In the Classroom 62

What Instructional Technologists Need to Do to Prepare for Moving Online in a Hurry?

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things but you're hanging out with me. Really I'm not sure if you're doing other things, you just may be hanging out with me. This COVID-19, this Coronavirus, wow. Has it started turning the world upside down? Easy two weeks ago, things were just trucking along, the term was going well. I was moving along with some projects and then COVID-19 jumped on us and suddenly, boom. Here I am taking a whole new group to distance learning platform and what a trip that has been.

Fortunately, the things that I've been doing in the last five years for the community college I work for has put me in a better position. It has not put me in a great position. There was still more that I needed to do but I'm doing it in a hurry. I just wanted to talk with fellow instructional technologists about those lessons that I've learned. Things that have put me into a good position, I want to share those strategies. Things where I think I could have been better. When this thing really changed the operations, some of the strategies that I put into place to help move things forward.

I just want to share some of those things with you. Hopefully, it's something that other instructional technologists and designers can use to be prepared either to use them now to better the situation or certainly lessons learned. For the next time, we go through this. Right now, I know everybody's pretty much heads down working. I've even been fielding calls through this weekend so crazy times. Anyways, let's talk a little bit about it. As I mentioned, there was things that I was doing well ahead of time, that put me in a decent position. Things that we were doing just to improve day to day operations, but I wanted to make sure that I could scale and everything that I did was planning to scale.

The reason that I say planning to scale is because when I first came in, we were not in the capability of doing that. We were putting out fires as fires were coming and there was far too many fires and we were getting behind. Things were falling through the cracks and that was not a good place to be. Over the past five years, we've been shoring that up, and we now have a cushion that we can operate in. Things are not dropping through the cracks like they were.

One of the strategies that I put in place was this idea of branch bank modeling. What that is, is if you think of your local bank, you have different operation. One, there is a lot of things that you could do online and I haven't been to a physical bank, certainly in five years. The only reason I had to go for five years is because I need to get a

special cashier's check and that required me going to a bank. It was not convenient because I actually had to drive two hours to get to the nearest bank that I had where my money was so that was not convenient.

The idea of branch bank modeling is you have an online presence where individuals can do self-serve, that they can find resources that they need or complete forms and therefore services will happen for them. We've been working very hard to do exactly that, that we have a lot of resources. I use this strategy called work out loud. I'll tell you about it in a few minutes but we put a lot of resources. Also, we have forms that we completed. We have faculty complete, that will tell us what services they want and then we go ahead and take care of them.

The other part of branch bank modeling is sometimes you just need to pop in and see the teller and you go into the teller you have a quick exchange and you're out but you have to come to the bank, go see the teller and take care of those transactions and that typically happens in our location. We'll run into somebody in the hall or we'll pop by their office and very quickly, we'll get them up and going. Then in the bank, you have those loan officers, those special people that have their own offices, and you meet with them for really more complex things but they're not that many.

The idea is, you're thinking of scale. What are the 80% of things that people can do through those services that you try to put those things out where they're in the self-serve? Then you reserve those really specialized things for meeting with you personally. When I first got there, everything was pretty much come in and we had worked with you one on one. One on one does not scale so we had to change that model right away.

The goal in this idea of scaling, how can I help the most people without this idea of just one on one personal support. I would love to do that. If I had the resources, I'd love to do that but I don't and so this idea of building so it scales is important. Which brings me to this idea of work out loud.

Next week, I'm just going to deep dive into this idea of working out loud. At a very basic level, when somebody sends me a question, odds are they're not the only one with the question. I will draft a blog post or create a video related to that question and make sure that it is public-facing. That anybody on the interwebs can go ahead and search for that and they can find it and they're able to help themselves based on that information. If someone shoots me an email related to the same subject, I can grab that blog post or video and send them on their way. That is at a very basic level what this idea of work out loud.

Over time, we've had lots of questions on a lot of different things and so I've curated this content. I've built up these repositories of a blog post that we have a couple of hundred blog posts that are sitting there on all kinds of topics based on questions that we have received. Now I can repackage those and when it comes time to moving online, like in this case of this COVID-19, I was able to package a bunch of resources together and get them out in front of the faculty where they could learn how to

implement this. I tried to make these as self-explanatory as possible with videos to support it and get that out to the faculty.

This curation over time has been very valuable that I can pull things together really quickly. Another piece of that is you don't have to reinvent every single wheel. Other people have done this so curate those resources as well. If somebody has talked about great ways to have discussions, I'm just going to say thank you and add it to my repository. Basically, I'm linking out to their materials and it's been quite useful. Now over time, some of those links become stale and I have to maintain it but that's another problem.

Also, with this, we have developed systems. Basically, I am building a franchise. I want to basically be able to replicate this and put it on some other institution, if possible. I want to be able to replicate it as easy and straightforward as possible. All the processes that we do in our office, we have documented it and this allows me to grab somebody, train them with that documentation and I can then have them take care of some of the tasks. Haven't had to do that recently but that's speeds up the process. More importantly, there are things that I only do once a year and I'm so grateful that we have those documents because that lets me do it much quicker than trying to figure it out again.

Get your systems in place and that also helps you identify bottlenecks. Areas where things are not working well and you just want to tweak the process a little bit in order to get the flow moving the way that you want and so building systems allow you to do that. One of the things part of my systems is we were getting requests for assistance. We would get them by telephone. We get them by email. We would get them in the hallway. I mean, they would come in all kinds of carrier pigeon, maybe, I don't know. They would go to one of the folks in our office and nobody else would know about that and they're on leave or on vacation. Then we're getting yelled at because those processes are not being handled and it's like how the heck did we know this person's gone? It's just a crazy time.

My first iteration of this is I use Google Forms to build a set of forms and I have moved from that to OS tickets. It's an open system, kind of open. OS tickets, I put it on one of my servers, and I'm using that to help collect requests for faculty and then we'll go ahead and process them. The nice thing is anybody on the team can see them and can pick up those tickets as they're coming in, and take care of them so that has helped a lot. Now, it's just a matter of getting faculty to use those more often but that's another problem. We'll work on that.

Now, in light of this COVID-19, one of the things that was important to me is I need to be able to work on the systems, work on faculty requests anywhere in the world. We use Google Docs in order to do this so I can get to it anywhere on the world. We have what we call a common drive on our campus but in order to get to it off-campus, you need to log in with a VPN. This is very problematic, now that I am working out of a remote situation that my VPN still does not work. We're working on it, but it doesn't work. There are resources I cannot get to. Making sure that you have systems and

platforms that you can also access anywhere in the world that is useful. Having an emergency plan put together ahead of time is very, very important.

Now, to be honest, this is where I fell short. I know better. My time in the Air Force, my time in Civil Air Patrol has told me to make sure I have plans in place and I did not. I'm building some stuff very rapidly to take care of that. If I had to do it again, I would make sure that I had an emergency plan that I can just basically pull off the show and start working on, running the checklist, make sure I had these things turned on. There is certain resources that I'm putting on the website that I may not keep running all the time. I may basically put them back if the draft mode and take them off the internet after this thing is all over. Maybe not. I have to go relook at it. Having a checklist at hand tells me to turn those things on, that would be quite useful.

Those are some things that I've been doing for the past five years in this particular job to get ready for what happen, but what happened, put this all in motion at a larger scale. What do you do when the disaster hits, when you're suddenly forced to change the modality in which you're teaching? One of the things is to figure out how you can help as many people as possible. This goes back to this idea of scaling. It was not going to be possible for me to get faculty into one room because of social distancing or even online because some folks were still struggling to figure out how to use Zoom.

I had to figure out another way. Fortunately, we had LinkedIn Learning at our disposal and we basically curated a number of courses that we wanted faculty and staff to go through on LinkedIn Learning that would bring them up to speed. One of the first ones was Zoom because we were going to do a lot of meetings on Zoom. I also wanted the faculty to become familiar with Blackboard and Google docs. Some of them had not even looked at it or touched it during the time that I've been at the campus. Now, they were going to have to get smarter very quickly.

I made sure that we pointed them to those resources. The other thing that I did is I sent out daily emails and I'm going to continue to send out daily emails basically telling them what my availability is and how to contact me. They have to know how to get a hold on me. It can be email, it could be telephone, it can be Zoom. I make sure in my email that it's clear when I'm available how they can reach me on those different platforms. I let them know that if I have a meeting, I have a meeting, for example, later today when this thing comes out on Monday and I have a meeting in the afternoon.

I'm not going to take other calls during that time. I just want to make sure that they're available. I turn my Zoom on for the whole day. I have a free Zoom account and I turn it on and I let people know they can get a hold on me. Here and there, people have jumped in and got hold on me. The nice thing about Zoom is I can ask them to share their screen and look at what they're doing and that's been really useful.

I also set up a system where I was asking faculty and even students what questions that they were having and try to put together frequently asked questions list to help them out. So far, not so many questions. I get questions all kinds of other ways, but that's okay. They're moving forward. Every day, I'll send an email, let them know that I'm available on Zoom. The 80/20 rule, Pareto's principle is very much in play here.

You want to put into place those 20 out of 100 things that will help 80% of what's going on.

You want to get resources in their hand that is going to do the most good for the most people right away and then you start working your way into those isolated one-on-one. That's were triage comes in that everybody has got a problem and you want to help everybody with their problem, but you're not going to be able to help everyone with their problem right now.

You have to pick and choose which problems you're going to address and that's where this thickening system or this request system comes into play that I will get everybody into that request system so I know that I won't forget them and I start working on the ones that will help the most at one time. In some cases, I see trends that are going on that folks, for example, wanted to know how to put images into their various documents on Blackboard. There wasn't just one request. There was multiple requests to do the same thing.

It was important for me to build a resource that I can put in their hands to help them do that. They weren't the only ones asking, so I tried to build that resource. With it, this request system, as the director, I'm the one that's doing triage. I look at all the requests that are coming in and I have somebody that's working with me and there are certain requests that I'll hand to her and other requests that I'll take care of, but I'll try to balance the load a little bit knowing what's going on.

It's important for the team, whatever team you have, that you're working with the same system and you have the same understanding of how the system is going to work and work with that system. You can always make the system better, you can always change it based on what you're learning, but you have to have a system. It is not useful where faculty are sending request to one person and they get sick. I have no knowledge of those requests. I can't help those faculty out. There's going to be a lot of tension, a lot of upset people and that's why you have to have a system.

If you want exceptional service, you need to reduce the exceptions. Yes, that's just rough. Communication. This is in my last piece. Communication. Just making sure that you're regularly communicating with your faculty things that you will learn that will help them out. You definitely want to push that out to them. Make sure that you let them know that you were there for them and will help them through the rough spots and try to help them as quickly as possible. I've been very fortunate that the faculty that I'm working with right now have understood that things have escalated.

It feels as busy as the beginning of a new term if not just a little busier. It's been useful to communicate out to them to let them know that we're still plugging along. Important to keep an eye out on the issues and any new resources that you can share with them. Those are some of the things that came to mind as I was thinking about this. I'm definitely a huge fan of this idea of Working Out Loud. Definitely, come check it out next week as I deep dive into this idea of Working Out Loud.

I hope that some of these suggestions that I've talked about will help you have this new transition as we go to distance learning. I don't know how long this is going to be. I'm there for you. If you got questions, if you want me to do a deep dive on something, definitely ask. Before I let you go, here is a quick plug from my book.