ITmyths

By Diana G. Oblinger
and Brian L. Hawkins

The Myth about Online Course Development

"A Faculty Member Can Individually Develop and Deliver an Effective Online Course."

In the early days of online courses, a widespread production model was to provide faculty members with release time and/or stipends in return for developing and delivering their own courses. These early online courses were developed by a cadre of faculty "zealots" who believed that information technology could transform learning. Such faculty were willing—and able—to master the required skills, whether that meant learning Java, HTML, or a graphics package. Often re-creating the lecture, the resulting courses frequently had an idiosyncratic structure and might—or might not—use good instructional design. Being a "Lone Ranger"[1] often meant figuring things out alone, so solutions were stitched together with whatever resources were available to the faculty member. Today, the legacy of these early courses is a boutique of different applications, approaches, and instructional designs scattered across a campus.

Developing and delivering effective online courses requires pedagogy and technology expertise possessed by few faculty. Consider pedagogy, for example. Good pedagogy implies that the instructor can develop targeted learning objectives. Online instruction is more than a series of readings posted to a Web site; it requires deliberate instructional design that hinges on linking learning objectives to specific learning activities and measurable outcomes. Few faculty have had formal education or training in instructional design or learning theory. To expect them to master the instructional design needed to put a well-designed course online is probably unrealistic. A more effective model is to pair a faculty member with an instructional designer so that each brings unique skills to the course-creation process.

But what is a course? And how should a course be put online? Instructors are being challenged to move beyond the notion of a course as covering content to the idea of a course as constructing a series of learning environments and activities. Effective learning motivates learners, develops their skills, and enables learners to transfer their new skills to other settings. Interaction is a critical part of the learning experience. How will that be facilitated online?

A first step is to rethink the roles of both the faculty member and the learner. Beyond lecturing, the faculty member might serve as architect, consultant, resource, reviewer, or role model. Students may assume multiple roles as well. Besides being a listener, the student might be an apprentice, builder, mentor, peer teacher, team member, or writer. With these alternative roles for faculty and students, the range of possible learning activities expands to include options such as authentic projects, peer exchange, case studies, debate, brainstorming, coaching, journaling, and so on. Can—and should—a faculty member who is a subject-matter expert be expected to think through these nuances of instructional design on his or her own?

Technology is another significant responsibility when developing and delivering an online course. One of the first issues to address is the application that should undergird the course. Should the course be built using a course management system? What other tools should be used to enhance the course? Is a chat room appropriate, or is using blogs or wikis better? Once the platform is chosen, who is the developer? Is learning HTML a good use of the faculty member's time?

The technology questions don't end when the course is developed. The support implications of any online course are significant. If the course includes links to readings or other Web sites, who is responsible for keeping those links updated? If a new version of software is released, who updates the course? And who worries about the security of the system, ensuring that students' assignments and grades are not tampered with? Who provides help-desk support for the course? If a student has trouble with the Web browser, should the student go to the faculty member, or is there an IT support desk that can handle technical questions? Is there a different place where students can get academic assistance?

Beyond the technical mechanics are IT policy issues such as copyright and intellectual property. Initial questions deal with ownership. If a course is developed as a part of a faculty member's regular responsibilities, does it belong to the faculty member (analogous to how textbooks are often handled), or does the institution own the work? If the author receives compensation for the course, such as a special stipend, is the course considered a work for hire? Who has the

right to modify the content? If the work is commercialized and revenue is generated, is a royalty due to the developer? The level of complexity increases when the "developer" is not just the individual faculty member. What ownership rights are vested in the technical staff, graphics designers, and instructional designers who supported the faculty member? And what about the use of material provided by others? Although it is tempting to assume that fair use will allow faculty to use any material for educational purposes, few institutions can take the risk of such an assumption. If students' material becomes part of the course (e.g., discussion boards), does the institution have the necessary approval to keep the student's intellectual property for future classes?

Developing and delivering an online course requires numerous and varied skills—skills that are unlikely to be found in a single individual. Teams will probably be more effective. For many faculty, working as a member of a course-development team is a unique experience, one in which autonomy yields to collaboration.

For any institution that wants to develop and deliver online courses, the members of the executive team should ask themselves the following strategic questions:

1. *What is the best use of the faculty member, an expensive institutional resource?* Online courses involve many components: technical architecture, instructional design, graphic design, intellectual property and copyright clearance, and subject-matter expertise. Faculty make up an institution's most highly trained, valuable resource. Is making them responsible for activities for which they are not trained (e.g., instructional design) and in which they may not be interested

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(e.g., technical architecture) the best use of their time? Or would a team approach work better?

2. *Do we have a process for strategically investing in course development?* What brings more value to an institution from online courses: having random courses available online, or having an entire program available online? In the early phase of online course development, faculty pioneers proved that putting courses online was possible. But to sustain the required investment—in faculty time and in support—online learning must be visible and viable. Are the advantages of online learning undercut because only one course per department is offered? Visibility becomes important once the pioneering phase has passed, as does also critical mass: programs must have enough online courses available to attract students to the offerings. In addition, the more courses that are developed within an individual unit, the deeper will be that unit's expertise, making success increasingly likely. Pursuing the "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach to online course development may not result in maximum impact for the investment.

3. *Do we confuse providing content with creating a learning environment or delivering a course?* When putting a course online, an institution may be tempted to focus on the content. But institutions should be clear about what defines a course. If a course is simply the equivalent of its content, why are courses not defined by books rather than classrooms and faculty? A course involves content, to be sure, but it also involves interaction, dialogue, mentoring, and coaching. Clearly, content can be hosted on the Web, but how will interaction be handled?

What technical infrastructure will facilitate communication and collaboration? And what pedagogical approaches will draw students in, motivating them to learn more? How an institution defines a course may well determine its success with online learning.

4. *What is the return we hope to see from our investment in course development?* In the early days of online learning, many institutions believed they would "strike it rich" by enrolling tens of thousands of students. Today's expectations are more realistic. Online learning offers needed flexibility to time-constrained students. Investing in online course development may help the institution graduate students on time while avoiding opportunity costs for the student and capacity constraints for the institution. But online course development typically catalyzes a fundamental rethinking of the course, the content, the learning activities, and the desired learning outcomes. This reexamination exists at the program level as well. With information changing rapidly, with new disciplines arising constantly, and with the understanding of how people learn growing progressively more sophisticated, the reexamination catalyzed by online learning may be one of the best investments an institution can make.

Although the "Lone Ranger" approach to online learning has worked in the past, it does not scale well. Institutions that are sincere about providing high-quality, flexible educational experiences are finding that teams—not individuals—develop and deliver the most effective online courses.

Note
1. Tony Bates, of the University of British Columbia, first used the term "Lone Ranger" to describe this approach to online course development. See A.W. Bates, "Restructuring the University for Technological Change," June 1997, ⟨http://bates.cstudies. ubc.ca/carnegie/carnegie.html⟩.

Diana G. Oblinger is Vice President of EDUCAUSE, where she is responsible for the association's teaching and learning activities and for the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI). Brian L. Hawkins is President of EDUCAUSE.