COMMUNICATION IN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

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Communication between instructional designer and client is key to a successful experience. Without a clear understanding about who will lead a course or how a course will function after it has been designed can cause friction and confusion. In this article, the focus is on the importance of communication that should take place during the needs assessment portion of the design should there be a leadership change.

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INTRODUCTION

Representatives from a non-profit organization in a Midwestern state requested from their instructional designer to convert two face-to-face personal finance teacher training courses into an online environment. The main goal for the instructional designer was to design an online teacher training experience that mirrored the face-to-face courses while still providing for the same quality of social interaction. There were no conditions regarding which learning management system to use, what content to include in addition to the curriculum, or which computer mediated technologies to bring in.

The instructional designer met with the program director and the executive director to outline the goals and objectives for the online teacher training course (see Figure 1). It was decided that the instructional designer would work with and train the program director about how to facilitate the online teacher training course (see Figure 2).

During the online course creation, the program director resigned. For the remainder of the design process, the instructional designer communicated directly with the executive director. Final decisions about the administration of the online courses, including setting course dates and selecting prizes for participants, were handled between the instructional designer and the executive director.

Meeting entailed goals, outcomes, and input for the eight-week project

Agenda Items:

1. What does the organization want to accomplish?
2. Roles and timeline
3. Learning management systems and online classroom
4. Ownership and credit
5. Miscellaneous

FIGURE 1. Initial meeting between Executive Director, Program Director, and Instructional Designer.

The meeting concluded with the following:

1. The program wants to create two online personal development courses that will be used starting in the fall. The courses will focus on middle and high school teachers only.
2. Each hour of face-to-face personal development will be the equivalent of one week online.
3. Film the workshops to include in the online classes.
4. Meet with institution officials to ask if they can assist in the filming and if the courses can be provided through the institution learning management system
5. What learning management system to use will be up to which is the easiest to use and free

FIGURE 2. Conclusion of 1st meeting between Executive Director, Program Director, and Instructional Designer.

Just before the start of the online teacher training course, a new program director was hired, and a new working relationship began with the instructional designer, which ended further communication with the executive director. Soon after, miscommunication occurred between the instructional designer and the new program director about the assignment of prizes and duties. The new program director had not been made aware of prior agreements between the instructional designer and the executive director, which led to confusion.

How to Create an Interactive Online Environment?

The main task was to make sure the course was interactive for the user. There was no budget provided for this project, so the instructional designer had to develop the entire course using open educational resources. Although the initial plan was to use a learning management system (D2L) from the hosting institution, institutional policy required a fee per user license. Unfortunately, the institution would
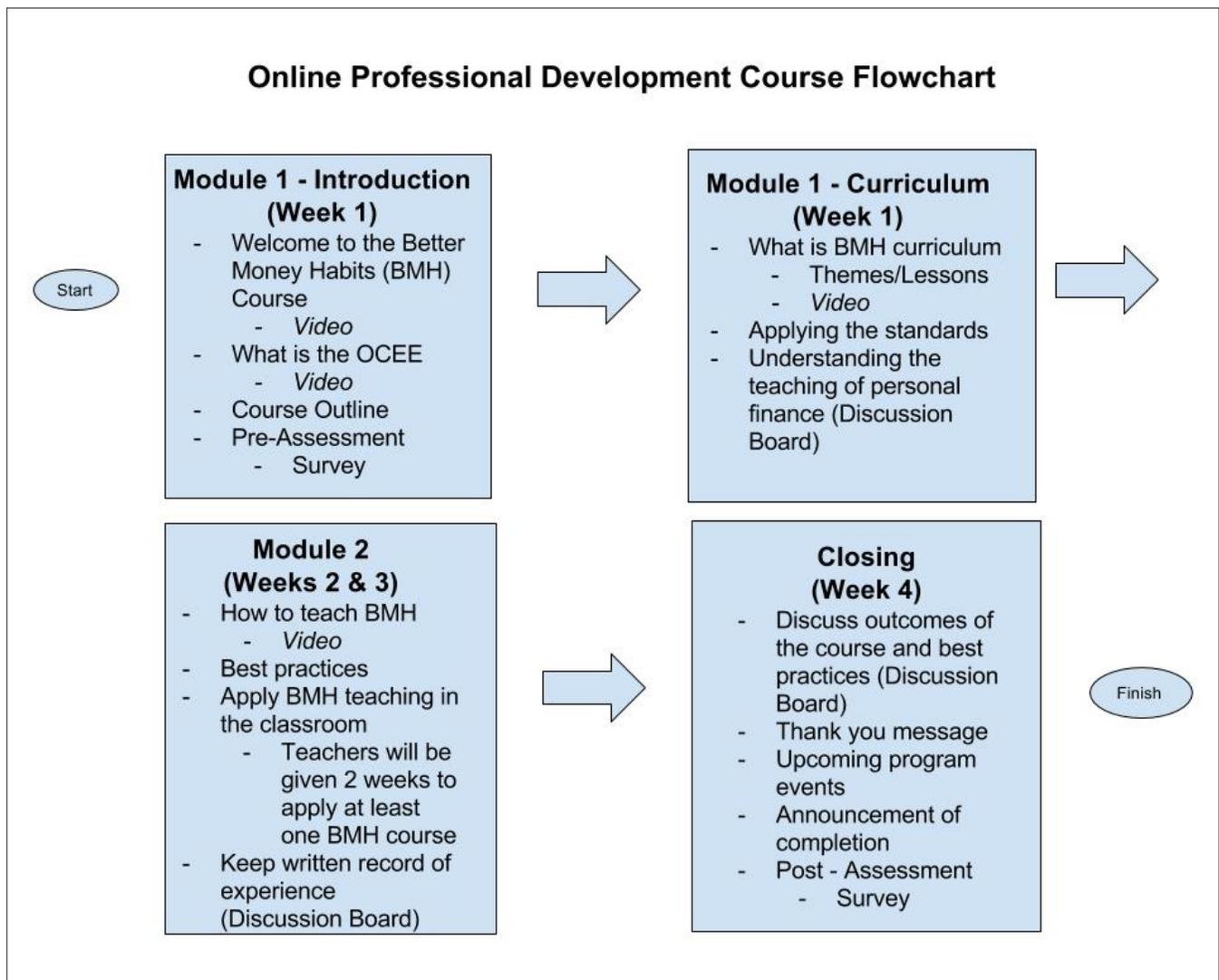
FIGURE 3. Online professional development course flowchart.

not host the course through its learning management system without receiving payment from the user. In the end, Schoology was the preferred learning management system because access was free up to a certain number of users, manageable in terms of course development, and easy for usera to navigate (see Figure 3).

A few days after the instructional designer had received course material to begin developing the online teacher training course, the program director resigned. The resignation was unexpected because not only had both planned to work together but also the instructional designer was supposed to teach the program director how to facilitate the online teacher training. Instead, the instructional designer resumed daily communication with the executive director, and they reached design decisions together.

The Miscommunication:

A new program director was hired; however, the instructional designer was unaware that the new program director would participate in the course as a student and lead discussions, which may have confused users about who led the course. The instructional designer also learned that the new program director had no prior experience teaching or facilitating an online course. From the instructional design perspective, this circumstance could set a precedent for future creation of professional development courses for the organization.

Furthermore, the executive director provided no direction to the instructional designer regarding the new program director's involvement in the course, and no formal introductions were made; however, the instructional designer was expected to communicate directly with the new program director.

Hello!

Let's do the first to post. I'm thinking since the time to register has already past the incentive is not as great for a gift card for first to register? Let me know if you feel otherwise wise.

I'm also good with offering a gift card each week for the first to post. Perhaps a $25 gift card for first to post? If you will share that with the participants so they feel more compelled to post. If you will also let Jason know each week who should get that he will mail it out.

Will you send a reminder email to those that did not log on? In addition to a reminder for them, I would want to make sure they know it's ok to get started late.

FIGURE 4. Initial email about gift cards from executive director. Names have been changed.

Hello Mark:

After our phone conversation today I wanted to clarify some things about the gift cards. As I wrapped up the development of the course in August Ashley and I had talked about giving out gift cards to participants in the course as an enticement to complete the course.

I was under the impression that it would be $20 or $25 per gift card. I was unaware of the small gift cards you mentioned today.

I just want to make sure we are all on the same page because I was confused after our phone conversation.

There will be a gift card for the participant who participates the most and to the participant/s who has an amazing or creative post. Is this correct?

So for week one student 1 will receive a $25 gift card thus leaving with $175 left in gift cards (if it's $200 total in gift cards)

FIGURE 5. Email sent to program director about gift card confusion.

The absence of clear direction led to complications. For example, the instructional designer had been expected to work hand-in-hand with the executive director, but it remained unclear who would lead the online course if the program director should resign or leave the project altogether. The new program director became involved in design decisions without meeting with the instructional designer, and course management became challenging.

This also resulted in miscommunication. Although the executive director and the instructional designer had discussed giving out gift cards to users (see Figure 4), the new program director had been provided different priorities, which confused the instructional designer regarding distribution (see Figure 5). After email and phone discussion with the new program director, the instructional designer learned that the executive director did not recall the conversation about the disbursement of the gift cards (see Figure 6).

After completing module one, the new program director stopped facilitating the discussion boards; it was as if the new program director had disappeared. In order to learn the curriculum, it was necessary for the new program director to monitor and participate as a student. Nevertheless, the instructional designer continued to facilitate the course.

Figure 7 illustrates the communication for the entirety of the online teacher training process between the instructional designer, the executive director, and the different program directors.

LESSONS I HAVE LEARNED FROM MY OWN PRACTICE

Lessons learned from the experience of the instructional designer include: (a) a detailed needs assessment is necessary before designing the course, (b) all decisions and responsibilities must be in written format and confirmed through email

Hey there Kevin,

I'm sorry for the confusion! Ashley couldn't remember what all she had said! Haha I just spoke with her again, and I think we came up with a plan! Let me know what you think. We will do 2 - $20 gift cards per week for any combination of first poster, best poster, most active, etc. At the end of the course, each participant who completes the course will receive a $10 gift card. However, please communicate that all gift cards will be distributed upon completion of the course.

So we currently have student 1 as well as the most frequent poster (other than myself M) for the first week as $20 gift card winners. I know that you said that we had about 6 that posted at least 3 posts. Can you tell which of the 6 actually posted more?

FIGURE 6. Email reply to instructional designer from program director about gift card confusion.

by all parties involved, (c) and the responsibility for leading a course must be established at the beginning of a project. In this design case, communication is key to the success of an online course. Without a clear understanding about who will lead and assume responsibility for a course once it has been developed can result in miscommunication. Also, discussions about the participation, management, or recruitment regarding providing rewards to online students (e.g., gift cards) should clearly establish who will lead the effort and what the responsibilities are for all involved.

The challenges that arose during the design, including the lack of clear communication and leadership from representatives from the non-profit organization process, did not adversely affect the outcome of the online course. Users completed the course, received their gift cards, and provided positive feedback. A second online course was implemented months afterward. Still, the outcome of the online course in this design case, when the leadership structure changed and the instructional designer took charge of the course, could have affected course outcomes. However, proper measures had been taken to avoid letting such challenges affect the course outcome. This design case also revealed the importance of setting up a clear structure of roles and responsibilities between the instructional designer and the client, which could have helped to avoid miscommunication and potential setbacks and which also could have negatively affected course outcomes.
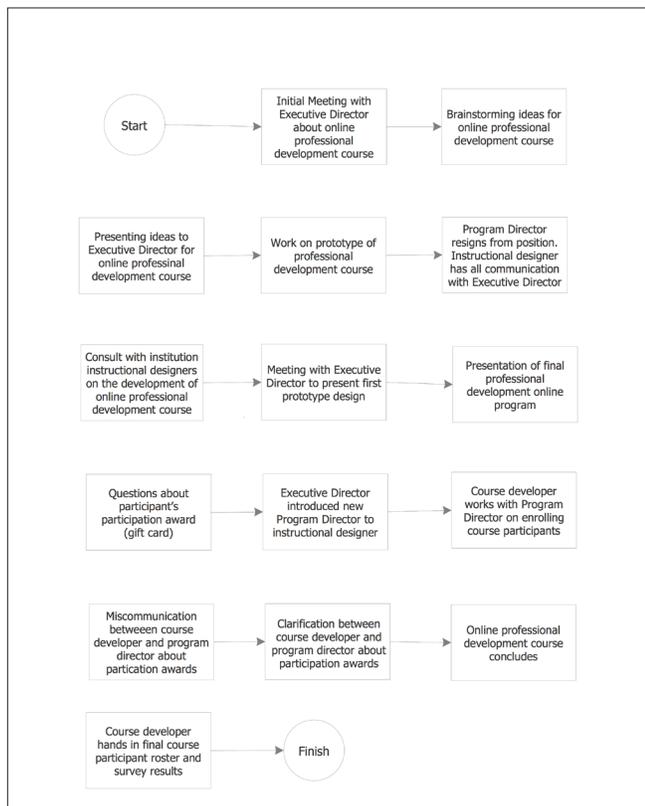
FIGURE 7. Communication.
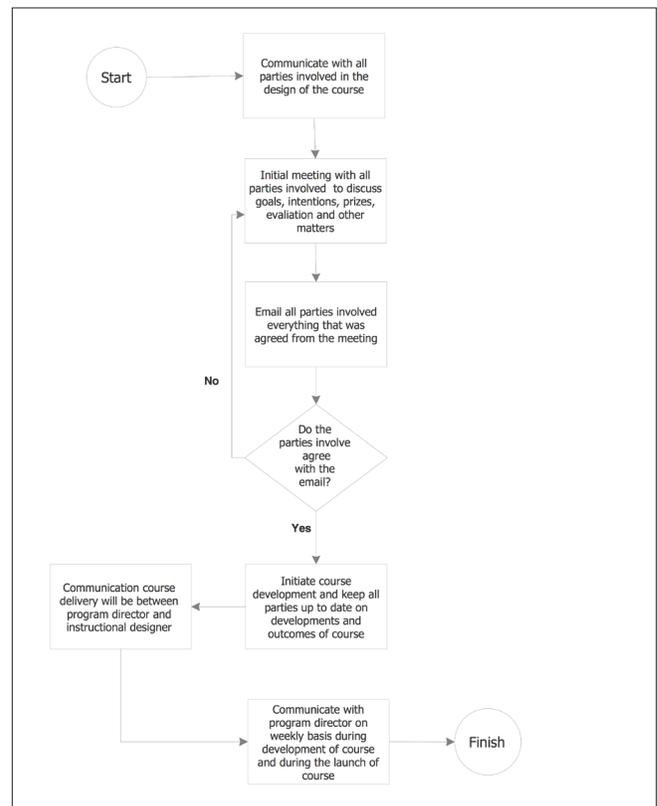
FIGURE 8. New communication.
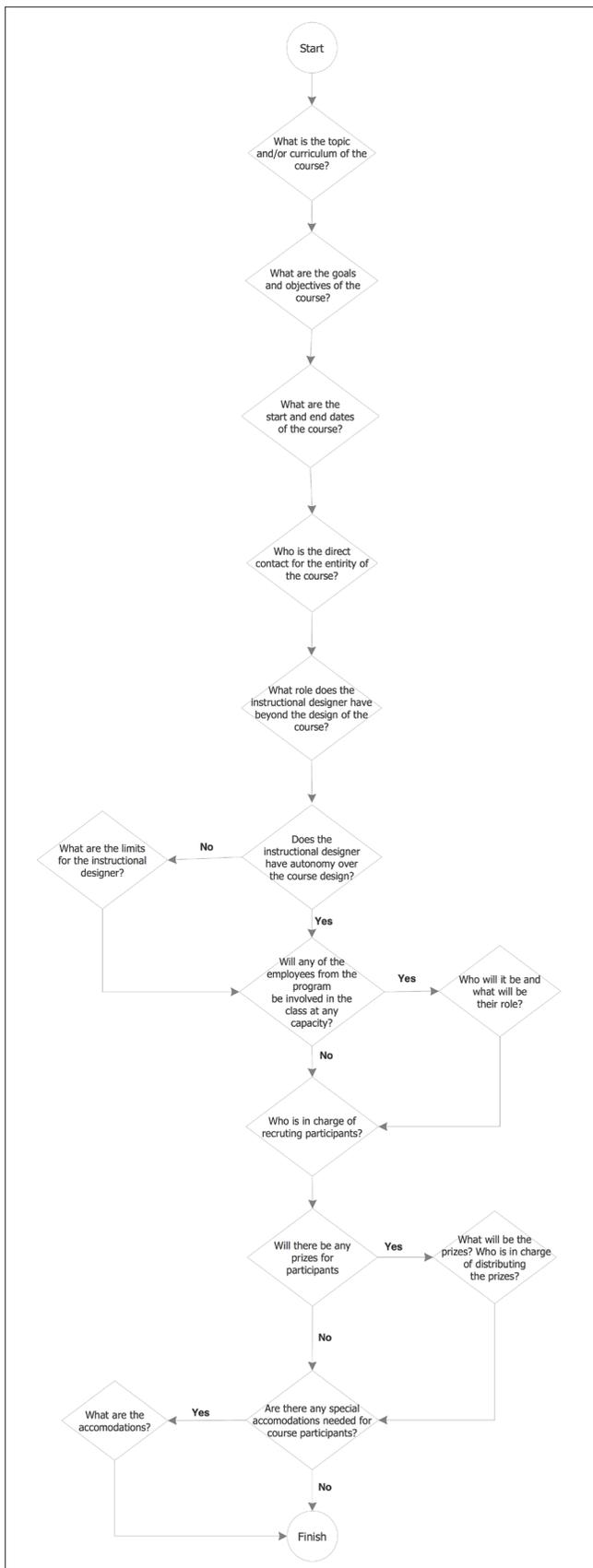
FIGURE 9. New questionnaire between instructional designer and client.

Developing this online course was difficult and time-consuming, but the addition of miscommunication between the instructional designer and the leadership of the organization made the job more difficult. The flowcharts in the previous section illustrate how course design should be managed in future projects. Designing the online course was not the problem; the problem was in the process of asking questions and assuring that all questions were asked. The flowchart in Figure 8 and 9 were used to document and refer to case questions that arose during the instruction and design of the course.

Figure 8 illustrates the communication levels that should occur among all members involved in the design process, especially among new members who join during the process. This new system of communication has been developed to avoid future mishaps. Of course, it is helpful when members ask questions and confirm decisions in writing.

Figure 9 illustrates the questions that should be asked during initial meetings between members involved in the design process. Again, asking questions and confirming decisions in writing provides evidence that should counter potential disagreements or "I don't remember" situations that could arise during the design process. In this design case, when clear agreements of leadership have been established, especially in writing, the design process is much easier to manage regardless of changes in leadership within an organization.

The instructional designer in this case should have been kept in the loop about leadership changes. Although the instructional designer had no say regarding leadership changes, knowing who is involved in the design process can help to prevent miscommunication and confusion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS