

Evolution of a Faculty/Instructional Designer/Librarian Course Development Partnership  
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Within the field of distance education the current growth in instructional technologies and research into how people learn provides a fertile background for examining and rethinking the design and delivery of instruction in higher education. Technologies are changing and they are changing fast. As a result, it is becoming apparent that, in addition to content expertise, there is a wide range of skills required to create the most effective online learning environments for today's students (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006). It can be overwhelming for instructors to keep up with growing options for the delivery of instruction and a daunting task to design the most effective online learning experiences (Butler & Sellbom, 2002; Fink, 2002). At North Carolina State University, a large land grant university in the southeastern United States, a faculty member, an instructional designer, and a librarian have discovered the power of collaboration to support the design and delivery of effective distance education learning environments. This paper presents a model for their collaborative approach with examples from their experiences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature in both higher education and librarianship contains numerous references to factors that are demanding changes in teaching and learning, including the dramatic growth in information and knowledge, as well as the increasing uses and complexities of technologies. Additionally, globalization, pressures to produce measurable outcomes, an expanded understanding of how people learn, the rise in demand for online learning opportunities, and a greater diversity of students add to the complexity of designing and delivering the most effective instruction (Cook-Sather, 2001; Frank & Howell, 2003; Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006; Peacock, 2004; Rader, 1998).

In addition to these factors, time-consuming activities such as research, publication, and committee work are a necessary part of a tenure-track professor's schedule, and these demands can cut into time available for course development. As a result, faculty are often pressed for time to learn to use new technologies, revamp existing courses, or redesign courses for online delivery. They are often

overwhelmed by the challenges of staying abreast of the latest developments in instructional technology (Bower, 2001; Chizmar & Williams, 2001). Increasingly, they must seek out partners to help (Fink, 2002).

A survey of the literature related to collaboration between faculty and other instructional support professionals in higher education suggests that collaboration has historically been uncommon. There is also evidence that this trend might be changing. Examples from the library literature indicate that, although many university and college librarians strongly desire greater involvement in course development and instruction, faculty often fail to recognize the teaching knowledge and expertise of librarians (Christiansen, Stompler, & Thaxton, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2001; Doskatsch, 2003; Ducas & Michaud-Oystryk 2003; Manuel, Beck., & Molloy, 2005; Rader, 1998). There are examples where faculty-librarian partnerships do exist, but librarians are generally portrayed as the ones who need to seek them out and carefully nurture the relationships (Rader, 1998, Peacock, 2004). Examples of collaboration between instructors and instructional designers and/or instructional technologists also exist in the literature although such partnerships are by no means commonplace yet (Xu & Morris, 2007; Byun, Hallett, & Essex, 2000). In some cases instructional designers feel that they are still defining their roles and trying to become an integral part of the course development process (Pan, Deets, Phillips, & Cornell, 2003).

At the same time, there is evidence that technological change is leading to new examinations of traditional roles, explorations of collaborations, and new niches of expertise. For example, Cook-Sather (2001) and Boisselle, Fliss, Mestre, and Zinn (2004) have conducted workshops to explore and “unroll” the roles of campus participants in teaching and learning – faculty, staff, instructional technologists, IT professionals, and students. These workshops and studies have centered on deconstructing traditional roles, examining expertise, and sharing perspectives with the goal of challenging preconceived ideas about each other. Cook-Sather promotes the value of collaboration among what she calls “differently positioned participants in education” (2001). She discusses partnering by professors, librarians, instructional technologists as well as students to design courses. In these collaborations she cautions against the tendency to limit contributions of participants to narrowly defined roles that individuals might have been historically expected to fill.

There is also evidence that traditional lines between roles are blending into new positions that suggest the expansion of knowledge and expertise. A recent article analyzing job announcements for “instructional design librarians”, for example, indicates a growth in positions that blend aspects of traditional librarian roles such as reference and information literacy instruction with instructional design and instructional technology (Shank, 2006).

Most importantly, Kang (2001) provides a collaborative model for designing online courses, which echoes the partnership developed by the authors. Kang’s model emphasizes the communication channels between a content expert (instructor), instructional designer, and “support personnel.” In Kang’s model support personnel are envisioned as graphic designers, media specialists, programmers, and technicians. The authors wish to expand on this model by emphasizing the unique perspectives of librarians, their expertise, and access to resources. Additionally, Kang’s model leaves students out of the collaborative course development process. The authors wish to bring students into the collaborative process as key players in providing feedback for the iterative design and enhancement of courses.

In sum, the literature acknowledges the challenges inherent in developing effective online learning, and also suggests that on many campuses there may be untapped and willing sources of talent available for assistance with the course development process. In light of this research and as a result of what the authors describe as a synergetic partnership, an instructional designer, librarian, and instructor developed a model based on their experiences in collaborating to design and support distance education courses.

#### A TRADITIONAL MODEL OF COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Although not the only possible description of a “traditional” model, Figure 1 depicts the practice of course development that historically has been very common in higher education. This model places the instructor as the content expert who often has sole responsibility for all facets of the design and delivery of his/her course content.

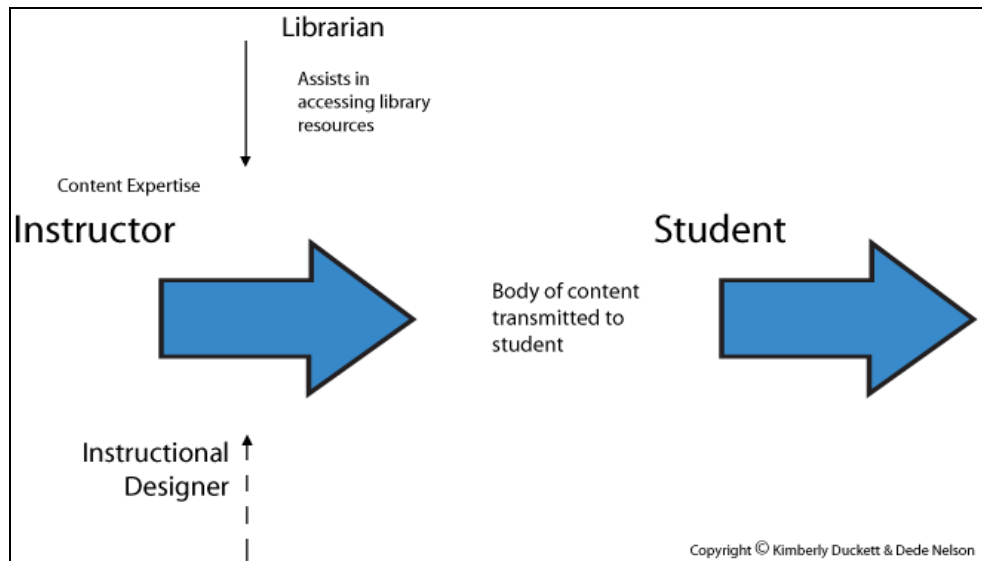


Figure 1. Instructor broadcasts a subset of his/her knowledge to students.

Historically, professors in higher education have operated in a very autonomous manner and have valued the privacy of their intellectual property. Content was often “broadcast” or transmitted to students. Freire (1971) called this the banking model of instruction, with the instructor making “deposits” of knowledge into his or her students from the bank of his or her knowledge.

Note that in Figure 1 both the librarian and instructional designer are on the side of the course development process. This representation reflects the side door relationship of many librarians and instructional designers in the course development process. Historically, many librarians have had to take the initiative in approaching the instructor to ask if he/she would like assistance in pointing students to relevant information resources and/or providing instruction in the use of such resources and other “information literacy” concepts. Occasionally, the librarian may work with the instructor to create or modify an assignment, but most commonly her interaction with a course consists in a “one-shot” session on using the library. Instruction pertaining to library resources and information literacy is often still tacked onto the side of the course, if addressed at all. At the same time, the librarian may have had one-on-one contact with students reaching out for support, and in the process may have observed gaps in student understanding about finding and evaluating information. Sometimes this model results in a beneficial collaboration between the instructor and the librarian, resulting in varying degrees of integration of library

resources and instruction into the course, but these partnerships have been the exception rather than the norm.

Also in Figure 1 the role of the instructional designer is represented by a dotted line in order to express the fact that the presence of an instructional designer has not become a routine part of the course development process in this model. There is an emerging awareness of what skills an instructional designer can bring to the table, but even where these skills are recognized, those operating within this model will seldom find instructional designers integrally involved in the course development process on a regular basis.

In the traditional model of course development, instructors operate alone for the most part, despite occasional attempts at collaboration. While the traditional model is more typical in face-to-face instruction, many of the early adopters of instructional technology and online instruction tended to continue with this same model, often just applying the same teaching methods to a new delivery medium – in a sense just putting lectures online.

Development for online and blended courses cries out for new approaches, and the vast majority of faculty do not have the diverse skill set that is required to create engaging online instruction. Oblinger and Hawkins (2006) describe these attempts for faculty to “go it alone” as the Lone Ranger model. They write, “Although the ‘Lone Ranger’ approach to online learning has worked in the past, it does not scale well. Institutions that are serious about providing high-quality, flexible educational experiences are finding that teams – not individuals – deliver the most effective online courses.”

#### A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Over the past couple of years, the authors have discovered the power of a team-based approach. Their collaboration centers on the design and delivery of distance education courses in NC State University’s Department of Adult and Higher Education. Dede Nelson, the department’s instructional designer, supports two completely online graduate programs. She works with faculty to build entirely new courses or revise existing course sites, advises on the effective integration of instructional technology and pedagogy, and reviews course sites for accessibility compliance. Kim Duckett is the Principal Librarian for Digital Technologies and Learning at the university’s libraries. She focuses on instructional design and

the use of instructional technologies for both distance education and face-to-face delivery of instruction pertaining to library and information resources. Together they work with Dr. Julia Storberg-Walker, an Assistant Professor in the department, who teaches a number of online courses. She is in the third year of a tenure track position and is challenged to maintain her teaching load, research responsibilities, and committee engagement. The three development partners are quick to acknowledge students as the focus of their efforts and view students as important partners in the course development process. The students in this case are primarily adult learners in graduate programs at NCSU.

A year ago, the librarian and instructional designer were working independently to support a variety of courses, including several of Dr. Storberg-Walker's graduate online courses. Gradually, they discovered that they were each working on the same courses but without consultation with each other and began to see ways that they could strengthen the courses through their collaboration. The instructional designer began to seek information from the librarian about accessing course-relevant library resources, addressing copyright issues, establishing e-reserves for the course, and exploring options for the delivery of course supplemental materials such as documentaries on DVD. In return, the librarian sought advice on instructional design issues. She asked for help with using tools in the learning management system and for ideas about instructional technologies that could be used in tandem with the LMS. They also discussed details about assignments. Through this relationship, the librarian found she had deeper access to the course web sites, new perspectives on the needs of the instructors and students, and a partner with whom she could share instructional design ideas. The instructor willingly accepted their support and actively fostered deeper collaboration in the development and support of her courses. The synergy between the instructor, instructional designer, and librarian fueled the creation of the collaborative model of course development shown in Figure 2.

As indicated in the model, the development process is iterative and allows partners to share individual expertise, while always keeping the student as the focus of their efforts.

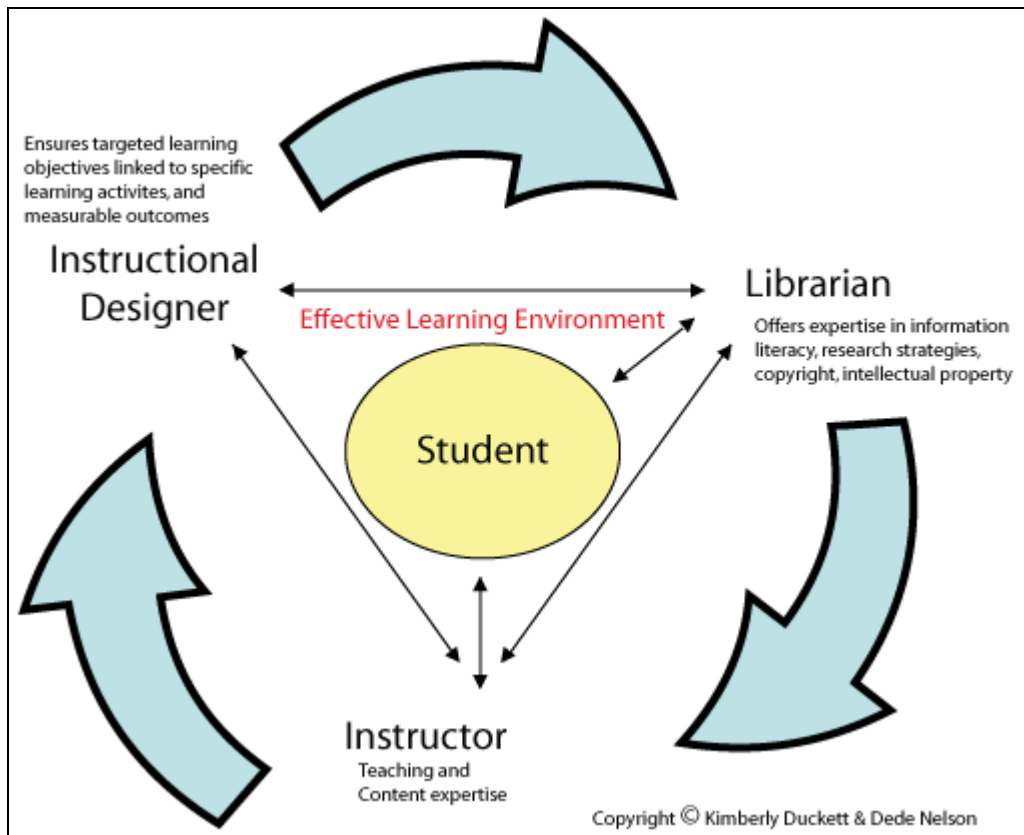


Figure 2. Collaborative model with instructor, instructional designer, and librarian, all keeping student as focus of the process.

The three large arrows represent collaborative partners. It is important to note that in this particular case the partners are a librarian, an instructional designer, and an instructor, but in fact, the actual collaborative partners may have other roles such as instructional technologist, research assistant, graduate student, or administrative assistant. Kang (2001) provides another useful model for the collaborative course design process and emphasizes the value of “support personnel” such as graphic designers and multimedia specialists. The number of partners may vary as well. The specific needs of a course and the staff available will significantly shape the kinds of expertise provided by collaborative partners. In all cases, however, the student remains a key participant in the course development process and is central in the model. The inclusion of students as key players in the collaborative process builds on Kang's model.

There is no single flow of information in this collaboration. The collaborative process normally begins with the instructor and in the end the instructor has the final say, but the development process may become very iterative. As a result, the communication channels represented by the large arrows may

as easily be reversed with communication beginning between an instructional designer and librarian then moving towards involvement with the instructor. When the overall course development process is considered, the collaborative participants may actually be co-equals, each bringing a certain expertise to the design, delivery, and support of the course. At times, the instructor might work more closely with the instructional designer or librarian to delineate course objectives, design online assessments, or create the framework for an entire new online course. The instructional designer and librarian may also frequently work with minimal consultation with the instructor on issues related to the course site such as the inclusion of appropriate library resources in the LMS and problems with e-reserve reading links. The smaller two-way arrows represent other important channels of communication that are important to recognize. These secondary arrows may represent the back and forth dialogue that goes on between and among individual partners. They also denote the flow of communication between the students and the course development partners. The dialogue between instructor and student is easily recognized and it is important to note that this dialogue provides essential feedback that should be incorporated into ongoing design decisions for courses.

This model also recognizes that there is sometimes an important communication channel between students and a librarian. Many times librarians are contacted by students who are having trouble understanding an assignment or feel confused about how to find information to do well. They also work with many students who do 'get it,' but just need a starting point. Their unique perspective on students' struggles to interpret or complete a research-based assignment provides invaluable feedback for the instructor and instructional designer. For example, a librarian who works closely with an instructor can point out patterns in students' confusion and make suggestions for language changes or supplemental instruction to scaffold student learning. In this partnership, both the instructor and instructional designer have sought advice on language used in assignments and course content to help students better understand how to access information.

On the other hand, when an instructor decides to incorporate various library resources into the course, he or she gives validity to these resources to the extent that a librarian might not achieve alone. In this partnership, for example, the instructor has dedicated a two week module to library research in her Research Methods course, including an hour-long online library workshop on finding journal articles,

selected readings, and discussion board activities. The module was designed with consultation with the instructor and instructional designer. It is also common for the instructor to email both a student and the librarian to put them in touch with one another as an extension of a conversation about a particular resource or article. As a result, the librarian can continue the instructor's work of steering the student in the right direction. Additionally, in this partnership the librarian and instructional designer worked together to design a library resources page that could be used in multiple courses within the curriculum. A link to this guide within the course site acts as a portal to the library for students. Instructors consider it part of the course materials and can refer students to particular library resources.

As Figure 2 indicates, direct communication between students and the instructional designer is missing. The instructional designer typically works behind the scenes to an extent that often obscures her from student contact. In some cases, however, the instructor might copy the instructional designer on email questions or suggestions about the site design or technology issues, thereby involving her in student contact. For example, students in one course were having challenges using Elluminate, a synchronous Web conferencing tool, to complete their classwork. They contacted the instructional designer who worked with them to solve the problem. Based on this feedback from students, she then created a step-by-step tutorial for other students to follow so that they were able to successfully integrate Elluminate into their online learning experience. In another case, students working in groups had an assignment to create Web content for student-led lessons. The instructional designer worked with them to post the information online, and took the opportunity to explain the need for optimizing PowerPoint file sizes and for adding alternate text for any images in order to comply with accessibility standards. Although the communication between instructional designer and students is not continuous, it is not uncommon. As a result, a dotted line might best represent this communication channel. In a perfect world there would also be more interaction between instructional designers and student in the form of focus groups and beta testing during the design/development process. However, in the compressed timeframe within which much course development takes place, this student interaction often does not take place. The need for additional communication between all partners in the process becomes obvious.

## FOUNDATIONS OF COLLABORATION

What traits are necessary in order to move towards a more collaborative model of course development? In the authors' experience the following characteristics support collaboration:

- *Commitment to the highest quality in course development, teaching, and learning.*

It is important to recognize that many faculty need to balance time spent on research or in pursuit of tenure with time devoted to course development efforts. In a collaborative effort, different players in the course design process can work together to maintain the vision of providing the highest quality learning experience for students. The faculty member in this partnership stated, "My students experience significantly fewer technical frustrations and the knowledge that we have direct access to expertise in addition to my own is a bonus for the students. I encourage them to think of our DE librarian and the instructional designer as part of our instructional team" (J. Storberg-Walker, personal communication, January 15, 2007).

- *Recognition of individual expertise*

In the world of teaching and learning with technology, many traditional roles are becoming blurred as staff expand their knowledge and expertise. As a result, it is important to understand the specific expertise of partnerships in the course development process and confront assumptions about what each partner thinks the other partners are able to contribute.

- *Trust and willingness to listen*

The demands of online teaching often make it essential for instructors to reach out for support. For some instructors, such as Dr. Storberg-Walker, it was important to develop trust in the expertise of the librarian and instructional designer with whom she worked so that she could let go of the need to maintain complete control over the course. Each partner must develop a comfort level that allows him/her to admit when there is no instant solution or when he/she does not understand the perspective of another. Additionally, if the student is to remain always at the center of the process, it is critical that course development partners listen to student complaints or feedback and not dismiss them as unjustified or evidence of laziness. All partners must listen for feedback that indicates when changes are needed.

- *Sense of humor*

In an environment where egos and the desire for recognition of one's achievements is prevalent, it is essential to maintain an ability to laugh when things do not always go exactly as planned, especially when technology is involved. There is a need for acceptance of the fact that perfection does not yet exist in the world of higher education.

## CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

For instructors such as Dr. Storberg-Walker, collaboration provides access to alternative skill sets. By turning to Dede Nelson and Kim Duckett for assistance, she expanded the range of knowledge and expertise available for her course, her students, and herself. She views this expanded range of expertise and perspectives as invaluable to the development of the course. Additionally, sharing the work for the course with these partners leads to an enhanced sense of overall responsibility. Although the evaluation of the course ultimately reflects on her, she knows that her partners feel equal responsibility. "From my perspective, this collaboration is so helpful because it allows me to focus on areas of my expertise (content) and I completely trust that my partners will assume responsibility for their areas of expertise" (J. Storberg-Walker, personal communication, January 15, 2007). The sense of trust is the keystone that can generate innovation and continual improvement. At the same time, collaboration does have challenges. The timeframe under which other support personnel are available might not sync with the instructor's time-based needs to balance research and teaching. Instructors might also encounter priority differences as well as language differences when working with both instructional designers and librarians. Collaboration involves working to find a common ground. Lastly, faculty must sometimes confront their own egos and acknowledge that they might need assistance and learn to trust the expertise of campus partners.

For an instructional designer the benefits of collaborative course design include the availability of additional channels to gather student feedback and a synergy resulting in the creation of a more robust learning experience for students. Challenges that often confront instructional designers include the different scheduling needs of instructional designers and faculty. Whereas faculty often avoid or need to put off thinking about next semester until it is only weeks or days away, instructional designers must plan

out their work over an extended time to meet the demands of many courses. It can also be essential that instructional designers learn when to “back off” if an instructor has strong opinions about course design at odds with his or her perspective.

Collaboration brings a variety of benefits for librarians. In particular, such collaboration assures closer involvement with a course and students rather than the fifty-minute, “one-shot” library sessions, which often represent a librarian’s online involvement with a particular course. Collaboration also provides an opening for deeper integration of library resources and “information literacy” instruction into the curriculum. Ongoing collaboration with faculty does not come easily for librarians, however. Building collaborative relationship necessitates that librarians knock on many doors both physically and virtually. It also requires that librarians learn to market their knowledge and skills to faculty who often do not understand their expertise. The rewards for students can be great. For example, one student in a course supported by this partnership told the librarian “I would not have been able to successfully complete the program without your help....I really struggled with APA and how to search the library online...your guidance was more important than you will ever realize” (graduate student, personal communication, April 23, 2007).

In a collaborative model of course development – one in which students are always at the center with available channels for communicating their perspectives on the learning process, there is potential for students to influence multiple factors in the course design. For example, a student’s problems with a research assignment might become obvious to a librarian who reports it to the instructor and instructional designer. Collaborative partnerships also increase student access to instructional support in the form of people (i.e. instructional designer, librarians) and through the course design itself (inclusion of links to library resources from the course website, for example). Additionally, by distributing the workload of maintaining a course’s website and materials, the instructor is often freed from certain hassles and administrative tasks, and as a result potentially has more time available for meaningful interactions with students. The authors recognize that in their own work, they are unaware of challenges that students face as a result of collaborative course development strategies, but they acknowledge that such challenges may exist and should be assessed.

## NEXT STEPS

The authors recognize the need for more formal research to help validate the usefulness of their collaborative course development model and the design approach it represents. Working in collaboration with Dr. Storberg-Walker, they have received IRB approval to gather feedback from students on their experience in a learning environment created through a collaborative process. Their hope is to gather qualitative and quantitative data to assess the value of this course design model and to look for other issues that need further refinement or study.

The authors continue to encourage other opportunities for cross-departmental partnerships. They have been invited to share their experience with this collaborative model of course development at multiple venues across campus as well as nationally at conferences and through a Webinar attended by more than two hundred librarians and other instructional support staff across the United States.

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