Cross-Professional Collaboration on E-Learning Courses

The past 20 years have seen increasing collaboration between universities and other organizations. This paper examines the problems that arise in cross-professional collaboration in the area of e-Learning, when the design team at an e-Learning company works with academic Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to create multimedia courses. The data are drawn from interviews with instructional designers at three e-Learning companies based in Singapore, as well as the author's interactions with two academic SMEs. The paper focuses on four aspects of the interaction: (a) differing priorities, (b) use of multiple modalities, (c) pedagogical knowledge, and (d) ownership of the course.

Key Words: e-Learning; collaboration; cross-professional collaboration; Subject Matter Experts

1. Introduction

Collaboration is becoming a fact of life at universities. Over the past 20 years there has been growing collaboration between different universities, industry and universities (Powell and Owen-Smith, 1998), and
researchers and practitioners (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001) in diverse areas such as the life sciences/medicine (Powell and Owen-Smith, 1998) and medical practice (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999). There are several reasons for the collaboration, such as pressure for funding as well as the need to systematically research and disseminate findings (Roberts & Sarangi, 2003).

One of the recent areas where academics have begun to collaborate is in the education sector. Corporate organizations and universities have begun to recognize the commercial value of educational degrees and courses (Buchbinder, 1993; Currie, 1998) especially those that can be offered through distance education. As universities begin to explore the option of distance education programs, some university professors have asked e-Learning companies to design multimedia versions of their courses; at the same time, e-Learning companies have approached university faculty to provide content for academic courses for the commercial market. In this relatively new sector of e-Learning, academics and business organizations collaborate in developing a product.

Collaboration requires "the coming together of diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordination of activities" (Jassawalla and Sashitthal, 1998; p.239). Although this diversity can generate innovative solutions through synergy, problems arise when the differences are very great. Guri-Rosenblit (2003) points out that these collaborative ventures in e-Learning have often failed and attributes their failure to the enormous difference between "the organizational cultures of these two worlds" (page 15); where corporations expect decisions to be made fast and deadlines to be met, academics spend large amounts of time on reflection and deliberation.

The type of collaboration between academics and the organization in an e-Learning venture can be described as cross-professional following Amabile et al. (2001). Although the study by Amabile et al. involved collaboration on a research project rather than a product, a number of features are similar, namely, the people are members of different professions (academic and business); they are collaborations between individuals or teams and not between firms; and the collaborators are not all members of the same organization.

Focus of This Paper
This paper identifies some of the problems that arise in the collaboration between academics, who are called Academic Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), and the design team at e-Learning companies. The data is based on interviews with members of the design team at three e-Learning companies in Singapore that worked with corporate as well as academic SMEs.

2. Roles in e-Learning
2.1 The e-Learning Team

At an e-Learning company, a course is developed by a team. The Instructional Designer (ID), who has a background in instructional design or education, designs the structure of the course and rewrites the content; graphics designers and programmers create images and animations, and program the course for the Learning Management System; the Project Manager oversees product delivery, optimizing resources (people, technology, and funds) and stepping in to resolve issues such as project over-runs and client interface.

2.2 The Subject Matter Expert (SME)

Since small organizations cannot afford in-house expertise in areas as diverse as insurance and aircraft maintenance, they rely on Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) for the content. When the client is a corporate organization, the SME is usually a trainer from the client's training department who handles their face-to-face training. The instructional designer works with the SME to gather the content and structure it so that it meets both client expectations as well as project deadlines.

The SME and ID work together to convert the course to an online format; in this process, the SME provides the content while the ID is responsible for the teaching expertise (Lee, 1994). The ID restructures the course so that it is shorter, consistent across the sections, and the material is self-instructional. For
both parties, this interaction can be difficult (Lambe, 2000). Surveys in a close related field (namely, technical writing) found that SMEs have scant respect for the skills of the technical writers they deal with (Walkowski, 1991) and are often hostile because they fear they will lose their jobs (Yancy, 1995). At the same time, technical writers complain that the SME is never available and lacks respect for the writer's work (Lee and Mehlenbacher, 2000).

E-Learning companies have worked out ways to work with corporate SMEs (usually by escalating the problem further up the hierarchy), but academic SMEs present a different set of problems. Some of the obvious differences between corporate and academic SMEs are listed below:

Expertise. Corporate SMEs have both technical expertise and training experience in their field. The academic, on the other hand, is usually an international authority on the subject who has published research articles and books on the subject.

Teamwork. Corporate SMEs are used to working as members of a team (usually within the training division of the company) but academics have greater autonomy at the university.

Professional Status. Corporate SMEs view e-Learning with suspicion, often because they fear being replaced; academics have no such worries and are confident of their abilities.

Motivation. Organizations expect their trainers to cooperate with the e-Learning company, so corporate SMEs are not given the option of refusing; academics, on the other hand, often work on e-Learning courses for the experience. As one academic SME told me, "This is the easiest way to find out what e-Learning is. After this course, I'm not creating another e-Learning course."

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