In the Classroom 119

Helping Faculty Excel with an Automated Communication Plan

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Stan Skrabut: 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, perhaps you are, and you're still hanging out with me. I really do appreciate it. One of my primary goals is to help faculty excel with their course creations. I've talked about this over and over. That's what I do. I'm here to help faculty build the best courses possible.

To be successful, I realize that I need to regularly communicate with them, and over time I learned that it was important to get the right message to the right people at the right time. Things work in cycles. As we are working through the semester, working through an academic year, everything moves in cycles. I believe I have been successful because I've used strategies that are used in the entrepreneurial world. I want to share strategies that I use. The first part of this program is really focused on helping other instructional technologists be able to better communicate with their instructors, but it also could be useful for program directors, for example.

The last part, I want to share ideas that faculty can use in the classroom. As I put this episode together, I don't think it's going to be terribly long, but I think there's some good stuff that can really help you. To keep a semester moving forward successfully, there are many opportunities to communicate important information. Basically, things that need to happen throughout the term.

Some of the things that I have sent messages out and about talk about new course shells are up, and how to get the content copied from one course to another. Where I can help a start-up of a new term, things that you should be doing for your students. When midterms come along, other things that you should be doing. Maybe dealing with the grade book same with final exams, and then wrapping up your course and archiving your course. There's also countless other events that happen.

Over the course of a year, faculty need to be alerted to these key events taking place, and what their role is, and what they need to do in order to be successful. Usually when I start working at a new place I have to learn what the battle rhythm. What is the cycle, how do you communicate with the faculty, what things that they communicate with the faculty. Each institution is a little different, but a lot of the same things happened over and over. You have the start of a term, you have an end of a term, and this cycle just keeps repeating itself. You have a new faculty every year, and you have faculty who needs some additional assistance. There's a lot of things going on.

During these periods, especially the first year, is I keep track of the messages that I send. Maybe the first year at a new institution, I'm sending out messages by hand. I certainly am using the experiences I've learned from previous institutions. I'm now at my fourth institution and so I've picked up things, I've learned things. I try to craft in many of my messages to help feed up the process for getting faculty to build the best courses possible.

Then when we have absolutely brand new faculty, we need a way to onboard them. There's also a collection of important messages that need to be sent to them to help them get on track quicker and more successfully. We don't want folks to be stressed. We want them to be relaxed and performing at a high level so they can turn that performance on to their students and get the best performance out of their students. As an instructional technologist, that's what I'm thinking about, how can I help the faculty get to the highest level of readiness as soon as possible?

I've been doing this for a while. I think I'm approaching 22 years, 23 years. I have to do the math, but basically, the problems that I was facing is I know that I was sending the same messages repeatedly from one term to another. There were reasons that the messages were crafted in such a way, is because they provided the key information that I needed, but I also had some concerns. One of my concerns was ensuring the right messages and the right number of messages were sent. I didn't want to send too many, but I also know that sometimes individuals need to hear it multiple times. I also didn't want to forget to send messages.

There are days where things just get entirely out of control, problems creep up, faculty are running into new problems. Maybe they're doing something clever but we need to get things back on track. The day suddenly just creeps by you, and that may be a day that you have to send a message, but because you're already behind the eight-ball, maybe you don't get to send the message out. It really messes up that timing which could affect the impact of that messaging.

I wanted a system that I could load and forget. That I could get out the messages, load it up, let it run for the term, and get the messages out at a key time in place. I wanted to be able to increase my productivity by batching my processes where there are certain days in the cycle that I don't have-- It's not the same ops tempo. I have an opportunity to get ahead of the game by batching all these messages, getting them ready to go, and sending them out the door.

Another problem that I wanted to make sure that I address was being able to track the success of a message. One, how do I know that faculty were opening the messages, and were reacting to it, clicking on links that I wanted? I wanted a system that allowed me to do that. Finally, some faculty once they have learned it, they are on top of it and they don't need messaging from me, so having a system that allowed them to opt out. Perhaps my biggest problem that I wanted to fix was, how to squeeze more productivity out of the time that I had?

As a one or two-person shop with responsibility for all the faculty, it's easy to become overwhelmed with everything that's happening. As I noted occasionally, things happen that will disrupt today's plans, and I needed a system that wasn't going to be

affected by this type of disruptions. I just wanted to leverage the productivity skills that I've come to learn and rely on, and batching and automation are one of those.

The solution. This is a solution that I'm going to recommend to other instructional technologists. If you're running a program, this is something that maybe you want to think about if you're a department chair. There are probably messages that you regularly send out to your faculty every term, certain things that you need to do, certain reports that you need in. When it comes time to schedule new classes and sign up for compensation. There's a variety of messaging that goes on term after term after term that we repeat over, and over, and over again. We need to figure out how to automate it. Here are strategies that I have picked up.

During my drives to and from work, I listen to entrepreneurs. I like to see what they are doing in terms of productivity. One of the strategies that they talk about quite often is how they communicate with their audiences in order to get more business, how to deliver business at a very high level. These things resonate to me because what I'm doing is providing a service to faculty and I want to do it at the highest level that I can possibly do it.

These are a couple of things that I took to heart. The first one is building an editorial calendar. Before these entrepreneurs communicate with their audience, they build out an editorial calendar. These editorial calendars are detailed plans that outline the sequence of messages that they would send and the details of each of these messages. As I noted, every semester there are activities that happen before the semester starts. There's start of the semester activities. During the middle, you have certain activities. At the end you have activities. There are opportunities for me to communicate during those. I would put those on an editorial calendar.

What this does is it allows me to ensure that each message is being sent in the right order and the right time. It also ensures that the specific messages that I'm sending have the right content. Naturally, every term I tweak these messages based on lessons that I've learned from the previous term. For the entrepreneurs, these folks have written their messages using copyright techniques to ensure the messages are easily read, that they're impactful, and they have the right calls to action. They want them to do something specific and so they craft their messages that way. For some of my messaging, I've certainly done that.

I would suggest looking at the messages you have sent to specific groups, and finding those messages, copying them off, and putting them into, I use Google Drive. I would put them in Google Drive and indicate when I sent those on a spreadsheet, and I would link to those particular messages. I would get them in the order that I wanted, and I would track those things.

The other thing that these entrepreneurs do is they use an email service provider or email marketing service like Mailchimp, Constant Contact, ConvertKit, Infusionsoft, AWeber. There's all kinds of ones that I use or that they use. I personally use Mailchimp. Mailchimp so far I've been able to get away by using it for free, and so that's why I like it for one, but it also does a number of other things. One I can craft

attractive, rich emails that include video and images and links and just all the features that I need and I can make them look good.

I can also segment audiences based on needs and interests. For example, I may have one group of faculty members that just do online courses. I have another group of faculty members that maybe are using active learning or universal design for learning, and they're interested in those messages. I can segment my audiences based on their needs. I can schedule individual email messages through the system, as well as build multi message campaigns. They're called campaigns in MailChimp, so I turn my use, but basically it's a sequence of email messages that come out at a specific time.

They're very structured. This message has to go out before this message goes out. When I plug somebody into that system, they will get the messages in that sequence. It doesn't matter when I plug somebody in, they'll get it from first message to the last message. I really liked those for different things like onboarding, for example. MailChimp, also allows individuals to signup for different sequences.

I use those for courses that I have done through email and they can sign up for a course and they start from message one through the end of all the messages for that particular course, and so they can sign up for those different things. I can also develop landing pages, so specific things that I want them to go check out for additional information, but also I can track the results from the campaigns. Once you build out an editorial calendar, you can then schedule it in one of these tools. This is how I have used it in the past and what I'm hoping to be able to do in the future.

Right now, I've been focused on other tasks. I haven't gone out and started scheduling my messaging, but I'm hoping to get to that. I have built out an editorial calendar and scheduled messages for each term to go out automatically. As I mentioned, I use Google Sheets to build out the editorial calendar, and then I draft each message in Google Docs and link the two together. For each message, I also include the identity of the audience segment that I want to send it to, the date when I would like to send it, and the title for the message.

Once I have that information done and I've reviewed everything, I make sure I have the right sequence, then I would load in schedule the messages in MailChimp and assign them to the correct audience. Then they just go out based on the date that I schedule them, those messages go out. I typically will schedule a whole term at once all 16 weeks and all those messages are sitting there waiting for their date to pop up, and then they go out.

This then allows me to focus my energies on other things that are important to the faculty, rather than worrying about scheduling and sending messages. I can send other messages. There may be some one-off messages that I need to send, and that's fine and I will certainly do that and I do do that. Something pops up, I need to get ahead of it. I'll put that information out and I can do that. The routine stuff is taking care of itself happening automatically.

In episode ITC 27, I also talked about email delivered courses. This is the second use case that I use for MailChimp. I send out these email delivered courses and I do it also with MailChimp rather than schedule individual messages each term, I would create a campaign of these collection of messages in these courses. When somebody subscribes through a course, they would receive a message a day during the period of that course, every day during the period of that course. Each audience was based on a segment.

They can sign up for an accessibility course. They can sign up for a UDL course. They can sign up for a multimedia learning course, and those messages would go out based on the courses. Now, if they signed up for all three at one time, they'd probably get three different messages a day, but that is also their choice. The nice thing about that is they can go refer to them later if they're in their email.

My third use case is dealing with new faculty. Where I once was, we created an online or email delivered course just for on-boarding all the really essential things that new faculty needed to know in order to be successful at the institution. We scheduled these messages once again with MailChimp. As soon as a new faculty member came on we would be aware of them, we would take their email address, drop them into the course.

They would get messaging from us to do different things, to make sure that they successfully could use the resources at our institution. If they had questions, they would then contact us. We would then work with the faculty members. Most of them did not have questions and they were quite successful in the things that they needed to do. That's how I use these tools and it proved quite successful. Like I said, I'm hoping to be able to use them in the future.

Instructional technologists and program chairs and folks that run programs or department chairs, program coordinators, things like that.They're not the only ones that can benefit. Faculty who are teaching courses also can benefit from these type of strategy, from this type of thinking. How can I automate in order to free up my time so I can then focus on other things? Because every term is different. You know you have good intentions. I am planning to send out this message on Friday in order to keep my students on track and Friday blows up you. Then you're too tired to really do it right and maybe don't even do it at all.

Then another week passes and these things happen. With a little bit of forethought, you can get ahead of that and have all these things scheduled well ahead of time. Take a look at your course, what messaging specifically, in terms of announcements, can you schedule on a delay to keep students on track? Each time you teach a course, you are going to send messages to students. You're going to put up announcements.

What you should do is think about them ahead of time, get them on an editorial calendar and then capture them in your learning management system or into your-- Sorry. Capture them into your system so you can improve upon the messaging. If you've taught a course once, look at those messages, where can you improve those messages to help add clarity, and then you can then schedule those. Things that you

want to do is look for pinch points in your class so you can get ahead of them in the subsequent class by scheduling these messages.

I talk about pinch points and episode ITC 87. I recommend that you go in and review that episode for more ideas. Really what I recommend is you look over your whole class, see what message you're sending and those messages that are just routine. You send out the same message, every class, figure out how to automate them. These are messages, you tend to send out every single class that you're doing.

You can go ahead, look at the message, how can you improve it, how you can make it stronger, better. That is great, but then schedule it, get it scheduled so it's automated, so it comes out at a specific time in your class and you set and forget. Then next year you can batch them, do it again. What that allows you to do is offloads some of that cognitive load because you're not thinking about, "Oh, I need to send this message," because it's already been scheduled to send. You just know what's going to happen.

You can then take that time and take that energy to improve your class in other ways, it could be personalizing those one-off messages that you need to send to your class. Something that uniquely happens and work on those messages. Take a look at your class, figure out where you can automate those types of things. I think it will help you really strengthen your class and allow you to focus on other important things.

Regardless if you're an instructional technologist or an instructor, you can increase the impact and provide meaningful messages at the right time to the right people, by developing an editorial calendar and automating it. You can then spend your valuable time focusing on tasks that need your immediate attention. I'm planning to talk about these types of strategies, share them with you in the future. I'll keep on learning, but speaking of sharing, here's a quick plug for my book.