"Twists and turns" of climbing the e-learning curve: The story of Masters in Project Management at the University of Botswana

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Abstract

This presentation relates a story of a new project that the University of Botswana (UB) hoped to offer as an online program: Masters in Project Management (MPM)in August 2009. MPM is a collaborative project between the Center for Continuing Education (CCE) and the Faculty of Engineering and Technology (FET) at UB. One of the key priority areas of the CCE at the UB is ***Extending Access and Participation****. The university envisions the CCE as a technology-driven national center for tertiary distance learning which has capacity for expanding the number of part-time continuing education programs at certificate, degree level and professional qualifications (Proposal for the Introduction of Masters in Project Management (MPM) through Distance Learning). The FET on the other hand offers MPM as a conventional program on campus. The proposal to offer the MPM by distance learning reflects new priorities to engage in initiatives in areas where CCE has competitive advantages relative to new tertiary education providers; thus, realizing the high demand among working professionals for the current MPM whose recruitment areas is limited to Gaborone (the capital city) and the surrounding areas. The FET and CCE agreed in 2007 to explore opportunities for extending the provision of MPM to the rest of the country through distance learning. Since that time, consecutive meetings had been held with different stakeholders including the CCE, FET directors of Graduate School; Heads of Civil Engineering, Department of Distance Education (DDE), Information Technology Department (IT), Center for Academic Development (CAD) the Library and at a later stage the Faculty of Business (FOB). However, it is apparent that the roles of different stakeholders aforementioned were not clearly articulated and understood. Despite lack of role clarity, major events commenced in March 2008 including identification of tutors, their work expectations, training workshops and some documents providing structures and processes. The identified needs for the training workshop included pedagogical principles of developing course materials for distance learning; instructional design for technology learning environments; the use of the technology; e-moderating and information literacy skills. The proposed MPM project was supposed to start in August 2008. Two and years later since this idea was conceptualized, not much has been accomplished. This presentation highlights the twists and turns of climbing the e-learning curve via MPM project at UB. Some of the "twists and turns" include: unclear rational for starting the project, pedagogical issues, lack of role clarity and lack of commitment and ownership by program owners.*

1. Introduction.

The advances of technologies over the years offered the new paradigms for university teaching and learning. The use of multimedia has strengthened the distance learning approach in general and e-learning in particular. The use of visual components such as graphics, video, animation (to mention a few) help to promote learner interaction with content and to understand meaning of what is displayed on the screen or in print. Universities embark on e-learning for varied reasons. Some of the reasons may include: using an online portion of the course as a supplement or hybrid; a standalone course where students are not in the same room at the same time at any point in the course; offering an online course to cater for the working segment of the population which cannot be on-campus ; or offering an online course to boost enrollment and retention in some cases.[1]

The University of Botswana (UB) is not an exception. The University of Botswana, the only national university in the country, has included in its vision statement 'lifelong and open learning approaches" as focal points for the institution. [2]. The university identifies student-centered learning as a key component in its vision, which is one of the important features of online learning. Distance education at the UB has been provided through print materials supported by occasional face-to-face interaction. In its pursuit to climb the e-

learning curve, UB embarked on online learning in 2001. "Online learning emerged as the vehicle through which instructional technologies could be used to teach courses online. It was hoped that the adoption of such technologies would create new avenues for learners to access educational opportunities both on campus and off campus" [3]. Since then, a number of blended courses have been developed and offered through WebCT.

2.1 Literature review.

It is important to revisit some of the research findings about teaching online courses. For the purpose of this paper, I will explore some of the advantages and disadvantages of online course and faculty perceptions of online teaching, in particular faculty involvement in the process of design, development and implementation. E-Learning differs from classrooms teaching in different ways. As a result, converting a face-to-face course to online is a mammoth task which is not only complex but also challenging. Converting a face-to-face course to online requires "planning, monitoring and control, to make the conversion effective and economical"[4]. These authors recommend that, "unless the advantages of e-learning outnumber the disadvantages for both educational institution and the learners, converting to e-learning may not represent an efficient solution." The author of this paper concurs with the aforementioned assertions which suggest that needs or situational analysis should be conducted and agreed upon by all the parties involved before embarking in e-learning. All stakeholders particularly lecturers should have a "buy in." Faculty or lecturers should understand why and how they are involved in e-learning.

2.2 Advantages and disadvantages of e-learning.

The advantages and disadvantages of e-learning have been explored extensively in literature. It is important at this juncture to explore some of the advantages and/or benefits of e-learning. E-learning:

> …is self-paced, faster, provides consistent content, …works from anywhere anytime, …can be updated easily and quickly, …can lead to an increased retention, a stronger grasp on the subject and it can easily be managed for larger groups of students. [5]

Some quotas argue that e-learning can improve retention because of a wide variety of technology used in e-learning such as images, sounds and text. The technology creates learner/learner; instructor and content interaction through chat rooms, discussion board, instant messaging and e-mail etc. Immediate feedback from the instructor is made possible through technology. Learning could be customized to meet the learners' needs which may lead to better understand of the content and fast learning.

The disadvantages of e-learning could include the following: it may be costly to develop, it requires new skills in content producers, and has to demonstrate a return on investment. [6] Some disadvantages of e-learning may include lack of visual cues, intimidation by technology, lack of personal touch and social interaction. If students are not technologically savvy and self-disciplined, learning online could be a challenge.

2.3 Faculty resistance to e-learning.

Faculty or lecturers involvement in e-learning is the cornerstone. If the lecturers are not impressed upon to teach online, the whole idea is bound to fail. Literature confirms some of the reasons why lecturers are reluctant to teach online. Some of the critical obstacles reported in studies are related to persons' resistance to or fear of the many changes that must occur at the individual and organizational level. The cause of reluctance may be due to fear of the unknown; and lack of support and the changing roles of the students. [7] Organizational cultural barriers are also noted as one of the most critical regarding elements of faculty resistance to online innovations. [8]. Perceived lack of institutional support may include inadequate compensation and incentive structures; loss of autonomy and control of the curriculum, lack of technical training and support; and lack of release time for planning. [9]. Lecturers also question the adaptability of courses to the online format. [10] Some resistance may be attributed to lack of knowledge about course design, technology and lack of confidence. Until and unless the

advantages and disadvantages of online, faculty and student involvement and institutional administration are ironed out and fully understood, e-learning could never be a success.

2.4. Lecturer resistance to online teaching at UB.

In a study conducted by the author in 2005 on "Motivational and deterrent factors of faculty participation in online learning at the UB: The case of the UB," the deterrents to participate in online teaching included the following: limited resources/access, lack of technical support and lack of students' readiness to online learning. In this study, lecturers expressed their concern about insufficient physical and human infrastructure. [11] There were not enough computers for students and access was very limited. Students could only access computers from the library when they were on-campus. There was not enough personnel to assist with breakdowns and slow network. Students on the other hand were sabotaging the innovation. Firstly, most of them lacked technological skills (computer literacy). Secondly, "because there were limited computer stations, students removed mouse balls so that no one else can use a computer. They return after they have attended a class and resume their work on what has now become 'their" computer. [12] Despite these challenges, however, " there were a few who despite affirmative responses, cited concerns about the time expenditure required, wanting to see if technical barriers could be removed and wanting more training and experience.[13]

2.5. Masters in Project Management (Online Project).

MPM is a collaborative project between the Center for Continuing Education (CCE) and the Faculty of Engineering and Technology (FET) at the University of Botswana (UB). One of the key priority areas of the CCE at the UB is *Extending Access and Participation.* The university envisions the CCE as a technology-driven national center for tertiary distance learning which has capacity for expanding the number of part-time continuing education programs at certificate, degree level and professional qualification. [14] The FET on the other hand offers MPM as a conventional program on campus. The proposal to offer the MPM by distance learning reflects new priorities to engage in initiatives in areas where CCE has competitive advantages relative to new tertiary education providers. Therefore, realizing the high demand among working professionals for the current MPM whose recruitment areas is limited to Gaborone (the capital city) and the surrounding areas. The FET and CCE agreed in 2007 to explore opportunities for extending the provision of MPM to the rest of the country through distance learning.

Early September 2008, a follow up meeting between Dean (FET), HOD (Civil engineering), HOD (Distance Education) and Director (CCE) established a consensus on the need to offer MPM by distance learning. The meeting agreed that the delivery mode for MPM by distance learning would be primarily online supported with other technologies such as print material, DVD and Video Conferencing. An expert from the University of South Africa (UNISA) who coordinates the MPM online program there and has experience in the provision of online program was engaged to assist in the development of the same at UB. The MPM would use WebCT/ Blackboard online platform as the learning management system. Some online supplementary technology for instruction would include DVD, Video Conference, mobile phones and Internet resources.

The MPM Committee was formulated early 2008. It comprised the Dean (FET) who is the chairperson; identified online tutors; the Dean of Graduate School; some representatives from the CCE; CAD; IT; Library; and the HOD (Department of Distance Education). Since that time, consecutive meetings had been held with different stakeholders including the CCE, FET directors of Graduate School; Heads of Civil Engineering, Department of Distance Education (DDE), Information Technology Department (IT), Center for Academic Development (CAD) and the Library. However, the roles of different stakeholders were not clearly articulated.
Despite lack of role clarity, major events commenced in March 2008. These included identification of (would-be) tutors and work expectations. Online tutors for MPM would be lecturers involved in teaching MPM conventional courses. These "would-be" online tutors were lecturers from the Department of Civil Engineering who taught conventional MPM courses.

A training workshop for these "would-be" online tutors was held from 7-10 July 2008. The workshop activities included online pedagogical advice, technological tools and support, resources information (library) and online technical support. Work on course design and development commenced immediately with continued support of CCE and CAD. That is, "would-be tutors" would work collaboratively with continued support of CCE and CAD. A framework for the development and implementation of the online MPM project was developed. The

document outlines the following:

- The online course model and delivery methods that are recommended for the program;
- Maps out the course development process including training and identification of the role and responsibilities of the major stakeholders;
- Identifies an implementation strategy and suggests a roadmap towards the eventual launching of the program and;
- Highlights the possible budget items. [15]

Despite all these efforts, no progress was realized in months to follow. Some quotas thought that the "would-be" course developers were reluctant because the incentives were not in place and there were no contracts signed. Remuneration package for developing online courses and tutoring was finalized and agreed upon. The rates were adopted from the print-based programs of the university administered by the CCE. In October 2008, the lecturers requested a refresher workshop. The guidelines and a template were developed to aid the course developers.

The refresher workshop was finally conducted in February 2009. At this point a new group of 'would-be" online tutors from the School of Business were brought on board. Lecturers from the School of Business started working on their courses immediately. Interestingly, this group worked with great vigor and enthusiasm. Their counterparts from the Department of Civil Engineering on the other hand were not doing so well except for one lecturer.

Despite the training at both individual and group levels, the "would-be" tutors from the Department of Civil Engineering made no progress on course development. It is against this backdrop that the author wants to investigate why the "would-be" tutors from Civil Engineering are so resistant. One and half years later, not much has been accomplished. The proceeding discussion highlights the twists and turns of climbing the e-learning curve at UB using MPM project as a case.

3.0. Twists and turns.

Since 2008, the design and development of MPM online program has been like a roller coaster ride. There had been twists and turns that could be attributed to the following (issues not exhaustive): the rational for MPM online program; lack of role clarity; pedagogical issues, and lack of commitment of some course developers.

3.1. The rational for MPM online program.

In the Proposal for the Introduction of Masters' in Project Management (MPM) through distance learning; the rational for introducing the MPM via e-learning states that:

> The introduction of technology-driven graduate level program has been necessitated by recent developments in tertiary education which have witnessed the emergence of new tertiary education providers in Botswana. The introduction of predominantly pre-degree providers encourages CCE to undertake a review of its strategic operations and priorities within the content of its relative strengths and advantages. [16]

The development of tertiary education in Botswana particularly the new private tertiary education providers create competition among tertiary institutions. Presently there are about thirty-two private tertiary institutions in the country some of which offer franchised programs ranging from certificate to diploma levels. Most if not all of these institutions are dependent on the Government sponsorship of students, hence the competition for students and finance.

3.2 Lack of role clarity.

Even though at the beginning of the project, major stakeholders were identified and their roles defined, the implementation of such failed. The stakeholders identified for the project included the following: Faculty of Engineering(FET), Center for Continuing Education(CCE),Center for Academic Development(CAD),the School of Graduate Studies(SGS),Information Technology(IT), Faculty of Business(FOB) which joined a bit late in the process and Library Services(LS).Some stakeholders did not do what they were expected to do. For

instance, CAD is expected to play a significant role in the course design phase giving advice on appropriate technology (i.e. media/tools etc.) to use. But their contribution is not visible. Naturally, as a graduate program, the advice from the SGS is very crucial but "it looks like as and when their advice is needed they would not be available."[17] The examples are not exhaustive. Lack of role clarity may result in confusion and impede progress on course development and the ultimate implementation of the project.

3.3 Pedagogical issues.

The lecturers may be reluctant to online teaching if they have "strong pedagogical reservations about online teaching." The CCE's role was to manage the development of the course materials for delivery; in particular to provide pedagogical leadership. The CCE is/able to attain the role. However, CCE "has been slow in some instances to define and refine certain processes related to course development. For example, the ICARE Model seemed to be a challenge to lecturers and perhaps a clearer guide should have been given earlier." [18] Unfortunately, the design statement format used in course organization was not developed with the ICARE model in mind, "therefore, translating the design statement into ICARE reality has…been a challenge to the lecturers".[19] It is important to note that if the lecturers' apprehensions are not addressed and resolved, the possibility of course success is farfetched.

3.4 Lack of commitment and ownership.

It is quite clear from the performance of "would-be" online tutors from the Department of Civil Engineering that, there is limited ownership of the program. The lecturers from DCE are not giving the project the expected attention. There is total lack of motivation despite the financial incentives introduced. There is completely no "buy-in" from these lecturers. In its meetings with the "would-be" tutors, the Project Committee attempted to determine the reason for the lack of enthusiasm. Lecturers give several reasons that include: heavy workloads (of teaching conventional courses); lack of time due other work commitments; unclear pedagogical practice in online teaching particularly the ICARE model etc.

4.0 Conclusion.

This presentation highlights the twists and turns of climbing the e-learning curse at the UB through the proposed online MPM project. It is quite clear from the MPM proposal that the rational to start the MPM online program was a "top-bottom" approach. The decision to embark on this project was made by the university administration. The administration essentially forced lecturers to use online technology to teach MPM.As a result there is no "buy-in" from the lecturers. The UB management was reactive to current development of mushrooming private tertiary institutions that created competition instead of being proactive in its approach to focus on the current trends of improving teaching and learning through the use of technology. Management did not bring lecturers on board ahead of time to determine the reason and possibility of embarking on this project. Thus, lecturers did not know why they were undertaking this project hence, the resistance. The author believes that the lecturers are not enthusiastic to participate in this project because of "forced online teaching." "For some faculty a forced online adaptation can be the difference between a years or two earlier retirement."[20]

The MPM proposal which is a guiding document in this project is silent on whether a clear situational analysis was conducted to see the viability of the project (e.g. student and lecturer readiness, available technology, resources and e-learning solution etc.). At the beginning of the project there was a lot of uncertainty on the level of readiness and understanding of the nature of e-learning solution. [21] Pedagogical issues were evident as one of the reasons for lecturers' resistance. It was evident that the "would-be" online tutors did not fully understand how to convert face-to-face courses into online format. Some of the reasons given by lecturers for not writing included (a) time constraints, (b) lack of skills and understanding of how online course are developed, (c) absence of appointment letters to mention a few. Even after attending mini-workshops and contracts/appointment letters were finalized, there were still no results from the FET lecturers.

Structures and processes in the form of key documents such as (A framework for the development and

implementation of the online (MPM) were not readily available when the process of design and development of materials commenced. The remuneration packages and appointment contracts were developed in progress. These structures and processes should be ready before the design and development of course materials could be started. The University of Botswana should learn from the best practices such as the St Cloud State University for example, which provided a number of options for faculty training. One of such training includes "Boot Camp," for novices running four hours each day for three days, three hours of instruction, one hour for course development for three days. This gives the lecturers a one-on-one opportunity to meet with the instructional designers, media online developers, graphic designers etc. For any institution that embarks on an online program, management should consider both "Proactive vs. reactive training" and "Voluntary vs. forced online teaching." While I appreciate that it may not be an easy task for institutions to rely on voluntary participation of their lecturers to teach online, I argue that management should not force their lecturers to do this because it is a recipe for disaster. It is also imperative to conduct situational analysis before embarking not only on online programs but in any new innovation. Lecturers need a strong, positive administrative leadership to encourage them to incorporate technology in instruction [22] University administration should take heed of lecturers' perspectives since they are the ones that implement the initiatives that drive institutional growth and competitive advantage.

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