University Instructional Designers:

Everyday Leadership in the Age of Accountability

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Abstract

Accountability metrics and measures are becoming the norm in the university, but as policies are molded, adopted, and modified, many administrators, faculty, and students continue to seek answers and a sense of ease in increasingly difficult times. Instructional designers at the university level can and should adopt theories of transformational, shared, and distributed leadership to help create the lasting change that is needed within many universities today. As experts in instruction and understanding how students learn best, instructional designers are in the unique position to build consensus and solve disconnects between faculty and administrative interests in times of uncertainty. This article examines practical applications of leadership theory, including encouraging collaboration, clear communication, and the establishment of strong goals and visions, in order to help university instructional designers navigate the difficult situations they may face. Through such actions, instructional designers can effect more lasting change, find buy-in and consensus amongst diverse groups, and in turn take on stronger leadership roles at their institutions.

Keywords: instructional design; transformational leadership; change management; higher education accountability

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Higher education is facing an immense leadership challenge in terms of navigating the mire of accountability metrics and measures. Everything from student credit hours to teaching and research productivity are being examined closely, although not everyone at the table always agrees with the procedures and philosophies taking root (Carrigan, 2008; Middaugh, Kelly, & Walters, 2008; Silbaugh, 2011). Universities are places where a host of complex factions are in continual competition, and the business of running a university often gets entangled, for instance, with the ethics of taking money from students in exchange for an education (Drew, 2010; Lowman, 2010). Accountability and productivity metrics often become contentious when measured against conflicting student admission and retention policies, which can represent very different ends of a philosophical spectrum. In addition, academic quality may be set aside for business efficiency in those universities that are not able to confront and manage growing changes in honest and innovative ways (Drew, 2010). Ensuing debates regarding such issues are likely not for the academic leader who is faint of heart, or for one that is unwilling to listen carefully to all sides of the argument.

Enter the instructional designer, who is part of a very interesting and unique group. Sugar and Holloman (2009) noted that instructional design professionals – including those with titles such as technology coordinator and instructional technologist – often serve as models of effective teaching practice. These individuals are able to work equally alongside faculty, administrators, or students, maintaining focus on a vision of learning that is highly effective, efficient, and engaging (Merrill, 2002), and planning an effective route to getting there (van Rooij, 2010). Because they understand the theories involved in what does and does not work in instruction, they provide faculty with professional development opportunities that can in turn

contribute to higher rates of student success. The instructional designer's ability to understand curriculum goals and translate them into good instruction makes him or her an excellent mentor (Pan & Thompson, 2009), as well as someone that faculty and administration can rely upon to help them reach goals related to learning accountability.

Instructional designers are typically neither faculty nor administration, resting somewhere in the middle between the two (Campbell, Schwier, & Kenny, 2009). Rather than being held in an advantageous and respected position, however, many currently find themselves in a somewhat insecure place (Molenda, 2009). Sometimes seen as a threat to academic freedom (Poore-Pariseau, 2009), or worse, faculty development consultants that are extravagant for universities to keep on the payroll in times of budgetary crisis (Molenda, 2009), instructional design and technology professionals may find themselves marginalized in many institutions. To be seen as important parts of the productivity puzzle in higher education, Molenda (2009) recommended that they work to assert their place as an essential part of the solution, showing that they can actually save time and resources by improving the way the work of the university gets done. However, this is not an idle proposition. In a time when many administrators are under pressure to find the quickest paths to productivity goals, instructional designers must think and act like leaders as well as problem-solvers and instructional theory specialists.

There are, of course, many theories related to leadership and what leadership styles are best for different types of situations and organizations. In challenging times, Drew (2010) found that creative approaches that value the efforts of all within the university environment are frequently the most effective ways to manage change. Rather than rely on systems and structures for answers, Drew's (2010) research suggests that universities should focus on people instead, as with so many individual ideas and groups coming to the table at once, top-down leadership

decisions may result in frustration, fear, and resistance. Indeed, Kezar, Carducci, and Contreras-McGavin (2006) indicated that many universities do this already, but simply because leadership is more distributed and less authoritarian in most regards, this does not necessarily mean that they have engendered an inclusive and collaborative environment by default. Mistrust between departments and divisions, uneven resource allocation, different departmental beliefs and cultures, and simple miscommunication are all common obstacles on college campuses that inhibit true collaboration from developing.

In times of change and uncertainty, Pearce and Sims, Jr. (2002) suggested that the most useful leadership approach is transformational and empowering, one where inspirational communication and expressions of mutual respect help all stakeholders subscribe to a shared vision. A shared leadership model, based on theories of transformational leadership, can be highly valuable in helping teams successfully tackle complex tasks (Pearce & Sims, Jr., 2002). Within shared leadership paradigms, all members of a team work together and come to decisions jointly, rather than looking to one individual to set goals and define how they will be achieved (Pearce & Sims, Jr., 2002; Bligh, Pearce, & Kohles, 2003). Shared leadership is dynamic and transcends both lateral and vertical boundaries within an organization, giving peers, subordinates, and managers more equality in influencing decision-making processes. By contrast, those groups in Pearce and Sims, Jr.'s (2002) study employing more directive, authoritarian leadership models were far less likely to be successful. This indicates that while the picture of the heroic leader sweeping in to take charge of a struggling university may seem appealing to those institutions needing such changes quickly (Hallinger, 2003), it is not necessarily the best way to make a lasting impact.

Indeed, "lasting impact" may not be the most appropriate term to use. In order to effect true change in attitudes, processes, and beliefs in any organization, honest *transformation* must occur. Campbell, Schwier, and Kenny (2009) indicated that instructional designers often act as transformational change agents within their work, as their participation in collaborative curriculum shaping with faculty often inspires new ideas and approaches. However, transformation is not necessarily synonymous with simple change, and infers a radical shift in culture and behavior (Poutiatine, 2009). This is a different concept, as change implies a sense of possible reversal or impermanency. Transformation requires that all aspects of the organization, including individual mindsets and procedures, become involved in the change process, without the possibility of regressing to previously adopted beliefs or behaviors (Poutiatine, 2009). Such transformation involves risk but also involves a broadening of the worldview, and requires "second-order change" (Poutiatine, 2009, p. 195) that spans all levels and paradigms. In other words, transformational change involves the instructional designer not merely impacting one dimension, department, or program within the organization. To thrive in the globalized, results-driven academic landscape today's universities face, deep and total transformation is not just a suggested course of action – it is a necessity.

What Makes a Transformational Leader?

Individuals at all levels can exhibit the characteristics needed for effecting and managing such holistic change. Bono and Judge (2004) noted that those who use transformational leadership styles exhibit a high standard of moral and ethical conduct, as well as the ability to stimulate individual thinking, to motivate and inspire others to action, and to act as trusted coaches and mentors rather than just as managers. Extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness are also traits often found in successful transformational leaders (Bono &

Judge, 2004; Phipps & Prieto, 2011). Furthermore, Phipps and Prieto (2011) indicate that political skill and the ability to moderate relationships through mediation and judicious honesty are extremely important skills for the transformational leader, as well. This research suggests that such characteristics can exist in any member of an organization, whether that person is a university president, a faculty member, or a staff-level employee such as an instructional designer.

Successful instructional designers may be able to exhibit these traits as well as anyone in any decision-making role. In a case study on the role of the instructional designer in a university setting, Pan, Deets, Phillips, and Cornell (2003) described these individuals as multi-tasking coaches and teachers, capable of helping the faculty with whom they worked come to consensus decisions about their course designs and ideas in a non-threatening and collaborative way. Campbell, Schwier, and Kenny (2009) also found that instructional designers in universities are able to dynamically adapt their processes to the needs of individual programs or faculty as needed. In fact, many use a personal ethical and moral compass, as well as the context of the situation and knowledge of instructional design processes, as a guide in instigating positive change (Campbell et al., 2009). Many designers thus exhibit the same types of characteristics described by Bono and Judge (2004) related to transformational leaders, inspiring collaboration, innovation, and reflective practice than simply telling faculty and staff what should be done (Pan & Thompson, 2009). All of this points to the fact that many instructional designers are natural transformational leaders, and should be recognized and encouraged within universities as such.

Exercising shared leadership and attempting to incite transformational kinds of change in any institution can have a number of possible consequences when a designer is not serving in a managerial or decision-making capacity. Caldwell (2003) indicated that many times, change

agents within organizations are seen as those with some legitimate power or authority over some

work aspect or department. Even though Kouzes and Posner (2007) noted that leaders are found

at all levels, the presence of strong leadership qualities does not mean that others will

immediately embrace one's ideas, regardless of his or her position. The ability to lead from

within in grassroots efforts has a great deal to do with one's perception and negotiation of power

in the institution (Kezar, 2010). Kezar's (2010) research suggests that instructional designers

may perceive their roles in different ways, and individuals may find it easier or more difficult to

exercise leadership skills – no matter how well-honed they are – depending on whether power is

viewed as confrontational, tempered and generative, or contextual in nature. When perceptions

do not match reality or are self-defeating, resistance may severely thwart future forays into

leadership.

     Organizational structures, attitudes, and beliefs can also play a role in either fostering or

discouraging shared and distributed leadership models. Kezar (2009) noted that the push for

change in higher education has caused some campuses to adopt multiple initiatives, often moving

in several directions at once. The result can lead to splintering resources and attentions,

disillusionment, and eventually lowered morale, with no actual change of any meaningful kind

occurring in the process. This morass of disjointed initiatives cannot possibly lead to the type of

true transformation defined by Poutiatine (2009), and while some individuals may have

wonderful ideas and may do great things, they do so in relative isolation, rather than as part of a

concerted and systematic effort. As a result, this reduces the potential impact that a university

can have on the greater community by producing quality graduates and creating productive

outside partnerships based on a clear vision (Silbaugh, 2011). Instructional designers and others

who wish to act in shared leadership roles as change agents may find it quite difficult to initiate and maintain transformative efforts within such an environment.

How Instructional Designers Can Create Transformation

In the face of such challenges, how can instructional designers build true transformative change through grassroots efforts? As Kezar (2009; 2010) indicated, the road is not an easy one to travel, but there are specific strategies that can be used. The first thing that must be done is to move out of the "normal state" (Quinn, 2004, p. 24). When in the normal, comfortable state of everyday work, people are typically self-focused, externally directed, and closed to the intuition that often provides internal guidance toward transformational action (Quinn, 2004; 2008). However, when they enter a state of leadership, they can become far more open to the needs and ideas of others as well as to messages from the self, and they can maintain a clearer focus on future vision and results.

Instructional designers can reach this fundamental state of leadership by looking inward and asking whether they are truly purpose-driven and open to new ideas, or whether they are working primarily to maintain the status quo. True transformation must be sought, rather than merely implementing isolated, minor fixes for much larger problems (Poutiatine, 2009). Through managing distributed project teams (van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & van Meurs, 2009; van Rooij, 2010), working toward synergy across campus-wide committees (Kezar, 2009; 2010), and conducting coordinated mentorship efforts (Barcyk, Buckenmeyer, Feldman, & Hixon, 2011), instructional designers can play a key role in creating successful collaboration and transformations that will help universities weather the tests of increased accountability and uncertain economic and societal landscapes.

Distributed Project Teams for Collaboration

Built on the theories of transformational and shared leadership, distributed leadership as defined by van Ameijde et al. (2009) involves a strong movement away from the central, heroic leader figure in an organization. Instead, many individuals share in the decision-making process, working together to leverage their various areas of expertise in order to create more informed policies, products, and resolutions to the problems of the institution. Distributed and shared leadership models can promote greater innovation, creativity, and engagement among people at all levels, and can create the kind of mutual respect necessary to ensure good team relationships (Mulford, 2006; Pearce & Sims, Jr., 2002; van Ameijde et al., 2009). A case of distributed leadership working particularly well focused on a British university facing rising internal friction, external pressures in the form of competition and accountability issues, and a pluralistic decision-making process run by an increasing number of ineffectual committees (van Ameijde et al., 2009). In a study of ten different project teams, van Ameijde and colleagues (2009) found that the most effective ones were those that made decisions involving key people, engaged in continual feedback, and communicated with stakeholders in a way that tailored the message to the individual. When each team member had a clear part to play, they could support each other more easily, and in turn could take greater advantage of the expertise that each member brought to the table.

On a practical level, the work of van Ameijde et al. (2009) shows that distributed leadership can play a vital role in ensuring that activities and decisions are carried out thoughtfully, and in a way that recognizes the interests and talents of all involved. But, this does not imply that universities should be implementing more committees and small teams working individually on separate efforts. Without truly distributed coordination, sharing, and

collaboration, such an approach may lead to splintered and ultimately ineffectual change efforts (Kezar, 2009). Instead, instructional designers may be able to leverage their often-superior project management and assessment skills (Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003; van Rooij, 2010) to ensure that all teams and their members communicate openly, provide continuous feedback, maintain autonomy from outside influences and possible authoritarian pressures, and that goals and responsibilities are clearly outlined and kept in perspective at all times. Because instructional design professionals are trained in planning and prioritizing goals, by extension they are excellent candidates to play key roles in distributed leadership teams.

Synergistic Change at the Grassroots Level

The instructional designer's project management skills and planning and assessment abilities (van Rooij, 2010) can also assist him or her in implementing initiatives that can blossom from small, ground-level projects to large-scale, transformational efforts. Kezar (2010) described the most successful grassroots leadership strategies as non-confrontational and focused on the problems to be solved, not on the people involved or on the potential consequences of taking action. Effective grassroots leadership involves maintaining a link to one's authentic self (George, 2008), networking with others, developing relationships, and negotiating circumstances without focusing on power or decision-making authority. These practices point to success in distributed leadership teams (van Ameijde et al., 2009), as they promote the empowerment of individuals within the organizational structure of the university. If an instructional designer is to be a truly effective leader and project manager, he or she must not engage in self-defeating attitudes like worrying about consequences and a fear of the unknown.

Fear is certainly not what will help universities achieve synergy in change implementation efforts. Kezar (2009) described an instance where one university brought a

committee of individuals from all organizational levels to study and consolidate the activities of

each school and program related to diversity issues on the campus. In an effort highly

reminiscent of project management and instructional design practices (van Rooij, 2010), they

collaboratively and systematically mapped each of these activities and their primary objectives,

eventually finding 75 separately functioning diversity programs. Realizing that so many

different, disjointed activities were potentially not reaching as many students and staff as they

could, the committee worked to create greater efficiency by combining many of these programs,

so as to avoid duplicating efforts unnecessarily and thus serving the needs of diverse students

and staff at much higher levels. This committee was not without challenges along its journey, as

individuals disagreed on different issues and the functions or importance of various programs,

and assessment needed to be completed to ensure that consolidated programs were indeed

effective (Kezar, 2009). However, with a shared goal and priorities, this committee was able to

come together and work as a team, even though many members were not necessarily in positions

of managerial power or authority. Their voices were heard through this well-planned and

cohesive venture, and thus each of them became grassroots leaders in their own right.

Mentoring and Coaching as Leadership

        Planning and prioritizing goals are also important parts of executing programs, and

instructional designers are rarely strangers to such activities. Their training also often puts them

in positions of serving as coaches, advisors, or mentors in educational settings, although often

informally so (Pan et al., 2003; Pan & Thompson, 2009). In an example described by Barcyzk,

Buckenmeyer, Feldman, and Hixon (2011), a tiered collaborative approach to mentorship was

used, where instructional designers mentored faculty skilled in designing and delivering online

courses, who were in turn paired with other faculty requiring training to improve their online

teaching. The focus on instructional design throughout the process enabled to team to stay

focused on systematic review of course objectives and corresponding activities, as well as

provided protégés with new models for creating exciting, problem-based coursework that

impacted student critical thinking and synthesis skills more fully (Merrill, 2002; van Rooij,

2010).   The formal, year-long program asked faculty protégés to design and deliver a pilot

online course, and at the end, the mentorship team assessed their level of success. Barczyk and

colleagues (2011) noted that the majority of faculty members reported high levels of satisfaction

with the program and with the outcomes they achieved, indicating that the supportive atmosphere

established between mentors and protégés was motivational and effective in curbing anxiety.

     This program was primarily driven by instructional designers and faculty at the institution

who were concerned about the quality of online teaching, and the need to demonstrate to state

agencies that the institution's distance offerings were of the same quality as its traditional

courses (Barczyk et al., 2011). Had these individuals not expressed these worries openly for fear

of rebukes from senior leadership, the program may never have started and would not have

touched the lives of so many faculty and students. Thus, this is a clear example of the power of

grassroots and distributed leadership efforts, as multiple parties played an important role and

worked together to create a successful, ongoing campus-wide initiative. This in turn helped

forever alter the way distance learning was treated at the institution, creating the sort of

foundational, holistic change essential for true transformation (Poutiatine, 2009). This example

shows clear support for instructional designers as transformational leaders within universities,

demonstrating how their knowledge and expertise can help institutions rise to the challenge of

shifting demands from legislators, accreditors, and other stakeholders.

Conclusion: Instructional Designers in the University of the Future

Universities are complex places, where multiple interests and agendas are brought together under a single banner. In order to achieve the common goal of ensuring continued success in the face of rising accountability measures and other challenges, organizations must learn to work together in a more cohesive fashion. To do otherwise may spell disaster, as the tides of change and rising demands for accountability show few signs of receding (Derthick & Dunn, 2009; Middaugh, 2007; Molenda, 2009). Instructional designers can play an integral part in making needed transformations happen by sharing in roles as mentors, transformational leaders, collaborators, and change agents within all levels of the organizational structure (Barczyk et al., 2011; Kezar, 2009; 2010; Pan & Thompson, 2009; Phipps & Prieto, 2011; van Rooij, 2010). The only requirement is a positive outlook, a willingness to try, and a focus on goals rather than on policies that present obstacles to achievement. Specifically, instructional designers can use certain strategies to help ensure that their universities are ready to face an uncertain future:

- Collaborate in campus-wide initiatives focused on improving services and creating more cohesion between departments and administrative units;

- Offer expertise in instructional design and project management in the development of coaching and mentoring programs to help faculty and staff gain more knowledge and greater comfort with new technologies or academic initiatives;

- Share in decision-making processes wherever applicable, and ensure that such efforts are focused on solving specific problems rather than on the things that are perceived to have caused the problems in the first place;

- Consistently avoid succumbing to external influence, bias, and conflict avoidance, and focus instead on the needs of others and the organization as a whole;

- Every day, follow the path that has been set, but do not be afraid to question where it leads, and recognize that no transformational journey is undertaken alone.

Universities provide a valuable service – one that some might even call a "gift" (Martínez-Alemán, 2007, p. 576) – to the community at large. By ensuring that their mission remains focused on the ultimate goals of helping students become learned and productive members of society, they have the power to continue making wonderful contributions. Instructional designers should use their knowledge and training appropriately to ensure that universities maintain their goals, regardless of the challenges and demands that may surface. They must build the bridge of communication and collaboration between faculty and administrators while they travel across it (Quinn, 2004), which often means taking risks. However, succumbing to self-doubt leads to splintered efforts that ultimately fail to create true transformation, and as change agents and grassroots leaders, instructional designers can do much more for their institutions and greater learning communities.

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