Panel Session: Connecting Theory and Practice in a Change Project - And What I Wish I Knew Before I Started

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This paper is one of four use cases in a panel presentation titled "A Guide to Connecting Theory with Practice for Change Projects in Faculty Development for Engineering." The panel session will include a primer on change theories, examples from large scale change initiatives in STEM education, and a discussion of lessons learned and the role of assessment in change initiatives. The panel will provide an introduction and then alternate discussion of the four use cases with activities designed to help audience members synthesize and apply the change theories and lessons learned to their own situation.

At the conclusion of the session the goal is for attendees to be familiar with at least 2 change management theories and why they might use one or the other; for attendees to be able to discuss how they might use the presented change management theories in their own contexts; and lastly for attendees to be able to describe strategies for avoiding common mistakes.

This panel paper use case focuses on the multi-million dollar transition of the University of Wisconsin Madison to a new learning management system. The paper will discuss the initial change management theories and philosophies identified and how they translated into practice. While the project was initiated at a university level, it had far reaching impacts on the College of Engineering (CoE), and change strategies had to be customized to reach those faculty and academic staff. As co-owner of the project, the Director of the CoE's teaching and learning center was well placed to not only represent all of the Schools and Colleges but also facilitate conversations around Engineering's unique needs.

This project was complex and required technical, cultural, and relational change across the University. The unusual project structure was such that there were 2 co-owners of the project - one from central IT, and one faculty developer from a distributed teaching and learning group - the College of Engineering. This pairing brought together the strengths of strong technical backgrounds and softer skills such as change management, consensus building, as well as 2 distinct perspectives. This model also created a touch point between a more networked agile model for the project and the more hierarchical model of the usual operations. One co-concept owner was part of the hierarchical model, and one had no tie to it.

The common assumption is that the technical change process will be the most time consuming in a project such as this. However the most complex changes that were needed - and really drove how the technical changes were approached - were cultural and relational. The campus had a long history of central and distributed resources working together more tangentially, but for this

project to be optimally successful, a new level of partnership was needed. Addressing this first with School/College administration and the faculty developers who would be supporting the technical move was done intentionally.   The goal was to foster these relationships, build trust, and develop project buy-in from these critical partners, before engaging with the end-users - the faculty/instructors and students. Once the implementation partners were on board, it was time to reach out to faculty and students. By addressing the technical and cultural changes that had been identified by the project and partners earlier in the process, the communications and change management strategies to bring faculty and students on board were easier to identify and more effective when implemented. Since the project was a partnership, faculty developers within specific schools and colleges could address the specific needs of the people they supported in addition to the larger campus outreach. This was particularly critical in schools/colleges such as the College of Engineering who traditionally have operated with a strong culture that is distinct from much of the rest of campus.

The ability to have the change approach be customized to the needs of a school/college was a linchpin of the success of the change management and the project overall. Many of the early philosophies of the project carried through successfully to the end, but many morphed and changed as lessons were learned. Using this project as a use case allows other faculty developers to learn how change management practices can scale, how they often are most important in areas that are viewed as tangential, and how faculty developers can participate in non-traditional ways in order to serve their faculty's best interest and improve their students' experiences. This is particularly important in areas of specialized needs such as schools and colleges of engineering.

The change model
The eventual strategy of the project fits in well with Kotter's approach to accelerating change in an organization [1], [2]. In his approach there are 8 steps in his concurrent process model:
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1. Create a sense of urgency
2. Build a guiding coalition
3. Form a strategic vision and initiatives
4. Enlist a volunteer army
5. Enable action by removing barriers
6. Generate short-term wins
7. Sustain acceleration
8. Institute change

This model is intended to have all of the steps run concurrently and over time. We found that an additional overarching step also needed to be included, that the process should be consistently evaluated to see what adjustments can be made to improve it.

Create a sense of urgency

For this project the sense of urgency was partially built in. The campus' Desire2Learn (D2L) license was set to expire and the decision had already been made to not renew it. This led to a pre-established and rigid timeline for campus to migrate to a new LMS. The second LMS on campus had a more artificial urgency created. For this service a deadline was created for when it was expected to be retired.

While these were urgent deadlines to be met, they were not likely to inspire faculty and staff that were satisfied with the status quo to put in the effort to transition. A vision for the future that included participation in the Unizen consortium, and being able to better serve the student population was also shared.

Build a guiding coalition

In Kotter's model the guiding coalition is at the heart of the process. The unique character of it is that it is made up of people from across the organization, and from many different hierarchical levels. This is one of the areas where the networked model diverges from the hierarchical.

This was an area where the project had already coalesced prior to the introduction of this model, but still fits well. The project structure created for the LMS transition was unique to this project, and was a stretch for campus leadership, but paid off in many ways.

The project had 2 "co-concept owners" who were in charge of keeping the big picture view of the project and maintaining the direction and philosophies of the project. Over time this role also took on more traditional co-owner responsibilities. One of the unique choices the project made was to have one co-sponsor be from the central academic technology unit, and the other be from a distributed academic technology group. From the beginning this created 2 unique perspectives directly in the decision making structure.

Another area of the coalition was a hook into the hierarchical structure. The co-concept owners reported back to campus leadership, the sponsors of the project. This team consisted of the CIO, the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning, and the Associate Vice Provost for Academic Technology.

There is an established IT governance structure at the University, and this was leveraged as well to get feedback from many areas of the university.

Lastly Deans and Associate Deans from every School, College, Institute, and Division were engaged with to inform, develop buy-in, and gather feedback from. This enabled the engagement of distributed leadership from across the University as well.

While there were quite a few ways to incorporate campus leaders in the guiding coalition, there was no established way to include the instructional designers and academic technologists. For this a new group was formed that was key to the success of the project, the Instructional Technologists Group (ITG). This group was formed for a variety of purposes, including maintaining change over time after the project was completed, giving feedback during the project itself, and as part of the "volunteer army" necessary to implement and spearhead the move to the new LMS

Form a strategic vision and initiatives
In many cases strategic vision is considered much like a mission statement - a high level perspective. In Kotter's model it is defined a bit differently. Strategic initiatives are "targeted and coordinated activities that, if designed and executed fast enough and well enough, will make your vision a reality" [3], [4]. They are intended to not only facilitate short term wins (Step 6) but also to engage and motivate people to participate and buy into the change.

In this use case identifying these initiatives proved crucial to both engaging the volunteer army, and getting buy-in from segments of campus that could have been significant roadblocks to the success of the project. A number of these sub-projects were identified: Quizzing functional gap, Content authoring functional gap, and LMS retirement - in addition to the migration of content into the new LMS - a task requiring touching over 20,000 courses. These sub-projects addressed many of the concerns of the campus users, and because they cared strongly about the outcomes, motivated a diverse group of people to participate.

Another area that was included, and proved highly motivating to many, was also looking at the service model going forward for the new LMS. The project created an opportunity to take the best aspects of the prior two service models, along with the opportunity of shifting to a cloud based service, to re-imagine what support could look like. This initiative is intended to have a long term impact, so many who might dismiss the limited time of the main initiative, were motivated by the ability to help shape the long term operating structure.

Enlist a volunteer army
> *"The volunteer army is not a bunch of grunts carrying out orders from the brass. Its members are change leaders who bring energy, commitment, and enthusiasm." [2]*

The scope of the Canvas transition far exceeded what could be accomplished by central staff alone. Additionally, since the campus is set up in an extremely distributed fashion, each school and college had unique needs that could not easily be understood by staff outside those Schools. By identifying strategic initiatives that were important to campus and creating the Instructional Technologists Group to give a voice to the staff who would largely be working with the faculty impacted by the transition, a natural group of volunteers formed.

In some cases these "volunteers" felt as if they were more "voluntold" by the central campus group, due to the capacity demands and service shifts brought about not only by the project, but also by the shift to a new service itself, particularly a cloud based one. This is one of the many areas where understanding what was important to them was critical, as well as making sure they had agency to help define aspects of the process moving forward. This had the added benefit of giving them ownership of the service long term. An additional help was having one of the co-concept owners be from one of the Schools/Colleges, so it was easier to understand their concerns, but also communicate a vision in a way that addressed them, and for the distributed staff to feel like their functional needs were being represented, and that they had a more complete understanding of what was going on.

A key part of keeping the "army" engaged was the project philosophy of transparency. Unless there was a clear and critical reason not to, information was communicated, and feedback was requested, even if it was difficult, or even undesirable. This created a trust that the project leadership was not hiding any "gotchas" but also created opportunities for people to problem solve and make a difference.

Enable action by removing barriers
The biggest barrier involved in this project was time and capacity. Faculty largely did not care about moving to a new LMS, so minimizing the amount of time they had to spend was a key to project success. This was done with a cadre of full-time staff and students who migrated content from one LMS to another, checked it, adjusted as possible, and then sent a report to the instructor of known places attention would be needed. Office House, training, and consultants were all made available so that any faculty who had questions or desired assistance could easily get it. This process allowed the project to track how many courses had been migrated and met the minimum level of "done." Additionally, it addressed the barriers of time and training for faculty, and the barrier of tracking completion for the project.

Generate short-term wins
The project was set up so that there were targeted Schools and Colleges each semester. This let the project track and reach interim transition goals, as well as keeping attainable goals in front of both official staff and volunteers. These wins were communicated and celebrated, and also

leveraged to build more buy-in from schools and individual faculty who had not yet transitioned to the new LMS.

Sustain acceleration

Sustaining acceleration happened organically in many areas of the project. Because the project was not only about the transition to the new LMS, but also moving to a cloud service and retiring the old LMSs, there was a steady stream of tangential but critical items that were discovered and creating new initiatives and pushes in their own right, which brought more people into active participation on the overall Canvas transition project.

Data management was one area that become not only a significant effort for the project, but also pushed many campus conversations. To determine how to handle the data of the retiring LMS services, as well as the model for the new service moving forward, campus had to revisit some data policies around what constitutes a student record, what is reasonable for length of storage, how to communicate data security responsibilities and expectations, among others.

There was also the draw of the changes to the new service itself. The lines between the project scope and the adoption of Canvas into an operation status were purposely blurry for much of the project. This created many sustained opportunities for change, as the tool - and campus culture - were understand better, largely through the involvement of the volunteer army.

Institute Change

Because of the participation of so many people on campus, and the blurred lines between the project and operations, as the project is nearing completion many of the changes are already part of the new culture. Extensive communication was done throughout the project in order to highlight new processes, benefits, and expectations. Also, because of the phased transition schedule, there was a constant rolling of people in all stages of adoption. As more people moved into the culture of adoption around the new tool, there were models of the new culture for later adopters to merge into, and already consider normal.

With that said, this is a difficult phase. Even with inclusion of the operations team and significant planning, the handoff from project and the "network structure" to operations and a more hierarchical structure is difficult. The designed cultures and processes have to successfully navigate the waters of the priorities and operating procedures of the operations team, which are significantly different, even when planned for unexpected things came up.

Results so far

The project so far has met the success criteria set out by the campus Sponsors. Over 99% of courses have been moved to the new LMS, and when a sample of faculty were asked about how well their expectations had been met, it exceeded prior benchmark projects.

The "quizzing functional gap" and "LMS retirement" sub-projects are still ongoing, as well as some of the data security policies and negotiations.

Lessons learned

An entire book could be written around the lessons learned from the different aspects of this project. Here are a few that are key:

- Identify and know your stakeholders. If you aren't sure whether someone is a stakeholder, they are one. Get buy-in from campus leadership - both central and distributed - early so that they can be change agents (or at least change supporters) for their individual School or College.
- Communicate more than you think is necessary, or possible. Be creative with your communication methods. The project ended up using everything from email, to phone calls, to paper posters. Also don't rely on "accepted" channels of communication if they aren't trusted as being efficient. The model of communicating with leadership and expecting them to pass that information along was often unreliable, so the project made sure to communicate across all levels and areas of impacted areas.
- Make it easy for people to spread the word. Provide templates, information, and example elevator speeches.
- Segmentation of initiatives is important, as is cohesion. This project had one main project manager for the entire project, who worked closely with the co-concept owners and the Sponsors. Each sub-project then had its own project manager and teams. This created an incredible amount of needed communication, and work for the co-concept owners, but in the end let the membership of the sub-groups shine, and take on leadership roles and problem solving challenges.
- Morale can quickly take a nose dive on a project at this scale. Keep a keen eye on capacity, and the temperature of the project teams - both staff who directly work for the project, and volunteers. For this project capacity was an ongoing struggle, and many of the involved staff struggled with burn out. Identifying the things that fed their passion, and made it worthwhile let people keep going, and to want to keep going, when they might otherwise have lost interest.
- Be transparent. Don't gloss over difficult items, put them into the light and talk about them. Acknowledge the challenges and difficulties as well as the opportunities and successes. This built necessary trust and social capital. It also created an environment of inclusion instead of exclusion when peoples' experiences were considered valid.

- As leaders work extra hard to exude the culture and climate you are trying to build. Kindness, acknowledgement, empathy, good listening, being trustworthy, calling it straight - these are all things that can make a challenging project feel less challenging. Helping people see their value and importance, and how they are making a difference can make a significant difference.
- Whatever the time and staffing estimate is, double it.
- Take time to informally communicate with stakeholders. Going to lunch or coffee with someone can be far more productive than an official meeting.

References

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