Bridging Gaps With Experience: Priming Faculty for Successful Online Course Development

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This article presents a novel approach to faculty onboarding in the development of online courses through an experiential learning framework, as implemented at the University of Michigan's School of Public Health. By integrating faculty into a comprehensive, hands-on training process, the initiative aims to bridge common gaps in online course development and facilitate collaborative efforts among faculty and course development teams. The paper details the structured three-phase approach aimed at enhancing faculty's practical understanding of online education terminology, processes, and collaboration with cross-functional teams. The documented outcomes indicate a marked improvement in the efficiency, quality, and overall engagement of faculty in the course development process. They underscore the critical role of hands-on experience coupled with reflective practices in priming faculty for effective collaboration with diverse course development teams, proposing this model as a scalable and adaptable blueprint for faculty development practices.

Keywords: course development, course development team, online course quality, quality standards, online education, experiential learning, cross-functional teams

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education has been significantly reshaped by the rise of online courses and online degree programs which continue to grow in number and popularity. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), 60.1% of college students at degree-granting institutions engaged in at least one online course during the fall of 2021, while 30.3% completed their entire course load online. These numbers signify notable growth when compared to the 2016 data, reflecting an increase of 28.4% and 15.3% respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Particularly striking is the higher percentage of graduate students who complete all coursework online (40.3%) compared to undergraduates (28.2%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

As demand for, and enrollments in, online courses surge, higher education institutions are challenged to not only provide these courses but also maintain their quality in a competitive landscape. Caplan (2004) underscores the complexity of online course development, emphasizing that quality online courses require the collective effort of a diverse team, far beyond the capabilities of just one or two individuals. The shift from a traditionally solitary and informally managed course development process to one requiring a

comprehensive set of new skills – including pedagogical expertise, technological proficiency, extensive project management, and collaborative capabilities – is considerable. For many faculty members, many of whom are still new to collaborating with instructional designers (Chen & Carliner, 2020), this change signifies a major paradigm shift.

To address these challenges, higher education institutions have implemented a range of support models. They vary from self-directed learning modules to highly structured collaborative frameworks. At a minimum, these models provide essential knowledge of instructional design principles, online learning pedagogies, and technologies. The more comprehensive models incorporate detailed processes and project management systems, offering cross-functional teams a structured approach to organizing work and meeting deadlines. Despite the availability of these resources, a number of faculty members continue to face difficulties, often resisting the recommended or prescribed processes for course development. This ongoing struggle indicates a persistent gap in the current strategies used to support faculty and their collaborators – a gap that remains insufficiently characterized and addressed in the existing academic literature. In this article, we describe an experiential learning-based onboarding initiative aimed at priming faculty for the successful development of online courses. By integrating collaborative frameworks and cross-functional team dynamics, this initiative seeks to bridge the existing gap, providing faculty with the necessary skills and understanding to navigate the complexities of online course creation effectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Changing Dynamics in Course Creation

The paradigm of individual instructors single-handedly managing online course design, sometimes referred to as the "lone ranger" model, is becoming increasingly obsolete in the realm of contemporary education (Bates, 2000; Chao et al., 2010). This traditional approach, where faculty members predominantly rely on their own subject matter expertise and develop courses independently or with minimal assistance, is proving inadequate for the complexities of online teaching. The shift to online education has placed many faculty members in unfamiliar territory as they find themselves increasingly being tasked with developing and implementing online courses, often without prior experience or formal training in the nuances of online pedagogy (He et al., 2014; Cutri & Mena, 2020). To bridge this skills gap, some institutions have implemented support models that offer faculty various resources, such as templates, specification sheets (Wang et al., 2009; Scoppio & Luyt, 2017), and professional development opportunities including workshops and self-paced modules focused on online course design (Schmidt et al., 2016; Rhode & Krishnamurthi, 2016). However, despite these support structures, in many cases, the faculty member still shoulders the burden of course development alone.

Recognizing that creating high-caliber online courses is a multidisciplinary effort that requires the collaboration of a diverse team (Caplan, 2004; Bransford et al., 2000; Gagné et al., 2005; Scoppio & Luyt, 2017; Kidney et al., 2007; Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006; Wang et al., 2009; Caplan & Graham, 2008; Knowles & Kalata, 2007; Hixon, 2008; Brown et al., 2013), institutions are increasingly moving towards more holistic models and augmenting the traditional solitary faculty role with cross-functional teams dedicated to producing high-quality online courses. This approach draws on the collective expertise of instructional designers, technology specialists, and subject matter experts (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006; Wang et al., 2009). Such collaborative models have been widely implemented and documented across numerous educational settings (Hixon, 2008; Care & Scanlan, 2001; Chapman & Nicolet, 2003; Ellis & Phelps, 2000; Hartman et al., 2000; Hawkes & Coldeway, 2002; Luck, 2001; Meyen et al., 1999; Plummer et al., 2001; Smith & Gunderson, 2000; Stevens et al., 2001; White, 2000; Youngman et al., 2000). The composition of these course development teams varies across institutions, reflecting differing needs and resources. Typically, a faculty member is paired with an instructional designer who not only provides pedagogical support but also often coordinates the project. Additionally, teams may include instructional technologists to guide technology implementation, graphics and animation specialists for visual design, video production experts for lecture creation, and occasionally, informationists and copyright consultants for resource integration and legal compliance. While the roles of these specialists are consistent across

various models, the dynamics and methods of collaboration can vary significantly from one institution to another (Hixon, 2008).

Collaboration Requires Cooperation

The transition towards a collaborative model in course creation marks a significant shift in the faculty's role in course development (Hixon, 2008). This approach, contrasted with the "lone ranger" process of course development, is effectively described by Daniel (2009) as being modeled after an industrial model of labor division. In such team-based models, the timely completion of each team member's assigned tasks is essential for the overall progress of the project. The importance of establishing robust collaboration in this context cannot be overstated. As Luck (2001) emphasizes, a course development process where every contribution is interconnected and critical to the success of the project inherently carries the risk of a domino effect: if one critical element in the development process is delayed or fails—such as a missed deadline—the entire project can experience significant setbacks. Effective collaboration is key to managing the inherent complexities and dependencies of this process efficiently and productively.

In these collaborative settings, faculty often emerge as the pivotal point where the process is most susceptible to challenges. For the team-based approach to be successful, faculty cooperation is crucial. However, this cooperation can be compromised when faculty are moved from their traditional roles as subject matter experts to novices in new areas of expertise (Brown et al., 2013). This transition can lead to a significant disruption in their professional identity, often resulting in discomfort and stress (Sockman & Sharma, 2008; Golden, 2016). Consequently, faculty members may experience a heightened sense of personal and professional vulnerability while adapting to these new, unfamiliar roles (Kelchtermans, 2009; Cutri & Mena, 2020). This adjustment is further complicated by the ingrained culture of autonomy within academia. Chapman and Nicolet (2003) note that faculty members are accustomed to having complete control over the instructional process. The necessity to reconcile and integrate diverse viewpoints in a collaborative setting can be perceived by instructors as a threat to their individual autonomy in course design and pedagogy, leading to concerns about maintaining academic rigor and control over course content (Xu & Morris, 2007; Cutri & Mena, 2020; Golden, 2016; Sockman & Sharma, 2008; Cowie & Nichols, 2010). Coupled with the fact that the creation of a quality online course is often a long, painstaking, frustrating process, this may result in reduced buy-in, weakened commitment to the collaborative effort, and increased resistance to the recommended or prescribed processes for course development.

The effectiveness of collaborative course development significantly hinges on understanding and addressing faculty members' concerns and needs in order to gain their cooperation. Research has shed light on several factors that contribute to a productive working relationship. According to scholars, these factors include clear role definition and expectations, fostering an attitude of open-mindedness, respect, and patience, building trust and developing rapport to generate buy-in, demonstrating commitment to the project and flexibility in work arrangements, empowering faculty with a degree of control over the course design process, and fostering a healthy workplace culture with adequate resources and transparent processes (Meyen et al., 1999; Stevens, 2013; Chen & Carliner, 2021; Chao et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2018).

At the heart of building productive relationships in collaborative course development is the essential role of communication. Effective communication within a team is crucial for defining roles clearly, fostering trust, ensuring commitment, and creating a unified vision. Luck (2001) emphasizes that excellent communication often serves as the cornerstone of a project's success or failure. This is particularly true in team development processes where the smooth functioning of the project depends on clear and consistent communication among team members. Misaligned expectations and different communication styles can lead to tension within the team. For example, instructional designers often provide detailed and specific feedback, which can be overwhelming for faculty members who are not used to such direct guidance (Chao et al., 2010). The situation becomes even more challenging when there is a lack of clarity on how team members should interact, potentially resulting in inefficient and time-consuming teamwork (Xu & Morris, 2007; Chao et al., 2010).

A notable communication challenge arises from the use of discipline-specific jargon. Faculty and instructional designers, accustomed to their own technical terminologies, may use language that is

confusing for team members from other fields (Bird et al., 2007; Xu & Morris, 2007; Stevens, 2013). This can lead to misunderstandings, particularly when faculty find it difficult to visualize plans and prototypes developed by instructional designers (Hixon, 2008; Xu & Morris, 2007). Team members with varied backgrounds and expertise can struggle to establish a common language (Hixon, 2008; White, 2000). This issue is especially pronounced when team members, like digital media services consultants, need to articulate their requirements to less technologically-focused team members, like faculty, and vice versa. However, despite recognizing the importance of communication in collaborative course development, there is a noticeable lack of detailed methods in the literature for establishing effective communication practices or resolving related issues. The existing research falls short in offering specific strategies to address the communication challenges faced by teams involved in collaborative course development.

Priming for Success

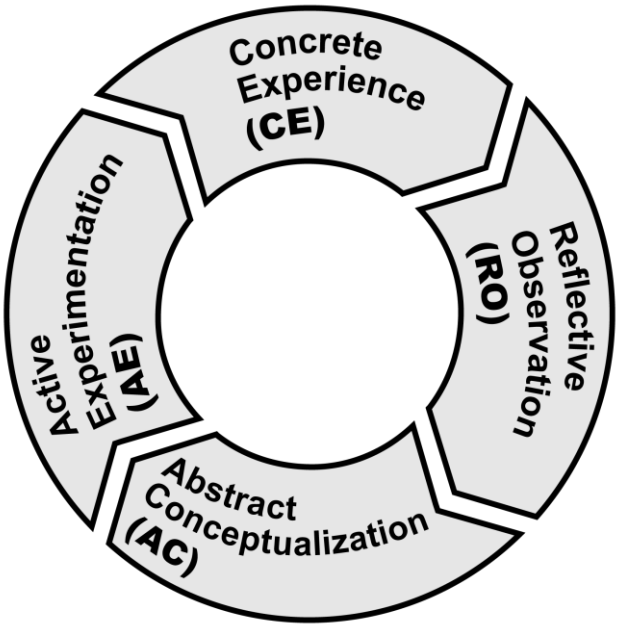
Onboarding faculty prior to beginning the course development process provides an opportunity to overcome some of the common challenges inherent in collaborative course design. As Leslie and Lizardo (2023) have shown, effective onboarding can significantly increase the efficiency and quality output of course development teams. Traditional onboarding methods typically involve disseminating information via workshops, written materials, videos, and lectures, which are designed to explain processes, provide definitions, and offer resources like templates. While this dissemination of information is a necessary component, it often is not sufficient to create transformative learning experiences (Mezirow, 1978). This is because such training often stays at an abstract or theoretical level, failing to foster a deep, practical understanding among faculty, particularly regarding the comprehension of specific terminology, processes, or course development requirements. For instance, during onboarding sessions, concepts like "video production" might be introduced, yet faculty members often walk away with only a rudimentary grasp of these terms. This superficial understanding can impede their ability to comprehend the necessity of allocating appropriate time to certain development stages or the importance of adhering to a structured project management approach. Without a genuine understanding of these crucial elements, faculty members may struggle to transform into the effective collaborators the course design process requires. The gap in the onboarding process, therefore, lies in transitioning faculty from an abstract/theoretical understanding to a concrete, experiential one. To address this gap, we propose leveraging the principles of experiential learning theory.

Kolb's cycle of experiential learning is perhaps the most well-known of the experiential learning frameworks. Citing the work of Dewey (1938), Lewin (1946), and Piaget (1952), Kolb (1984) posited that effective learning is an active process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. His proposed four-stage learning cycle (Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, Active Experimentation) underscores the central role of experience in the learning process (See Figure 1). Other scholars, such as Joplin (1981), Jarvis (1987, 1999), and Roberts (2006), have expanded upon Kolb's foundational ideas, each offering unique perspectives on the experiential learning process. Joplin's "Five Step Model" (1981) provides a structured approach for experiential learning activities, particularly suitable for educational settings. It encompasses focus, action, support, debrief, and transfer stages, ensuring a comprehensive learning experience. Jarvis (1987, 1999), on the other hand, emphasized the role of disjuncture – when existing knowledge is insufficient for new experiences – as a catalyst for the learning process, which involves experiencing, processing, and transforming stages. Roberts's model (2006) highlights the importance of active involvement in learning through planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Collectively these frameworks underscore the idea that learning is best facilitated through the twin processes of experiencing and then reflecting on that experience (Estepp et al., 2012).

Clarà (2015) defines reflection as the "thinking process which gives coherence to a situation which is initially incoherent and unclear". Schön's (1987) contributions to the conceptualization of reflection in learning are particularly notable, especially regarding professional development and reflective practice. Schön proposed that professionals learn not only from experiences, but also through the act of reflecting on these experiences. He identified two key types of reflection: reflection-*in*-action, a type of reflection that

occurs in real-time, during the activity itself, and reflection-*on*-action. Occurring post-event, this reflection involves looking back on the actions taken and extracting lessons from the experience. This reflective practice facilitates deeper analysis and is essential for future learning and development. Expanding on Schön's concept, Farrell (2013, 2019) introduced the idea of reflection-*for*-action, where the insights gained from reflection-*on*-action are utilized in planning and preparing for future actions. This forward-looking reflection allows professionals to apply their learned experiences in anticipation of similar or new situations. Reflective practice, then, is a mechanism through which faculty can effectively integrate conceptual knowledge (theory) with professional experience (practice) (Johnson & Golombek, 2016). Reflection enables a continuous learning cycle, where theory informs practice, and reflections on practice lead to refined theoretical understanding. This cyclical process of experiencing, reflecting, and applying is fundamental in transforming theoretical knowledge into practical skills and strategies, particularly in collaborative course design and development.

FIGURE 1
KOLB'S CYCLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING



The integration of reflective practices within experiential learning frameworks is not only beneficial but essential, particularly when considering the unique learning needs of adult learners as identified by Malcolm Knowles. Knowles (1984) emphasized that adult learners excel when they actively engage in the learning process, perceive a direct connection between what they are learning and their professional lives, and have the opportunity to apply new knowledge directly in their work settings. This understanding is critical when developing effective onboarding programs for faculty involved in collaborative course design. By incorporating experiential learning elements into the onboarding process, we effectively "prime" faculty for success. The experiential components in the onboarding process facilitate transformative learning and serve to equip faculty with the necessary tools, understanding, and mindset to navigate the complexities of collaborative course design effectively. This 'priming' is vital in transforming faculty into effective collaborators, ready to apply their skills and knowledge in a real-world context, ultimately leading to more successful and efficient course development outcomes.

EVOLUTION OF AN ONLINE COURSE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

In the fall of 2019, the University of Michigan's School of Public Health launched its first online degree program, a Master of Public Health. This ambitious project encompassed the development of 60 courses over four years, involving a collaboration of over 50 faculty and lecturers across six academic departments. In addition to the academic staff, a dedicated team of instructional designers, instructional technologists, graphic designers, and media specialists was formed incrementally to support the program's development.

Course Development Approach #1: The Workshop Model

The initiation of a new, expansive online program presented a complex set of challenges, despite the school's rich history in developing both traditional and online courses. The ambitious scope of the program, involving a significant number of faculty and staff, along with stringent development timelines, necessitated an innovative approach to course development.

In response, the online program director, along with an instructional designer, led the implementation of a structured process centered around departmental working sessions. Over a five-month period, faculty from each of the six departments engaged in five detailed sessions, each lasting two hours, meticulously designed to guide faculty through the entire course design process, from initial concept to final course outlines. The sessions were aimed at aligning faculty with the overarching goals and structure of the online program, employing backward course design principles (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to ensure a focus on course-level as well as program-level learning outcomes. Additionally, these gatherings sought to encourage collaboration among faculty working on interconnected courses and courses grouped within a departmental series, fostering a sense of community and providing continuous support throughout the design process.

However, the application of this workshop model revealed several significant challenges. Inconsistent faculty attendance hindered progress on course design. Moreover, discussions often strayed into broader, macro-level issues, diverting focus from the immediate tasks and leading to reduced productivity. This divergence from the intended outcomes, coupled with varying levels of participation and the tendency for discussions to deviate from the planned agenda, resulted in a process marked by general frustration among all parties involved and tangible outputs that, consequently, never materialized or failed to meet the high expectations set for the program.

Course Development Approach #2: The Individualized Model

Recognizing the shortcomings of the initial workshop model, the opportunity to create a process fostering a more personalized approach to course development emerged with the hiring of additional staff. Moving away from the group-based approach, the revised strategy introduced a more personalized method, with instructional designers holding weekly individual meetings with faculty members. This shift aimed to offer tailored, focused guidance through the course development journey. The process began with an initial meeting to outline the course development stages, set a clear timeline, and establish mutual expectations. Subsequent meetings were designed to guide faculty through the course development stages, ensuring a thorough understanding and application at each step.

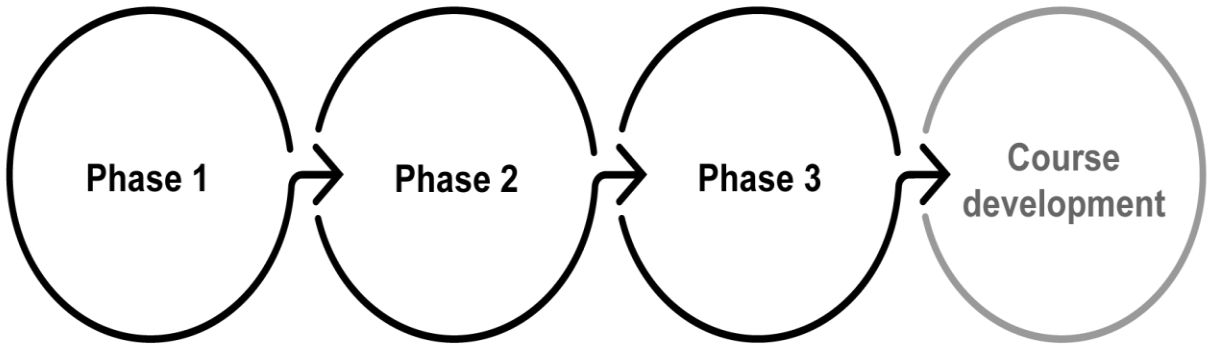
However, this individualized approach was met with its own challenges. Faculty members, previously distracted by broader, systemic issues in the group settings, now found themselves mired in the minutiae of course development. Feedback from faculty highlighted persistent difficulties in grasping course development processes and requirements, understanding roles and expectations, and visualizing certain elements of course design. As often happens, this created bottlenecks in the project management workflow. This confusion not only hindered their ability to adhere to the development timelines but also fostered a sense of resistance to the collaborative process and created frustration for the team. The resulting friction and inefficiencies underscored the need for another strategic pivot.

Course Development Approach #3: The Experiential Model

After a thorough review of feedback from both faculty and the instructional design team, it became evident that many of the issues encountered stemmed from ineffective communication practices within course development teams, as well as a lack of understanding among faculty regarding key terminology, processes, and the overarching requirements of course development. These insights prompted the development of a new approach: a structured three-phase experiential onboarding process for faculty to complete before engaging in actual course development work (See Figure 2). This onboarding initiative was carefully crafted to directly tackle the identified issues, aiming to resolve these concerns and effectively "prime" faculty for a seamless transition into their course development roles. This revamped onboarding process was rooted in the principles of experiential learning theory, emphasizing a dynamic cycle of experiencing, reflecting, and applying. The process was designed to ensure each phase built upon the insights and skills developed in the preceding one, thereby providing faculty with a layered and immersive period of preparation.

The experiential model, engaging two small groups of faculty (n=5 and n=6), unfolded over three sessions spaced approximately four weeks apart. In preparation for each session, faculty members were asked to review carefully selected preparatory materials and complete a small set of targeted tasks. These pre-session activities were designed to immerse faculty in real-world scenarios relevant to course development, setting the stage for reflection and deeper engagement during the sessions themselves. The sessions served multiple purposes: they provided a platform for faculty to reflect on their hands-on experiences, facilitated introductions to key members of the course development team, offered answers to pressing questions, and laid the groundwork for the next phase of the onboarding process. This iterative process of preparation, engagement, and reflection was designed, not just to inform, but to transform faculty's approach to course development.

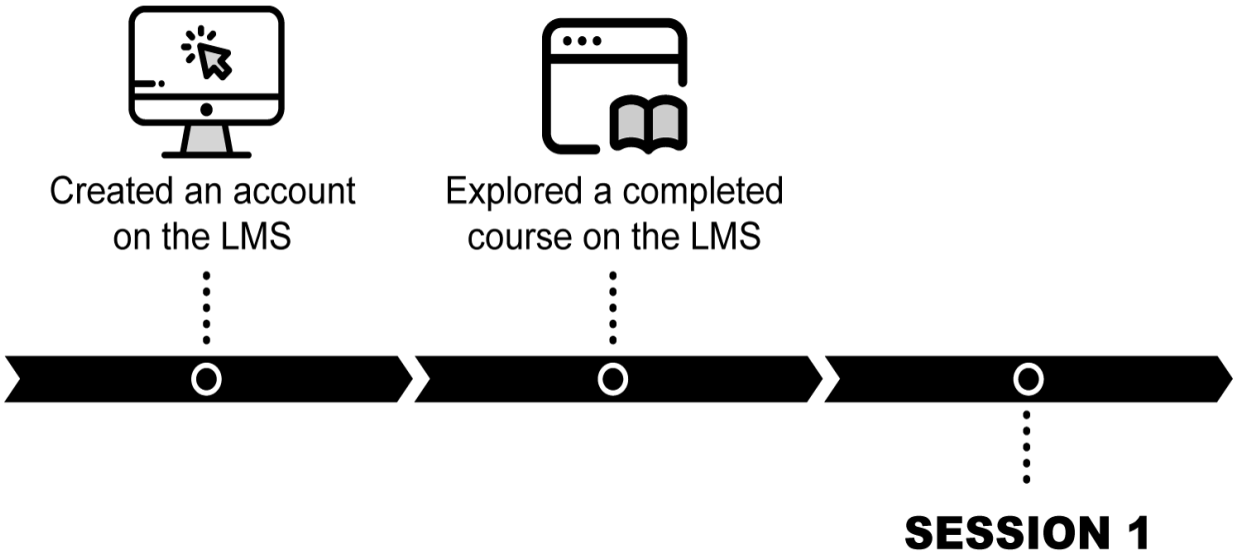
FIGURE 2
A THREE-PHASE EXPERIENTIAL ONBOARDING PROCESS IS INTRODUCED PRIOR TO THE START OF COURSE DEVELOPMENT



Phase 1: Setting the Stage

The inaugural phase set the stage for the course development process, introducing faculty to the nuances of the learning management system (LMS) utilized for the online program, which differed significantly from the LMS used in the school's residential programs. As a precursor to the first session, faculty were prompted to engage directly with the LMS by exploring a completed course that modeled exemplary course design principles (See Figure 3).

FIGURE 3
PHASE 1: SETTING THE STAGE FOR ONLINE COURSE DEVELOPMENT



This hands-on experience was vital for faculty to not only familiarize themselves with the platform's architecture and functionalities but also to understand the rationale behind the structured layout of the course outline template, or course blueprint. For instance, the design of the LMS mandates that each module incorporate a concise description, a requirement reflected in the course planning templates. However, faculty often overlooked this section of the template until they had firsthand experience with the platform's structure. To support faculty in their communication with the instructional design team, the session agenda also included discussion on terminology unique to the LMS.

During the session, the faculty reflected on their experience using the platform, comparing notes and asking questions. Their firsthand experiences with the LMS served as a catalyst for a more in-depth discussion led by the instructional design team, covering the LMS features more comprehensively. This contextual groundwork facilitated a smoother introduction to the backward design process (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and an overview of the project management setup, including collaborative tools and spaces. The assistant director of online programs also guided faculty through the Faculty Handbook, emphasizing sections that address frequently asked questions. The session concluded by outlining the tasks to be completed in preparation for the next session, paving the way for a smooth transition into the more technical aspects of course development.

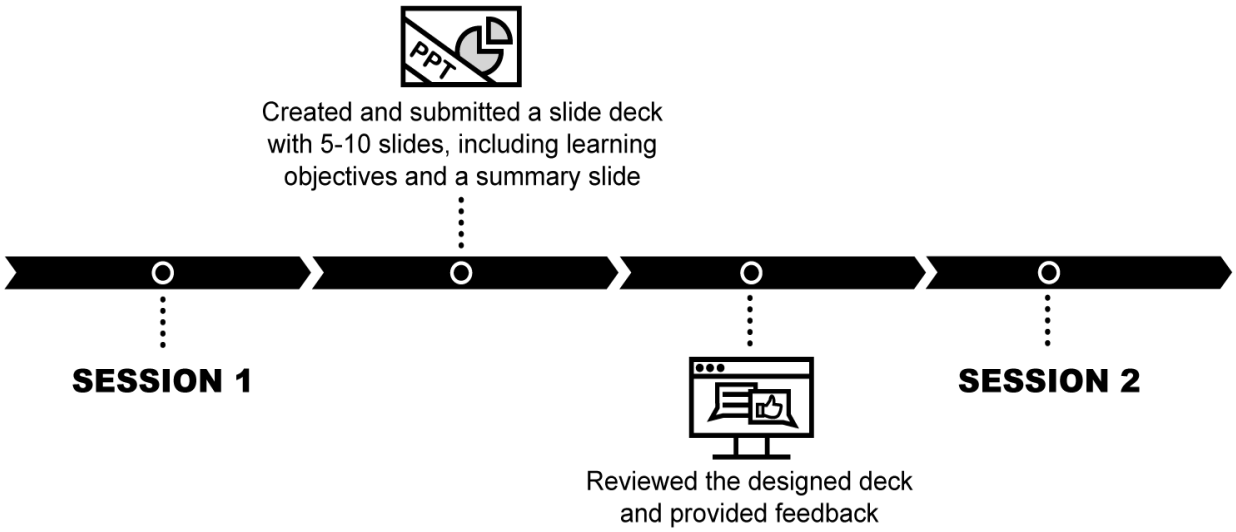
Phase 2: Establishing a Design Partnership

In the realm of course development, the integration of high-quality graphics and video lectures stands out as a specialized area that often falls outside the typical expertise of faculty members. Traditionally accustomed to crafting their own lecture materials, faculty might find the detailed preparation required for online courses, particularly those involving graphic design collaboration, to be a novel challenge. Unlike the flexibility afforded in residential courses where lectures can be fine-tuned up until moments before class, the pre-recorded nature of online lectures demands that content, including graphical elements, be finalized well in advance.

To bridge this gap, the second phase of the onboarding process was dedicated to introducing faculty to the graphic design team and shedding light on the collaborative design process (See Figure 4). This phase aimed to help faculty members understand some of the factors that inform graphic design work, such as copyright considerations, adherence to brand standards, and compliance with accessibility guidelines

(Section 508), all while setting realistic expectations regarding the time commitment required for this collaborative endeavor.

FIGURE 4
PHASE 2: ESTABLISHING A DESIGN PARTNERSHIP

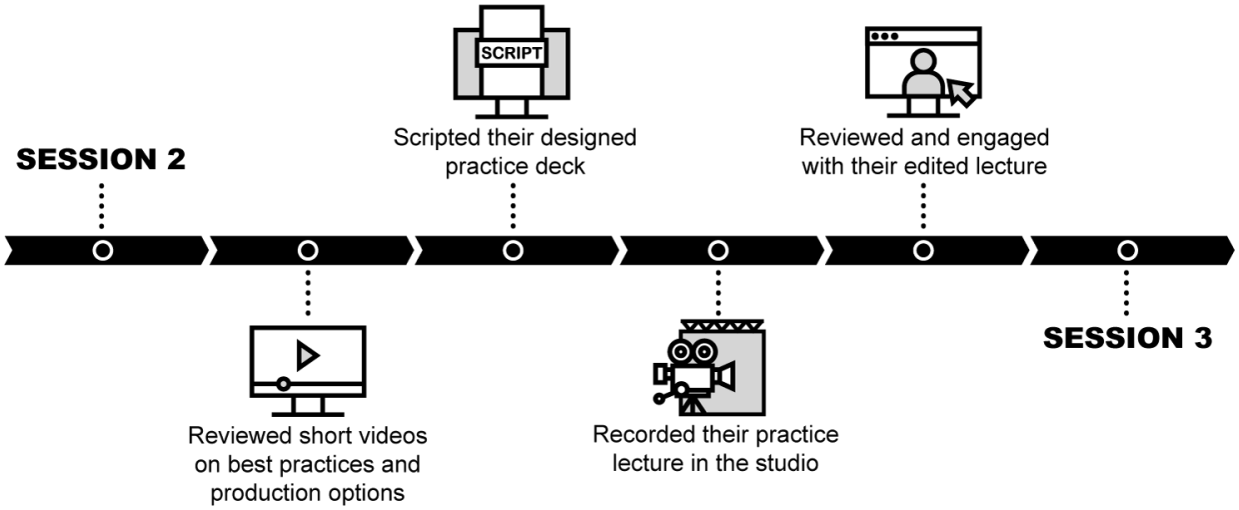


Prior to the second session, faculty were tasked with submitting a concise slide deck, consisting of 5-10 slides. This could be an adaptation of an existing lecture or newly crafted slides utilizing the provided online program slide template. They were further directed to include slides detailing learning objectives at the outset and a summary at the conclusion. Adhering to a predetermined process, faculty were to submit this practice deck by a specified deadline, allowing the graphic design team ample time to apply their expertise. Following their creative input, the graphic designers then uploaded the enhanced slide decks to a review platform, enabling faculty to review, comment, and request adjustments as needed. This iterative process of review and revision continued until faculty were fully satisfied with the design outcomes.

The second session served as a reflective checkpoint where faculty could share their experiences and insights gained from interacting with the graphic design team. Utilizing both designed and original slide decks, the graphic designers talked through their creative process, providing the rationale behind specific design choices, particularly those concerning copyright and accessibility. This dialogue also provided a prime opportunity for faculty to learn how to effectively communicate with graphic designers, understanding the types of feedback that drive efficient and productive collaboration. Conversely, it allowed graphic designers to grasp academic conventions, such as in the presentation of data visualizations. This phase of the process also provided faculty with hands-on experience using the team's review platform.

Having acquired a tangible understanding of the complexities and time requirements involved in crafting visually compelling lectures, faculty were now better positioned to appreciate the graphic designers' emphasis on the necessity of starting early, allocating sufficient time, and strictly adhering to established timelines. This approach ensures a seamless workflow, enabling graphic designers to deliver their best work. Similar to the first session, the second session wrapped up by specifying the tasks to be undertaken in anticipation of the third and concluding phase of the onboarding process.

FIGURE 5
PHASE 3: DEMYSTIFYING VIDEO PRODUCTION



As depicted in Figure 5, in preparation for the third and final session, the media team curated a collection of concise instructional videos. These videos offered an overview of the various formats for recorded lectures—ranging from studio-based presentations and field videos to interviews, panel discussions, and on-site demonstrations—while also highlighting best practices. Faculty were then invited to schedule a studio session to practice recording a lecture segment. To facilitate the recording process, faculty were directed to integrate a script into the slide deck created during phase two. Following the studio session, the recorded lecture underwent professional editing by the media team, with the polished version subsequently made available for faculty review on the same platform utilized in phase two for slide deck feedback. This initiated an iterative cycle of review and revision, akin to their earlier collaboration with the graphic design team.

Session three provided a reflective space for faculty to share their experiences and insights from the lecture recording process. This session served as an opportunity for the team to address any lingering apprehensions about video recording, reiterate best practices, and tackle common logistical challenges. The editors played a pivotal role in this session, offering faculty a "behind-the-scenes" look at the editing process. By showcasing comparisons between raw footage and the final edited videos, the editors effectively illustrated how faculty need not be flawless in front of the camera to achieve a professional and engaging end product. They discussed the scope of their editing capabilities, the type of feedback that facilitates their work, and creative strategies for enhancing viewer engagement through animations and annotations. The session also introduced faculty to the collaborative project management tools employed to monitor and manage deliverables, further streamlining the video production component of course development.

This phase, by unpacking the video production process and emphasizing a collaborative approach, aimed to alleviate faculty anxiety, provide options for production up front, promote best practices, and underscore the importance of early and effective planning in producing high-quality educational content.

OUTCOMES

The introduction of an experiential onboarding process brought about tangible improvements in the online program course development experience. The positive impact of this approach was multi-faceted, enhancing the efficiency, quality, and collaborative nature of course development.

Enhanced Understanding and Application of Course Design Principles

Faculty members reported significant benefits from the hands-on experience of navigating an actual course within the LMS. This practical exposure was instrumental in helping faculty conceptualize the end product, making abstract concepts tangible and facilitating a deeper understanding of the course structure and flow. One faculty member noted, "It was helpful to be able to walk through an actual course on [LMS] and get a general idea for how things flow. This allowed me to wrap my brain around the final product which was very helpful." This foundational understanding made it considerably easier for faculty to embrace and effectively apply the principles of backward design. They gained a clear understanding of the purpose behind the course blueprint, resulting in more comprehensive and thoughtfully completed blueprints.

Streamlined Collaboration With Graphic Designers

The onboarding process also demystified the collaboration with graphic designers, leading to more efficient interactions and a smoother design process. Faculty learned the value of clear communication with designers, understanding that providing a clear vision or description of desired graphics could significantly facilitate the designers' work: "The graphic designers are miracle workers, but you can make their lives easier if you have an idea or can describe what you want the graphics to look like." This mutual understanding ultimately led to better initial deck submissions, more efficient design processes, and a reduction in the number of revisions needed.

Optimized Lecture Recording Process

A notable shift occurred in the lecture recording process as well. The onboarding experience afforded faculty more time for thoughtful planning, which not only preserved but enhanced the richness of content in the lectures. The faculty found themselves adding rather than cutting ideas for their videos, leading to a wider variety of video types and better production plans. This thorough preparation allowed faculty to navigate the recording process more swiftly and produce a greater number of videos. Furthermore, faculty engagement in the review process became more productive, with less resistance to using the review platform and more constructive feedback provided to editors. This change fostered a more collaborative and efficient production process.

Faculty Feedback and Overall Impact

Faculty feedback on the experiential onboarding process was overwhelmingly positive, underscoring the significant impact of the experiential learning approach on their engagement with course development. As one faculty member remarked, "I had never put so much preparation into a course, but it was all very valuable." The experiential learning process facilitated a tangible grasp of the terminology and a comprehensive understanding of the course development process, fostering a newfound respect for the diverse expertise within the course development team. This profound understanding and appreciation catalyzed a paradigm shift in the faculty's approach to online course creation. A consensus emerged on the critical importance of proactively initiating the course development process, judiciously allocating adequate time for each stage, and rigorously adhering to the project's timelines. This shift in perspective was encapsulated by a faculty member's insight: "You might think they are joking when they provide you with a 9-month timeline to develop a course...but they aren't! Don't let yourself fall behind." This disciplined, well-informed strategy not only streamlined the course development process but also contributed to the overarching goal of delivering high-quality online educational content. Furthermore, the experiential onboarding approach forged a deeper sense of collaboration between faculty and the course development team. The collective journey through the onboarding phases enriched the collaborative dynamic, rendering the course development endeavor not only more efficacious but also more fulfilling for everyone involved. This enhanced synergy between faculty and the development team illustrates the transformative power of weaving experiential learning into the fabric of the onboarding process. However, the success of this process revealed an unexpected challenge: the capacity of the team became the limiting factor, as the team struggled to keep pace with the (now) highly engaged faculty.

The effectiveness of this process was most pronounced among faculty members who fully embraced the approach. This observation reinforces a universal truth: the outcomes of any initiative are intrinsically linked to the level of effort and commitment invested. Moreover, the experience reinforced an undeniable reality—that no procedural framework, regardless of its robustness, can entirely counteract the hurdles introduced by procrastination. This insight highlights the critical necessity for active involvement and sustained engagement from participants to truly leverage the benefits of the experiential onboarding journey.

DISCUSSION

The integration of an experiential learning framework into the online course development at the University of Michigan's School of Public Health, as delineated in this article, was a strategic response to identified gaps in the faculty onboarding process. These gaps previously hampered the seamless and productive collaboration essential between faculty and cross-functional course development teams. To bridge this divide, the initiative launched faculty into a series of experiential activities—ranging from hands-on navigation of a course within the LMS to direct collaboration with graphic design and media production professionals. Complementing these hands-on activities, structured reflective sessions were designed to enable faculty to voice their insights, questions, and concerns, effectively transforming their tacit experiences into articulated knowledge. The transition towards a more hands-on, collaborative approach marked a significant shift from traditional onboarding methodologies, which often fell short of facilitating effective interdisciplinary collaboration.

The initiative's core was rooted in the application of experiential learning principles, notably those advocated by Kolb, which suggest that effective learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This theoretical underpinning was manifested through the incorporation of practical activities coupled with structured reflection sessions, enabling faculty to convert their implicit knowledge and experiences into explicit, actionable insights. This process not only aimed to enhance faculty's practical knowledge and collaborative skills but also sought to foster a community-oriented ethos among all stakeholders engaged in the course development process. By organizing the onboarding around cycles of hands-on experience followed by reflection, the program not only provided faculty with firsthand experiences but also equipped them with essential resources, tools, and tips tailored to their specific learning and operational needs at each stage of course development. These cycles facilitated a dynamic interaction with the course development team, enhancing the overall collaborative process.

This emphasis on experiential phases ensured that faculty members were armed not just with theoretical knowledge but also "primed" with a practical understanding and firsthand experience, pivotal for their active and substantial engagement in the course development journey. The structured sessions within this onboarding process became crucial touchpoints for faculty, granting them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. These reflective practices enabled faculty to critically evaluate their interactions with the various course development tools, processes, and team members.

As highlighted by Brown and colleagues (2014), impactful learning necessitates deliberate and structured reflection. This suggests that onboarding processes should allocate dedicated time, space, and cognitive supports to facilitate productive reflection (Aaronson, 2011; Harwood & Koyama, 2022), a practice often absent in conventional faculty development initiatives. It was through these structured reflective discussions that faculty were able to translate their experiential learning into actionable knowledge, significantly enhancing their preparedness and effectiveness in the course development process. During these sessions, reflection-on-action facilitated a backward glance at experiences to glean insights and lessons, while reflection-for-action encouraged a forward-thinking approach to anticipate and prepare for future course development challenges (Schön, 1987; Farrell et al., 2021; Kleinheksel et al., 2023). The experiential learning model proved exceptionally suitable for adult learners, such as faculty, who benefit from a clear understanding of the reflection cycle's purpose and its utility in preparing them for stages of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

The data derived from this initiative suggest that the iterative experience-reflection cycles were instrumental in demystifying disciplinary terminology, unraveling the intricacies of the course development and project management processes, and clarifying the roles and responsibilities within the broader team. This experiential and reflective process not only deepened faculty's comprehension of the course development process and equipped them with essential tools and insights for meaningful participation, but also alleviated various anxieties initially associated with aspects like video production, transforming potential stressors into manageable tasks. The outcomes of this innovative approach underscore the transformative power of integrating experiential learning and reflective practices, preparing faculty to navigate the complexities of online course development with confidence and efficacy.

However, the approach outlined in this study is subject to several noteworthy limitations that warrant careful consideration. First of all, factors such as preparation time and staffing capacity influence successful implementation of an onboarding program. At the University of Michigan's School of Public Health, the three phases of the onboarding process unfolded over a generous 3-month time period. This duration gave instructors ample time to engage with the experiential learning components of each phase and to debrief with staff. While this led to more efficient course creation later on, integrating the program into the existing course development process extends the overall timeline for course development. Another limitation emerges in meeting instructor demand for the production of course materials, which could prove challenging without adequate staffing. For instance, the introduction of instructors to diverse graphic design capabilities and an array of available recorded lecture formats, such as interviews and location-based recordings, led to a surge in requests for video production. Limited staffing capacity impedes the program's efficacy, especially in meeting the escalating demand for course materials. Despite the benefits of the program, resource allocation challenges persist, especially in meeting the increased demand for course materials such as videos. Finally, ensuring the sustainability of the program over the long term poses a significant challenge. As demand for online courses grows and staffing resources fluctuate, maintaining the program's effectiveness may become increasingly difficult. The scalability of the program may also be limited by resource constraints and changing staffing dynamics, thereby hindering its long-term impact.

Despite these challenges, the onboarding initiative represents a significant step forward in addressing gaps in faculty development for online course development. Future iterations of this initiative could be enriched by inviting past participants to contribute to sessions, thereby offering direct insights and experiences to newcomers. Additionally, the introduction of a fourth phase focused on optimizing the efficacy of live class interactions for students who have already engaged with lecture recordings and completed assigned readings could further enhance faculty preparation and instructional impact. Embracing an iterative development methodology and investigating flexible models that preserve the fundamental experiential and reflective elements, while adapting to varied educational scenarios and resource constraints, will foster continuous improvement. This approach ensures the onboarding process remains adaptable and responsive to evolving needs and challenges inherent in online course development, thereby sustaining its relevance and effectiveness in the evolving educational landscape.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the significant impact of an experiential learning-based onboarding process in equipping faculty for the development of online courses at the University of Michigan's School of Public Health. The implementation of this experiential learning paradigm enriched faculty's comprehension of the complexities associated with online education, underscored the critical need for collaboration with experts in instructional design and technology, and significantly bolstered the cooperative dynamics between faculty members and the cross-disciplinary course development teams. Ultimately, this led to the creation of higher caliber and more efficiently crafted online courses and advanced faculty readiness for digital teaching environments. Embedding experiential learning and reflective practices at the heart of faculty onboarding has proven to be an effective model, aligned with adult learning theories, to address the sophisticated needs of faculty as they transition to digital teaching modalities. The success of this initiative offers valuable insights for the design of future faculty development programs, underscoring the importance

of practical engagement, structured reflection, and community-building in fostering effective and resilient educational practices in the digital age.

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