) points out the significance of the interaction between an ITC and a subject specialist in order to successfully complete a project. Several studies on practitioners rank having good communication skills (York, 2010, p. xv), people skills (Liu, Kishi, & Rhodes, 2007), or interpersonal skills (Tessmer, p. 29) as one of the most important attributes of effective instructional designers when engaging with clients.

Interpersonal Consulting Skills

The importance of client and instructional designer interaction is not new to this domain. In 1981, the Task Force on ID Certification listed interpersonal consulting skills and effective communication as key core competencies for instructional designers. Yet, despite having long been identified as an important area for research (Durzo, Diamond, & Dougherty, 1979; Task Force on ID Certification [TFIDC], 1981), the call has only been answered in a limited fashion. York (2010) identified that experienced instructional designers should apply the following techniques in order to maintain good communication with their clients: (a) listen to the client (Keppell, 2004; Liu et al., 2007); (b) explain using the jargon of the client (Liu, Gibby, Quiros, & Demps, 2002); (c) ask questions (Liu et al., 2002); (d) use visuals to facilitate communication (Keppell 2001, 2004); (e) and verify information to prevent miscommunication/teachback method (Keppel, 2001). Other interactive consulting skills, during early stages, are also discussed. Bratton (1981) highlights the importance of effective interviewing techniques as a crucial component in...
understanding a client’s subject area and project. Bratton (1983) also highlights the importance of client confidentiality in building a supportive climate and help build credibility, comparing the ITC relationship to that of a doctor and patient.

This Study

Research Design
A multiple case study research design was utilized to investigate the interpersonal consulting skills of Instructional Technology Consultants (ITCs) with faculty in higher education. Current best practices in research methodologies were utilized in this study including, the use of purposeful sampling to identify cases (Patton, 1990), where as individual cases were selected to represent diverse professional backgrounds to ensured maximum variation (Creswel, 2007) in interpersonal consulting skills. As each case study was established, the use of constant comparative data analysis allowed themes to emerge (Yin, 2003).

Each case consisted of multiple data sources drawn from one initial and one follow-up consultation between the ITC and various faculty members. In particular, data collection for each case was conducted from four data sources: (1) pre-interview with ITC; (2) two observations of faculty consultation session (initial, follow-up); (3) post- interview with ITC using think-aloud protocol; (4) document collection resulting from faculty consultation.

Context and Participants
All interviews and observations in this study were conducted at the same teaching center at a large Midwest urban research university. The center’s primary mission is to support faculty in all aspects of their teaching, including course development and technology integration. The four participants were experienced Instructional Technology Consultants and have been working in the center for five or more years. As the center offers a variety of initiatives and services to faculty, instructors, and staff, each ITC collaborates in organizing a plethora of support and professional development opportunities ranging from workshops on topics related to teaching and learning to one-on-one consultations.

Findings

Guiding Principles
Three overarching themes emerged that showed how the participants in this study approached their work, particularly, consultations with faculty. It is important to understand these guiding principles since they describe how the participants in this study understand their roles as Instructional Technology Consultants at an institute of higher education and also provide insights into their beliefs and values.

1. Empathy for the client. When working with faculty or clients, all participants considered the most important goal of an Instructional Technology Consultant is to “partner” and to “establish a good rapport” with the faculty (Steve, pre-interview) in order to collaboratively advance teaching excellence at the university. For clients to value the support services offered by the center, it is crucial to build on the work that faculty is already doing (Max, pre-interview) and act in their best interests when it comes to teaching and technology integration.

By showing empathy, i.e. having high regard for someone’s values, thoughts, feelings, and experiences even if they differ from your own (Milne, 2003), an ITC is able to enter into the client’s frame of reference and develop a better understanding of the matter at hand which is crucial to build a trust-based relationship (2003). Furthermore, showing empathy influences the overall interaction with clients and circumnavigates all other skills, such as body language or facial expressions (2003).
2. Customization. Among the main responsibilities of ITCs, the focus is on supporting faculty and making sure that any tool they might be using is helpful to them even if it might not be the perfect technical solution (Patti, pre-interview). As Patti points out, the “goal of consultation is help with immediate needs and help them [clients] to get to a point where they don't really need us” (post-interview). To assist clients, all participants indicated that ITCs need to develop a thorough understanding of a client’s personality and technology literacy but also be flexible in their choice of tools. Knowing the client’s skill sets and preferences helps in customizing the consultation to specific needs and interests. Nevertheless, it is still the client who owns the project and, in the end, makes the final decision of what tool will be used.

3. Technology and pedagogy knowledge. In order to work effectively and efficiently with the university’s faculty and instructors on a variety of teaching related projects, all ITCs need to be familiar with an array of technologies and, most importantly, the educational application of these tools. While it is understood that one cannot know everything about each tool, the center employs a collaborative approach where each ITC needs to have a basic comprehension of a wealth of technologies and their educational application as well as have specialty areas. Here, individual ITCs are responsible to further develop their expertise in certain technologies. When necessary, ITCs collaborate with these specialists on projects that require a deeper understanding. Although supporting the use of instructional technology, Clarence also points out that technology should not be integrated for technology’s sake (pre-interview) and one should consider the learning outcomes when selecting a tool. “Technology is just a means to make other things happen… more student involvement, more student collaboration” (Clarence, pre-interview) and it has to be a good fit for client, e.g., competencies, time commitments. Acting in the client’s best interest; however, can at times diverge from the university’s plan to integrate certain technologies. Thus, it is important to balance university’s desire to push technologies versus the client’s actual needs and interests (Max, post-interview).

Interpersonal Skills
Participants in this study showed a diverse set of communication and relationship-building strategies when consulting with faculty on projects that integrate technology. When asked to reflect on particular situations and the rationale behind certain actions during the initial and follow-up consultations, ITCs pointed out that they often intentionally choose the way they interact depending on the client’s characteristics, the context of the project, or even the ITC’s personality. For example, Max emphasized that he asked the general question “What brings you in today?” (Post-interview) in the early stages of the consultation to have the client explain the context of the project and to identify possible tools that might be used. Furthermore, having the client go through the various aspects of a project generally helped to gauge the faculty’s own understanding of the project as well as technology literacy.

Emerging themes from each case indicated that certain communication strategies were universal among participants and applied repeatedly throughout consultations. In order to better differentiate types of strategies, Hargie (1997) suggests breaking down communication into individual interpersonal skills, e.g., questioning skills. Furthermore, the researchers drew from the field of counseling to identify possible interpersonal skills that ITCs might apply. The field of counseling requires comparable communication skills and offers strong similarities to consulting in higher education, e.g., the relationship between counselor/client and consultant/client. In both professions, there is emphasis on attention to one person only, i.e. the client, and the role of the consultant, i.e. helping and supporting the client (Milne, 2003).

The following table (table 1) summarizes interpersonal skills of ITCs which emerged during this study.

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Table 1: Interpersonal Skills among Instructional Technology Consultants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal Skills</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Listening (nonverbal communication)</td>
<td>quietly paying attention to self, other, and context to gain information about the speaker’s ideas and mood, e.g., nodding head, saying “uh-huh”, taking time to listen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrasing</td>
<td>brief restatement of what someone has said in one’s own words to check understanding of context; generally in a question form, e.g., “What I hear you are saying is…?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing</td>
<td>longer statement to summarize a larger context, e.g., action points at the end of a meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed Questioning</td>
<td>questions that can be answered in a single word, e.g., yes/no; useful when seeking a decision or clear-cut response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Questioning</td>
<td>questions that allow for longer responses, e.g., “Can you tell me more about…?”; useful for learning about somebody’s opinion / feelings, exploring context, brainstorming solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirroring*</td>
<td>mirroring an expression or the level of formality of the client, e.g., repeating a line, using humor; needs to be used with sensitivity to be effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive body language*</td>
<td>messages can be congruent or not congruent with body language; often inner emotional state is communicated through our body, e.g., posture, looking at client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address client’s questions - Explaining Concepts</td>
<td>helping clients understand a situation or technical tool, e.g., providing examples / non-examples, breaking down technical jargon; helpful for clarifying of a (abstract) solution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address client’s questions - Explaining Procedure</td>
<td>helping clients understand specific technical procedures; providing direct statements or commands, e.g., &quot;Can you click here…!&quot;; helpful for teaching new procedure, giving directions (when client is on computer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Conversation</td>
<td>communicating with client on a topic unrelated to consultation, e.g., sports, university news, family; helpful to get to know client, making a connection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*limited data due to observation protocol restrictions

Overall this study examined the interpersonal consulting skills that are applied by four experienced ITCs in higher education. Despite the stated importance of interpersonal consulting skills to the instructional design process (TFIDC, 1981) and findings of heuristics of practitioners (York, 2010; Liu et al., 2007, Keppel, 2004), concrete strategies addressing interpersonal consulting might not be taught in instructional design programs at universities (Liu et al., 2007; York, 2010). By having identified important interpersonal consulting skills, instructional design programs could incorporate those skills into their curricula to better prepare future instructional designers for a career in a university setting.

References


**About the Presenters**

**Peter van Leusen**, PhD candidate in Instructional Systems Technology (IST), currently applies and practices his IST knowledge as the Assistant Director in the Office of Instructional Consulting in the School of Education at Indiana University. As such, he collaborates with a team of consultants as they consult with faculty, instructors, and staff in various teaching areas, such as innovative teaching strategies, course design and evaluation, the production and delivery of digital media and other course content, as well as the evaluation and application of emerging technologies.

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