Chapter 3

Supporting Instructors During a Crisis:
Expanding the Wants of Instructors to Address their Needs

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On March 12, 2020, approximately 24 hours after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic, our institution, the University of Alberta, told instructors to prepare for emergency online remote delivery. On March 14, in-person courses and exams were canceled and instructors were told that classes would resume online on March 17. For many instructors, this transition was harrowing. As highlighted by Philipsen et al. (2019), transitioning to online instruction with inadequate direction can evoke frustration which slows the process. We represent two educational developers who sought to provide this necessary direction to instructors.

Most instructors were not prepared to pivot so quickly and to completely rethink the last few weeks of their courses; we, the educational developers, braced ourselves for the impending need for our expertise to support instructors during this shift. We, the authors, are two educational developers from two separate units within the same university; in this chapter, we discuss how we supported instructors to suddenly transition to emergency online remote learning. Through sharing our stories and insights, we explore our experiences as educational developers during the pivot and our attempts to encourage a shift in what it meant to teach.

Describing the Shift

Ellen’s Team

In the afternoon of March 11, 2020, our team of educational developers met to discuss how we might support instructors should our university decide to move online. We were a team of four educational developers supporting three campuses which provided (relatively traditional) courses for over 40,000 students. Prior to the pivot, our instructor support focused on one-on-one consultations—between one and 20 hours of contact with one instructor—and small group workshops. Over the previous year we recorded contact with approximately 80 instructors and delivered in-person workshops several times per month with a maximum of 40 participants. We were making a difference with instructors but worried that we could not maintain individualized support as our university transitioned all of their courses to remote online delivery.
Following the lead of other teaching support centers, we quickly produced documents to help instructors shift their work from face-to-face to online. One example, *A Brief Introduction to Remote Teaching* (Watson et al., 2020), was posted on March 12, 2020. Our course for teaching online was released early and we began designing an online resource. We tried maintaining individualized support by offering drop-in support through Zoom and handled incoming consult requests as best we could. Over the next two months, our group of four handled 220 unique consultation requests and held 20 webinars averaging 180 participants. Over 500 instructors enrolled in our online course. Our small team of educational developers worked around the clock to offer support that was as ‘normal’ as possible. Educational developers are used to managing change, but the disruptions in March 2020 showcased the difficulties in managing such massive change in a short period of time using our existing approaches (Huijser et al., 2020). We needed something more sustainable.

To streamline our support, we surveyed instructors about what support they needed to prepare for the upcoming online terms. Instructors wanted written, online resources and individual consultations focusing on delivering online lectures, assessment, and student-centered learning. We shifted our efforts from individualized service to developing an online resource about remote teaching. Instructors were coached to find answers on our website instead of requesting one-on-one consults. Initially, we were met with some resistance with comments such as “I want someone to walk me through it,” or “I requested a consultation so that I could talk to someone,” but as we directed more traffic to the online resources, this eventually became the first stop for most instructors. Five months later, instructors were surveyed again and asked how they were likely to engage with our teaching support centre in the future—95% of participants intended to access the online resources and only 50% intended to request an individual consultation.

**Bryan’s Team**

I am a Team Lead and Educational Developer with a support unit responsible for designing, building, and supporting online courses for a continuing professional education faculty. Some of our main programming areas include occupational health and safety, business and leadership, information and privacy, communications and design, and language instruction. Courses are scheduled anywhere from three-day intensive seminars to full-term (13 weeks) courses. The majority of our students are between the ages of 30-50 and our unit supports over 300 courses per year.

The COVID-19 response announcement set in motion a series of rapid planning and action items for our faculty. In the first few days it was vital to coordinate efforts with all internal stakeholders affected by the emergency. Faculty leadership, program staff, and support units came together to develop a plan. The goal was to get the instructors and students through to the end of their winter term course work and develop effective online assessment strategies. Delivering a highly sophisticated educational product was not an option in these unique circumstances. We could only do what we could with the time available. This meant that we had to rely heavily on our instructors and students to do the best they could with what they had. With that in mind, each faculty group set out on a path with dedicated responsibilities and duties to achieve this goal. In these early stages, faculty leadership played a key role bringing everyone together and developing a coordinated action response plan.

Our team was first responsible for working with the program staff to compile a list of courses requiring immediate attention, and then contacting instructors to arrange consultations. In total, we had 56 courses that needed to transition to an online format in the winter term. Since
the emergency online remote instruction was to begin on March 17th, we focused on the courses that would be taught that first week. Many instructors had a strong sense of the urgency and demands the COVID-19 situation created. For the most part, they were engaged and willing to invest the effort to navigate the transition as best they could. As a support unit, we had very little time to spend with each instructor. We only had time for one or two consultations with each instructor where we established a remote online teaching transition plan and determined what level of support they needed.

Initial instructor consultations revolved around what could be done to finish their courses in the online format. In this sense, we limited the options because the instructors, at this point, wanted to be given a solution, which our team was in a position to provide. Once a plan was established and explained, we defined the instructor responsibilities and how our team would support their efforts. To deliver course content instructors either developed voiceover Powerpoints or used Zoom or Adobe Connect. Most of the instructors also had to learn how to, at the very least, upload documents to the learning management system and adapt existing classroom-based assessments for online delivery. Depending on the online course requirements, our unit provided basic training with the tools needed. Still, it was also important to guide the instructors to additional resources where they could continue learning about teaching online.

Lessons Learned
About Supporting Instructors

In this time of crisis, instructors did not have the time or resources to deeply explore the changes required for effective online teaching. Instructors wanted to “transition online” as quickly as possible, yet instructors could not assume that how they taught in-person would translate to online remote teaching; the definition of teaching is slightly different in online learning (Gloria & Uttal, 2020; Palloff & Pratt, 2011). Ideally, to make this shift, instructors should have access to educational developers and/or instructional designers over an extended period of time (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2020; Hundey et al., 2020). However, neither educational developers nor instructors had the time to establish these extended relationships. Oftentimes, it felt as if the educational consultations were a stop along the journey, a pit stop along the instructor’s path to help with a quick translation to help them reach their destination. We, as those translators, had no way of knowing whether they reached their intended destination; we could not know if our pedagogical guidance changed their practice.

As we tried to change instructors’ thinking about what it meant to teach, particularly to teach online in this crisis, we also recognized different groups of instructors. We noticed that those instructors previously engaged with our support services—those already invested in improving their teaching—required less support during this time. Typically, these instructors had quick questions or wanted to check that their ideas were pedagogically sound. These already-invested instructors took responsibility for their own professional development and learning. Consultations with these instructors often focused on checking that they had mapped the best educational path forward.

Alternatively, a second group of instructors was less frequently engaged in professional development about teaching. It was positive to see instructors who had not previously sought teaching support coming to us, yet these instructors struggled to shift their mindset about teaching. Often, these instructors insisted they “talk to someone” instead of reading/viewing resources. Admittedly, many of these instructors were overwhelmed; we dealt with tears, anger, and yelling about being forced to move online. Nonetheless, the pivot proceeded and they had
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to follow the directive. As a frequent example, these instructors asked questions about using video conferencing software because they intended to live lecture during class time, as they had with their traditional classes. When we, as educational experts, explained why that might not be the best strategy, instructors were not always receptive to rethinking their teaching. Instructors who had previously not “worked at” their teaching were forced to reconsider what teaching looked like when learning was remote. Many wanted to mirror the face-to-face classroom as much as possible. As educational support, we took these opportunities to challenge instructors’ assumptions about teaching while helping instructors transition their courses online.

About Leadership and Supporting Change

During the pivot, some leaders with instructional/pedagogical knowledge were called upon to quickly develop a rapid response and implementation plan. It was determined early that successfully transitioning instructors to remote delivery required support from senior leadership, educational developers, instructional designers, and technical support. During the first few days, new information was released daily; there was little time for perfection, we were forced to operate with “in-the-moment” direction. Educational developers, as they are agents of change (Taylor, 2005), disseminated these decisions and explained how they might impact teaching. As the leadership at our university made decisions, it was imperative that the campus community followed this vision and remained focused on the common goal of supporting students and instructors through this transition.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, educational developers had moved from the fringes of the institutions to the center as advisors but not necessarily decision makers (Gibbs, 2013; Saroyan, 2014; Timmermans, 2014). As a result of the pivot, educational developers were integrated into decision-making committees. A few weeks after the initial shift, both authors were invited to contribute to a team focused on advising campus leadership about best practices in teaching and learning. This connected us to deans and other university leaders involved with teaching and learning. We were able to comment on and influence policy and decisions being made about core educational practice at our university. As Gibbs (2013) highlights, educational developers often move from supporting individuals to supporting groups and, finally, supporting their institution as their centers mature. Our centers had been supporting individuals and groups of teachers since their inception but, with the pivot, we were thrust into supporting institutional change that was happening at an exponential rate.

Working at a large institution, we, the authors, had accepted that educational change occurred at a glacial pace. Typically, any large-scale change had to be passed through several committees for acceptance before being rolled out to instructors. For example, in 2008, the Community for the Learning Environment at the University of Alberta formally supported the use of multi-faceted evaluation of teaching (Marin, 2020). However, it was not until the Fall of 2019 that a framework for this evaluation was developed and it was finally released in spring 2020. The educational disruptions created by COVID-19 showed just how responsive established institutions can be when directing their resources to supporting students’ and instructors through a necessary change.

Looking Ahead

Educational developers are no strangers to change; we are chameleons, able to adapt to the changing needs of higher education (Kensington-Miller et al., 2015). In this sense, we were able to make the pivot in stride, providing the support that instructors needed. However, as we reflect on these adaptations, we cannot help but notice how differently we work after only six
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months. We do not anticipate these changes reverting back to what we considered normal before the pivot and so we are prepared to adapt and live in a new normal.

One of the biggest changes we noticed was how we offered support to instructors. As Ellen mentioned, most of their work in supporting instructors before the pivot was focused on one-on-one consultations and small, in-person workshops. This was a great way of developing deep relationships with instructors but not an efficient, nor sustainable, way to offer widespread teaching support. Bryan’s team also had to make similar shifts to reach more instructors. Both situations required workflow changes to optimize the use of personnel and create ways for instructors to learn about online teaching without having to meet one of our educational experts. Five months after the pivot, our services have changed with instructors most likely to engage with us through accessing online resources and attending webinars. This shows a significant change in the way instructors interact with our services; one that would not have been possible—at least not as quickly—without the changes forced by the pivot.

Finally, as a result of this pivot, we have seen our teaching support centers move from the periphery to essential, involved, and centrally located. This type of shift was described by Gibbs (2013), but few would expect such a quick transition in a pre-pivot university. As we prepared for the predominantly online Fall 2020 term, more instructors were aware of, and accessing, our educational services than ever before. As we move forward, we expect this to continue as higher education determines the “look” of future learning. Globally, COVID-19 has pushed much of the world into online learning and shown the effectiveness of this modality. In our geographical context, the winter can bring -40 °C temperatures and we must say that online learning looks mighty welcoming if it means not having to leave our homes. Whether or not online teaching remains a significant part of the higher education landscape, we expect (and hope) that educational developers continue to be viewed as essential to any institution focusing on supporting students in their learning.

References


