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A Model for Enhancing Online Course Development

by Evelyn Knowles and Kathleen Kalata

As online education grows, universities face the challenge of training faculty members to become online course developers. [Park University](#), a major provider of online credit courses to international and active-duty military students, has been facing this challenge since offering its first online courses in 1996. In this article, we will describe Park's course development process, which relies on an integrated approach guided by evolving standards of quality online instruction.

Park's approach to online course development incorporates key elements similar to those outlined in a recent *Innovate* article describing Lawrence Technological University's ([LTU](#)) online training program (McCord [2007](#)). These elements include clearly defining expectations for faculty course development, requiring faculty members to complete an online teaching course, assigning an instructional developer to each faculty member to provide guidance and ongoing support, and supporting the preparation of course materials using various media. Unlike LTU, which offered 11 courses online in Fall 2006 with 24 more expected by Fall 2007, Park University currently offers 311 courses online, some with multiple sections, resulting in over 500 online classes maintained by 144 faculty course developers. The significantly larger scale of Park's online instruction project requires more faculty members to be trained as course developers and online instructors, and it requires more instructional designers to be available to work with course developers. More importantly, an online learning program as large as Park's requires a course development process that encourages collaboration between instructional designers and content experts and integrates quality assurance measures across all courses.

The Early Evolution of Park's Online Course Development

Park University, historically a small liberal arts college, started offering online courses in 1996 using the [V-Campus](#) course management system. By 2004, however, Park's course offerings had become too numerous and too complex for V-Campus's capability. In order to provide faculty course developers with a user-friendly system that could accommodate the program's anticipated growth, the university adopted [eCollege](#) as its new course management system and developed an online development certification course to empower faculty members to create their own courses in the new system. This eight-week online course was led by an instructional designer in Park's [School for Online Learning](#), and it included basic information regarding best practices for online teaching (Moore, Winograd, and Lange 2001) as well as instructions for uploading content into eCollege's online course shell.

By taking the development course online, faculty members both learned to use the system and mirrored students' online learning experiences. However, many became overwhelmed or frustrated in their attempts to adapt to the new technology. While some faculty members were technically savvy early adopters who wanted to do most of the course design themselves, others complained that they did not have time to learn a new technology and did not complete the courses they had started to develop. Compounding these difficulties, procedures for entering course content changed as the course management system provider (eCollege) made upgrades to the system.

Although Park's School for Online Learning provided both an instructional designer and a media developer to assist faculty members with graphic design, video presentations, and audio-enhanced PowerPoint presentations, faculty course developers assumed that, because they had taken the online development course, it was their responsibility to put content into the online course shell; as a result, course developers

only called the media developer or instructional designer when they ran into problems. Collaboration between course developers and instructional designers was further frustrated by the fact that designers also functioned as reviewers who ensured that Park's policies and procedures were followed in the final course design. Because of this formal relationship and the perception that a staff member was telling a faculty member how to design a course, course developers did not welcome suggestions from instructional designers during the design process. Reviews were received with particular hostility, and there was no enforcement of designers' recommendations.

As a result of these difficulties, many courses lacked substance, failed to support robust instructional practices, or did not take advantage of the features available in the new course management system. In order to make it easier for faculty members to develop quality online courses, we implemented substantial changes in our course development process.

The Revised Course Development Process

In the fall of 2005, three events at Park paved the way for significant improvement in online course development. First, the university hired a new coordinator of course development who had an extensive technical background and a new instructional designer charged with the development of our first online biology laboratory course. The collaboration between this instructional designer and the biology professor provided a model for collaborative course development. In October, [Quality Matters](#) was introduced to a consortium of colleges to which Park University belonged. When the Quality Matters rubric was applied to the university's existing online courses, 22 courses (11%) met the standards; 176 (89%) did not. This led the newly hired course development coordinator to establish rigorous procedures that incorporated the Quality Matters standards into a course development checklist. By January 2006, Park had adopted the Quality Matters Rubric for online course standards (Legon [2006](#)) and assigned an instructional designer to consult with each course developer.

The Collaborative Model

Under our original course development procedure, faculty members who chose to develop online courses at Park University did so on their own after taking a training course. Now, each course developer is assigned to an instructional designer for collaboration. Course developers tell us they appreciate having instructional designers help with uploading content and ensuring compliance with quality guidelines. A new course developer wrote to her instructional designer, "thanks for all your help in (my first time) developing an online course. I couldn't have done it without you!! (G. Heller, personal communication, August 2007). A more experienced course developer wrote to his instructional designer, "I appreciate the quick response and 'can do' attitude" (K. Hartenstine, personal communication, October 15, 2007). A course developer who has been developing courses at Park since 1999 wrote, "The instructional designer is a valuable resource for a course developer in that they can provide direction and assist in the creative process, which is much appreciated by someone like myself seeking excellence in the area of online instruction" (H. Roehrich, personal communication, 2007).

A number of cultural and technical changes led to the evolution of this system. Originally, full-time faculty members expressed little interest in developing online courses. They were content with teaching their courses in a traditional face-to-face context. However, Park's administration has consistently encouraged online course offerings and has especially promoted degree programs available totally online. Both faculty and administration now consider online course development a key element in tenure and promotion rather than an extracurricular activity, so that developing and teaching online courses is now a normal part of a faculty member's teaching load.

In addition to this evolving attitude toward online instruction, the shift to eCollege dramatically improved the

relationship between course developers and instructional designers. Because eCollege supports content-managed courses ([Exhibit 1](#)), the development process is somewhat difficult for people without a Web design background. This change has encouraged faculty course developers to seek help from instructional designers, who were eager to improve the quality of Park's online course offerings.

In Park's new online course development process, an academic department selects a faculty member to develop an online course. Course developers usually hold a terminal degree in the subject area and have experience teaching in a face-to-face setting. While our original model relied on faculty course developers to create content and design the online course with some assistance from an instructional designer, the current model requires course developers and instructional designers to collaborate in the development of the course within a structure based on quality standards defined by the Quality Matters rubric. The course developer acts primarily as subject matter expert, providing content to an instructional designer assigned to the course developer by the coordinator of course development, who also recommends support services based on the course level, the course's content and technology requirements, the development schedule, and the experience of the course developer. The instructional designer loads the content into the online classroom, provides consultation on design issues and technical assistance with multimedia resources, and ensures that the resulting course conforms to Park's quality guidelines.

Because of eCollege's complexity, we have moved from a formal training course to an informal orientation to the course development process. At the outset of course design, we welcome each course developer with a letter explaining the process followed by a phone consultation with the course development coordinator, during which the course developer can explain the nuances of the course content. An instructional designer is then assigned to the course developer, and the collaborative course development process occurs over the next six to eight weeks.

In the past, some course developers who had extensive experience with the online course development process uploaded content into their online classrooms on their own. This practice has been phased out because it created alterations in content-managed items and problems with Web page formatting. Although it is easy to enter content into eCollege's visual editor, professional-looking results require the expertise of an instructional designer more familiar with the technical aspects of uploading documents. Under the current system, all content is placed in the course by the instructional designer. Course developers are given a checklist to identify the content they should submit to the instructional designer, and instructional designers use another checklist and a policy handbook to guide the placement and formatting of content in the course.

Before a course can be offered to students, the academic department chair or program coordinator reviews course content. Department representatives are given reviewer access in our online platform, which allows them to view the course as a student would view it. The department representative may request additions to the course, such as exams or links to informational Web sites. If the course developer has communicated effectively with the academic department during the design process, the course generally passes the content review easily.

The Contract for Development

The course development process at Park now starts when a contract is issued by the coordinator of program quality development to the individual course developer; the contract specifies the course to be developed and the timeline for developing content. Frequently, face-to-face courses that are already in the university catalog are selected for online delivery. In other instances, courses are developed solely for online students. The contract implemented in 2004 provided a flat fee of \$3000 for new online course development or \$2000 for redevelopment of a course already offered online. Most redevelopment contracts were necessitated by the move in course management systems from V-Campus to eCollege. These two-year contracts required ongoing maintenance of and updates to each course. Maintenance payments were specified as \$60 per section for each term the course was offered.

In concert with other changes in the course development process, the contract fee has recently been changed to \$2000 per course for all online course development with an additional \$150 payment for updating the course each term. The change in payment structure was motivated by several factors. First, once all of the courses had been moved from V-Campus to eCollege, redevelopment was no longer necessary. We also discovered that under the old system, most course developers neglected to update and maintain their courses as specified in the old contract. Instead, they waited until the end of the two-year contract period and then applied for another contract for redevelopment. The move to eCollege, however, significantly simplified the process of updating a course so that the task is now the same regardless of the number of sections offered. Finally, with the new course development process, responsibility for online development no longer rests solely with the course developer; instructional designers enter content into the course management system. Since these changes dramatically improved the ease with which faculty course developers can create and maintain online courses, development contracts now span one year and verification of maintenance is required before course developers can receive maintenance pay.

Quality Assurance

In addition to its departmental content review, each online course is subject to a Quality Standards Review (QSR) for instructional design ([Exhibit 2](#)), in which a certified Quality Matters peer reviewer applies the Quality Matters rubric (Legon [2006](#)) to the course design. The rubric requires that each course include content items that address appropriate cognitive levels and critical thinking skills, while also ensuring sufficient breadth, depth, and currency of subject material. Park's course development procedures further require the course to provide a variety of activities and methods to engage students actively in the learning process. All new undergraduate courses require input from an instructional designer and approval from a quality standards reviewer.

Over the past two years, the course development staff has grown from one multimedia designer and one instructional designer/reviewer to one multimedia designer, three instructional designers, and two quality standards reviewers. Two additional positions will be filled this year. Each instructional designer is assigned to five online courses during each eight-week term. Since Quality Matters trainers instruct the entire course development staff, online course requirements and goals are consistently applied throughout the program.

Course Structure

As noted earlier, the eCollege platform at Park University supports content-managed course development. In keeping with this feature of the platform, one of the unique characteristics of online course development at Park University is that the courses developed now become master courses, from which individual course sections are duplicated. While individual instructors can add content to their own sections of a course, the master course shell provides locked content-managed items to all sections that individual instructors cannot change. When the course developer updates the master course shell, the course management system applies those changes to all sections, facilitating course maintenance. This structure allows course developers to create learning activities and assessment opportunities that align with the course's learning outcomes and to identify such activities to students and instructors through the course's weekly home page ([Exhibit 3](#)).

This common master course structure enhances online learning by ensuring compliance with the Quality Standards Review as well as consistency across course sections taught by different instructors ([Figure 1](#)). Because online courses follow a common format, students can also easily locate essential content information across courses ([Exhibit 4](#)). Similarly, most faculty members have responded positively to the inclusion of communication-related common course items ([Exhibit 5](#)).

Since instructional materials may include a variety of technologies, all courses also include a link to a common Help and Resources Web site ([Figure 2](#)). The site, included in every course shell, offers information

beyond technical and student support, allowing students to locate library or other university resources without leaving the course shell. The Help and Resources Web site provides uniform compliance with standards that cross all courses.

Course Maintenance

Park has adopted a comprehensive approach to maintaining online courses. Course developers are responsible for updating the course each term and providing ongoing maintenance to the master section. At a minimum, developers need to check all Web links in the course to make sure they are still active, implement changes in the course textbook or teaching materials, update content or technology, and integrate any changes in the university's policies or procedures.

Over the past year, quality reviewers have also evaluated all of the existing online courses. We found that there were quite a few problems in the existing courses, resulting in low scores on the Quality Standards Review. Unclear assignment grading for students and missing core learning outcomes were the most common problems. The Coordinator of Program Quality Development is now making a concentrated effort to reach every course developer with the results of their course's Quality Standards Review and encourage updating courses to bring the scores up. Our goal is to have all online courses meet the standards; to pass the QSR, a course must have a score of 80 percent or better on the QM rubric with all essential standards met. We are striving toward quality improvement in online courses, recognizing that continuous work toward improving quality will always be necessary.

Conclusion

What is most remarkable about Park University's online course development is the program's significant growth over the last decade. Since 1996, Park has implemented several models of online course development with different training and review processes. All of our innovations in approach have grown out of identifying problems and creating workable solutions that can support a large-scale program. In our early days of online course development, the quality of the course depended on the skill of the developer. Now, our course development team ensures that all new courses coming out of development are of a consistently high quality.

Park has seen an increase in our capability to produce quality online courses since we designed a cooperative course development model using instructional designers to upload course content provided by faculty subject matter experts. As Tom Peterman, Vice President for Distance Learning at Park University, has stated, "Implementing a common format for course structure has provided consistency for both instructors and students, and using Quality Matters standards to evaluate our courses has given more credibility to the review process" (T. Peterman, personal communication, October 2007).

While many institutions are currently developing online courses, Park is going further by insisting on maintenance and continuous improvement of existing online courses. The combination of a team approach to course development and a common course structure provides Park University with an innovative framework for designing and developing quality courses for online delivery. The keys to this process are dedicated instructional designers whose technical and design expertise frees course developers to focus on what they know best, rather than spending time learning instructional design; a collaborative development approach that allows designers to work with developers in a constructive relationship; concrete quality standards; and a consistent review process to ensure that those standards are met in each and every course.

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