

Chapter 14

The Third Time's for Charm: A Three-Semester Journey of Learning to Facilitate Relational, Online Learning Communities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case examines a three-semester journey of an instructor's efforts to augment face-to-face course delivery with online instruction. Her mission was threefold: (1) to update a school-based organizational leadership course to become more relevant to the profession, (2) to develop students' proficiencies for building leadership capacity and organizational intelligence, and (3) to cultivate relational, online learning communities. The author shares the failures and triumphs she experienced in developing her capacity for quality, online course design and instruction and in realizing the aforementioned goals in an online environment. The differentiation of instructor strategies and learner outcomes are highlighted vis-à-vis standards of quality online design and time-honored student reflections.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The University of Central Arkansas (UCA) has a history that spans over 100 years. UCA is the second-largest university in Arkansas, with about 13,000 students enrolled. UCA's diverse array of academic offerings includes 160 undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degree programs.

The College of Education at UCA is dedicated to providing exemplary programs for the preparation of professional educators, including teacher preparation, educational leadership, school coun-

seling, library media, instructional technologies, higher education student personnel administration, and other related professional fields.

SETTING THE STAGE

Do you remember the sinking feelings you experienced after reflecting upon the first course you ever taught? If you felt chagrined, then your feelings bore a striking resemblance to what I felt after my first semester as a novice instructor. This, in my mind, was a good enough reason not to become a novice online instructor. Even though

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-111-9.ch014

I was conversant with crisscrossing instructional platforms and was genuinely excited about the instructional stretch of augmenting my traditional course delivery with online instruction. I grimaced at the déjà vu of being a novice instructor. Despite my shortcomings, the unique challenges of updating a school-based organizational leadership course beckoned me to the vulnerable role of novice instructor once more.

I accepted the challenge to enhance the face-to-face (F2F) delivery of this course with online instruction for three primary reasons. First and foremost, I wanted to address the public criticism that educational leadership programs are chiefly theoretical and insufficiently practical (Albritton and Klotz, 2005). That school leadership programs are grounded in cognitive-based content rather than practical applications suggests that leadership programs neither reflect the realities of modern day school operations nor the veracity of their diverse student populations. This indictment motivated me to strengthen the relevance of our pre-service leadership program by not only training emerging school leaders in the requisite knowledge, skills and dispositions but by also designing performance-based activities that would simulate the everyday functions of 21st century school leadership teams.

The second reason to accept the challenge was the dire need for schools to expand their leadership capacity (Perkins, 2003) and engender organizational intelligence (Wilensky, 1967). Much like corporate America, school districts are filled with “telling” leaders and “doing” staff who work in isolation. Even though leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow, when transactional leadership reigns, the relationship oftentimes disintegrates into an association of exchanges (Burns, 1978). Even though the strategy to *divide and rule is a sound motto* as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once stated, *to unite and lead is a better one*. Leadership as a cohesive relationship is often seen in transformational leadership which is characterized

by mutual interests, genuine trust, plus shared values and vision between leaders and followers ((Burns, 1978; Flumerfelt, 2006). Since future school administrators will be leading complex organizations where pervasive leadership capacity and organizational intelligence is essential, school leadership programs must prepare candidates for the full scope of leadership challenges and opportunities that lay ahead, including team leadership. Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Flumerfelt, 2006) is viewed as one of the means by which school cultures can segue into professional learning communities for the purposes of student achievement and overall school improvement (DuFour & DuFour, 2005). These understandings inspired me to plan for activities that would allow key players such as aspiring principals, counselors, directors of gifted/talented programs, special education, curriculum and other instructional leaders to replicate functional school-based teams.

Sensitivity toward the schedule of today's professionals was the third reason to forge ahead. I grappled with philosophical, pedagogical, and administrative challenges in designing an online course that would remain true to preparation for the profession while it also accommodated the lifestyles of the professional. This necessitated a balancing act in that most students wanted fewer F2F classes but at the same time were not comfortable with technology's inability to take the place of the human touch. Students were equally repulsed by the notion of learning to use new technology. I attempted to quiet these storms by touting the significance of learning to lead functional teams, whether team members were distant or F2F. I also corroborated that online learning was not only forward thinking but a boon in the fulfillment of our purposes (i.e. less F2F classes, 24-7 communication, digitized organization, and a venue to house course and program documents, etc.).

When I first began the renovation of this traditional course for online delivery, it was natural for me to think about the teaching and learning

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