The ID CaseBook

Case Studies in Instructional Design

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Kathryn O’Neill had looked forward to working with college faculty ever since she had left her own teaching job to complete a degree in instructional design (ID). Her enthusiasm for using technology, trying new approaches to teaching, and working collaboratively with colleagues had led her to shift her career from teaching content to providing faculty support for integrating technology into higher education. One of her principal tasks, the dean had emphasized during her job interview last month, would be to ensure success in the college’s new venture into distance education. He stressed the importance of reaching out to underserved regions of the state as a means of boosting student credit hours while establishing degree programs before some of the “competition.” Since O’Neill had completed her internship and dissertation in distance learning, she was looking forward to the opportunity to share her enthusiasm, insights, and newly practiced consulting skills. Soon after her arrival, she was given a list of faculty who would be teaching on the new interactive television system. One of the names was Dr. Joseph Johnson from the Elementary Education Department.

Dr. Johnson was a full professor with 14 years of college teaching experience. He had won several teaching awards and liked knowing that he had a reputation for being a risk taker and an independent thinker. Over the past few years, he had taught a methods course in a variety of formats (weekly, weekend academy, independent study, and so on), and had recently been asked to be the first one in his department to teach the course on the interactive television system. Reaching a new group of students in a part of the state underserved by any university appealed to him as well, because his department had been experiencing some decline in enrollment this year. Since he had not been using technology much in his traditional classes, he was a little concerned about dealing with the equipment, but had been assured by his department chair that there would be a technician available. He would try to stop by for a lesson sometime before his class was ready to begin.
O’Neill decided to set up a workshop for the group of faculty who would be teaching on the system so that they would have an opportunity to get to know her and each other, learn about some of the unique aspects of distance teaching and the somewhat different characteristics of the distance learning audience, and find out how her office could assist them in preparing for their classes. Rather than sending them a formal invitation, she opted to drop by each of their offices, introduce herself, and invite them to the workshop personally. Dr. Johnson greeted her warmly, but he seemed distracted and unconvinced that the workshop was necessary or a good use of his time. She noticed he did not write down the time and place of the workshop, and in fact, he did not attend.

A few days later, O’Neill stood behind him in line at the deli and suggested they might visit about his upcoming class over lunch. He thanked her but indicated he was en route to a committee meeting. She also tried sending him an e-mail to schedule an appointment, but he did not respond. Finally, she sent him a letter with a few of the handouts she had used in the workshop to spark his interest. Again, he did not respond. Weeks went by as O’Neill worked with the other distance faculty in their pre-course planning, practice sessions, and adaptation of their visuals. She gradually became more concerned as the start of the semester drew near and Dr. Johnson continued to behave as if nothing were going to happen in his life. He appeared to remain confident that he would be able to walk into the distance classroom, teach as he normally does, and function fine without any help from O’Neill’s office.

A few days before classes were to begin, the technical crew mentioned to O’Neill that Dr. Johnson had contacted them for a lesson on operating the classroom equipment and instructions on where to send his syllabus. The dean contacted her to let her know he and the president of the university were planning to sit in on a portion of Dr. Johnson’s class, since it would be the first one to go “out” on the system. The technical crew notified her that they were having some minor technical problems with the audio in a couple of the remote sites. O’Neill decided she needed to warn Dr. Johnson about the coming events and offer to assist him in any last-minute planning or preparations. She phoned him to share the news. He thanked her for letting him know about the visitors and mentioned that he was going to get briefed on the classroom equipment that afternoon. She wished him well and told him that if he had any questions or concerns over the next few weeks, to feel free to contact her.

The next day, the excitement was palpable as Dr. Johnson’s class time approached. O’Neill arrived early and waved at Dr. Johnson. He seemed a little anxious as the technical crew assisted him with the wireless microphone and reminded him about which monitor displayed the video signal being currently broadcast to the remote sites. A handful of students enrolled in the class at the host site filed in and sat scattered
around the room. O’Neill waited for the dean and the president to arrive. Meanwhile, Dr. Johnson’s department chair stopped by as well. Just as the class was to begin, the visitors arrived and moved into the back of the classroom.

Dr. Johnson began by introducing himself to the class and asking the class members to do so as well. He asked them to share their names and location and an experience each had with a K-12 classroom. He pulled out the printed list of registered students (40 in all across five sites) and called on Susan Anderson. She started talking but was difficult to hear. Dr. Johnson appeared a little flustered and asked her to speak up; although he could still not hear her well, he decided to move on and called the next name on his list. The next two students were seated in the host site. Dr. Johnson moved closer to them while they were talking but without realizing it, moved out of camera range. He dialogued a little with each student and then returned to the podium, where he worked his way through the list. A half hour crawled by as each student responded to the roll call; the host-site students appeared to pay little attention and became increasingly fidgety. Dr. Johnson gradually became aware that many of the students enrolled at the remote sites were older, working adults with lots of prior experience with K-12 education. Not only that, some sites had large numbers of students (many of whom he could hardly hear), while one site only had one student!

Next, Dr. Johnson decided he had better move on to discuss the syllabus if he were going to get to it before the class ended. He asked the remote-site students to locate the syllabus in their rooms while he passed them out to the host-site students. One of the students in Lawrenceville spoke up and said that there were no syllabi in the class materials box at his site. A second student at one of the other sites chimed in that there were none at her site either. Dr. Johnson looked anxiously at the technical staff, and then said that he would put the syllabus on the TV screen and look into what happened to the syllabi after class. (The dean leaned over to O’Neill and said, “This isn’t going too well, is it?”) Dr. Johnson placed the syllabi on the document camera, switched the control box so that the syllabi would be projected over the system, and zoomed in and out until he was comfortable with the size of the lettering on the monitor. Although the width of the syllabi was wider than the monitor now, he just moved it back and forth slightly as he read the document and explained portions of its content. Meanwhile, O’Neill hoped the dean was not aware of what was happening on the monitor screen. Zooming and moving the document was forcing the compressed video to redraw the screen often, giving the monitor an out-of-focus, swimming appearance most of the time.

Finally, Dr. Johnson decided to have the class form groups of five or six and brainstorm questions that they would like to see addressed during the
course. He told everyone he would give them 10 minutes for the exercise, at which time they would be asked to share their list. As class time was running out, Dr. Johnson asked the Lawrenceville site to share their list first. After a moment’s hesitation, one of the students there said that they had just managed to form their groups and needed more time to discuss the topic. At this point, Dr. Johnson took a look at the clock and decided to have the groups share their ideas at the beginning of the next class. O’Neill thought, “I am going to have to find a way to get faculty to want me to help them! How am I going to reach Dr. Johnson now?”

Invoking ID practice via the Kathryn O’Neill case

1. How is distance teaching similar to and different from traditional instruction? How do these factors impact faculty who are beginning to teach with the new medium?

2. How might the characteristics and needs of distance students be similar to, or different from, those of on-campus students? What kinds of instructional strategies, support services, or logistical practices might need to be implemented to serve them?

3. What are the primary concerns of the college dean and what responsibility does O’Neill have to meet them? Who are some of the other stakeholders in the new distance learning initiative?

4. Given Dr. Johnson’s reluctance to accept assistance in preparing for his distance teaching assignment, what could O’Neill have done differently to win his cooperation? What is her responsibility in doing so? How can she sensitively use the new opportunity of “things not going well” to reach him now?