Lessons from the Pivot

Instructional Designers

Chapter 1

“Shaka, When the Walls Fell”: The (Temporary) Dissolution of Service Silos During COVID-19

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There were rumblings, quiet preparations being made, when our students were sent home, mid-semester, from our Italian campus (ok, villa), who were now going to be completing their study-abroad semester online. This was two weeks before our own campus shut down and transitioned to emergency distance delivery. Websites were updated, platforms were upgraded, infrastructure was mobilized, and resources were created, rapidly and efficiently. Our center, the Center for New Designs in Learning and Teaching (CNDLS), was made the central hub for all Instructional Continuity efforts, including resources, training, and support.

What I witnessed and experienced during the spring of 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic at Georgetown University was an unprecedented breaking down of service department silos, silos that even existed within our own center; we are a combination of a traditional teaching and learning center, an academic technology unit, and an instructional design center. Typically, the three units work fairly independently from each other - the faculty development team does traditional faculty cohorts and pedagogy workshops focused on improving the classroom experience for our students; the academic technology group does workshops, consultations, and other programming focused on incorporating technology into teaching; and the online and hybrid course design team worked with schools and programs to develop new courses or adapt existing ones for online or hybrid delivery. But once the campus shut down and the semester had to be completed remotely, we were all called into service to support faculty for distance delivery.

This also doesn’t include the various other units on our campus who support faculty and students in and around the classroom: University Information Services (UIS), the Academic Resource Center (ARC), Classroom Educational Technology Services (CETS), the GU Library, and the Gelardin New Media Center, among others. While CNDLS had various relationships with all of these units, rarely were we all called, at once, to work together towards a common goal of ensuring students’ success during a pandemic.
I chose my title from one of the most well-known and popular episodes of the 1990s TV show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In this episode, in a first-contact type situation, where a new species is granted admission to the Federation, Captain Picard is alone and stuck on a planet with a species who communicate by exclusively using metaphors. At first, Picard can’t understand his companion, nor can his companion understand him. “Shaka, when the walls fell” is a metaphor for this opening encounter; Picard understands it too late to save his companion, but is now able to understand this new species and welcomes them to the Federation.

I hope you see my own metaphor.

Our various units on campus are often siloed and isolated from one another, and we tend to even speak different languages across professional organizations and units. Even seemingly simple and obvious words like “service,” “workshop,” or “consultation” can have important differences depending on the context of the particular unit using them. We quickly had to learn how to communicate with one another and smooth over misunderstandings in order to best meet the needs of our campus.

This language divide isn’t the main reason that service units on campus infrequently work together. An overview of what little literature there is about successful collaborations (see Behling & Linder, 2017; Cavanagh, 2019; Hutchens & Sorcinnelli, 2019; Kinsie et al, 2019) find the challenges to more of these kinds of collaborations include conflicting priorities, time and logistics, campus culture, and limited resources. Ultimately, organizational changes are hard. Institutional culture is notoriously hard to change and bureaucracies are often ossified. Anecdotally, we assert that we want to collaborate and that more inter-unit collaborations would be ultimately beneficial, saving us all both time and resources, but the amount of investment needed to make said changes is larger than anyone can spare and not sacrifice the day-to-day workings of their units.

COVID-19 changed all of that. Our day-to-day tasks disappeared and we were all thrust into a new working environment, facilitating new collaborations. We were making up our responses as we all went along, allowing for space to invent, instead of falling back on what had always been done. And so, while we all eventually figured out how to do virtually those things that we had always done (consultations, workshops and other training, advising, etc.), we also found space to work together to create new forms of programming and engagement.

As challenges arose, units across campus pitched in with their efforts to assist faculty and students with the transition; for example, the unit responsible for classroom technologies transitioned to support faculty use of Zoom (our video conferencing software) for teaching, as that was their new classroom space. Initially, they were also willing to attend classes and help facilitate class sessions while faculty got used to the new teaching environment. That experience led CNDLS to collaborate with multiple units on campus to create a program for Federal work-study students to work as “Instructional Technology Aides” (or ITAs) in remote classes that did not already have a graduate student TA assigned to them. Students were able to keep their work-study jobs while also learning about technology and pedagogy, and faculty benefited from having an extra set of hands to help with technical issues and liaise with the students in the class.

Another example was our closing faculty-facing event that took place virtually just before the start of classes at the end of August, Digital Learning Days. Over three days, CNDLS, the Library, Gelardin Center, UIS, and ARC came together to collaborate on digital tools and pedagogy-based workshops for faculty. Typically, each unit would offer its own programming during an event - there would be library workshops and UIS workshops and ARC workshops
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and CNDSLs workshops, all separate but under the same event banner. In 2020 we all worked together to create and facilitate workshops that combined the expertise and experience of members of various units to prepare faculty efficiently and effectively.

This level of effective collaboration is a reflection of the values of our institution, but also the investment that had been made previously into our various service units. Our response to COVID-19 was stressful but relatively smooth, a situation that I recognize from watching my colleagues at universities across North America was, while not an anomaly, certainly not the situation everywhere. I watched as turf wars developed between units; they fought over scarce resources and staff, while faculty were left largely to themselves to figure out what they were to do in the fall. In some places, already understaffed and under-resourced units were unable to meet the demand for the fall, even while working together. Our institution also decided relatively early that we were going to start the semester remotely, despite our best efforts to incorporate some sort of HyFlex model with a select population of students invited back to campus. This allowed time for all of us to adequately prepare programming and adapt all of our work.

One other positive outcome from these collaborations and increased visibility was that we were suddenly no longer “in the margins” of the institution, to borrow a phrase from the title of Connie Schroder’s (2011) edited volume. Service units on campus are often left in the margins, excluded from the shared governance model that universities practice. COVID-19 provided an opportunity to show our expertise and importance to the institution, gaining us a level of respect that we often lacked given (among other things) the common rhetoric of “administrative bloat” (see, for example, Simon, 2017). The level of institutional goodwill towards our units is, like the situation we find ourselves in, unprecedented.

We are moving forward through the fall and into the unknown spring of 2021 with a renewed sense of purpose, but also moving in ways to ensure that these collaborations continue, that the walls remain fallen. Internally, for our unit, this has meant a restructuring of our sub-units to allow them to be more responsive, but also to ensure continued cross-unit collaborations for projects and initiatives. We recognize, as well, that our faculty are at a new level of digital literacy and pedagogical knowledge, so together we must work to figure out “what’s next” to best help our faculty and ultimately help our students.

There are still struggles, of course. Circumstances change rapidly, and we are trying to be responsive, which can lead to miscommunication, or even no communication at all between units. As I write this, we are scrambling to prepare a handful of faculty to teach again on campus in a small pilot, and while it hasn’t been smooth sailing, it has certainly been easier to try since we already have an established relationship, where we are no longer assuming the worst (“you are purposefully excluding us!”), but instead giving each other the benefit of the doubt and working together with a spirit of generosity.

It took being isolated on a dangerous planet for Picard to finally understand his counterpart, and it took a global pandemic for our units to really come together to best help our faculty and help our students succeed. May it be the start of something greater than the sum of our units’ parts.
References


