

Accommodating Advanced Learners: Hybrid Format

Greg Gibbs

Abstract

The article entitled “Accommodating Advanced Learners: Hybrid Format” deals with the moving a university program from traditional to hybrid on-line format. The process of program examination through student responses to the changing of curriculum delivery is touched upon. Elements of instructional theory are touched upon through a personal review of the way in which elements of this educational leadership program had been taught and are now moving towards a new delivery model. The model has been now in effect for 4 years and reflections of how this came to be and how it is now viewed are also present in this descriptive piece. Moving to an online delivery model is a big step for traditional faculty this article focuses on that journey as well.

Greg K. Gibbs, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor and Educational Leadership Program Director at St. Bonaventure University. He can be reached at Plassmann Hall B-42, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, New York 14778, phone (716) 375-2363, email ggibbs@sbu.edu<mailto:ggibbs@sbu.edu

In the Spring of 2007 it was determined that there would be a detailed examination of the educational leadership program at the typical course evaluation time but this time the analysis would really delve deeply into the students responses. There always had some responses saying how difficult the program was or how rigorous the course load was, etc. It was simply believed this was some level of a normal, standard response and the faculty was actually pleased that the program challenged the learners.

But that spring the faculty opened up the usual formatted evaluation sheets and allowed for narrative to each specific question. They even added a few that dealt with the negative areas we had logged for the past couple of years so they could get at the details or at least the level or degree of the negative responses. The faculty provided three by five cards in addition to the usual evaluation form that the university provided. On these three by five cards (anonymously) students could add details of anything you would like to see different or changed.

The professors sat with these cards from all the educational leadership program course groups and reviewed them long after the students were gone. Analysis included going over them several times and categorizing them into several sets, mostly dealing with structural points of the program. Faculty often felt they had little control over some of these elements and went back to their previous conclusion that some of this is just a normal student response.

The educational leadership program's student numbers were fairly consistent over the years and saw neither major influx nor potential change toward decline on the horizon. Faculty were all aware of their own competition and graduate programs in nearby colleges and universities as well as online sources. The university had always dismissed these and stood fast with our little niche of the world. This simply would not cut it in the future. The educational

leadership program needed growth and needed some level of excitement about the program if they were to continue to support future administrators in our region.

Determined to change this for the better, the faculty had conversations with the Dean of the graduate school who said go for it, make some changes, send in a proposal for doing business differently. After studying some of the local models that the competition used, the faculty only came to the conclusion of what they didn't want the program to like. This guided much of the discussion early that summer. Education is a people business, who better than school administrators – they must be people oriented. Could the university make the educational leadership program online and not meet or see the “people” (students) regularly? The faculty and professors were not in favor of that option. What was left, online or not online?

It was determined that the university would go with a hybrid format, partially online and partially face-to-face for each course within the program. Also decided, at that time, keeping the practicum and internship phase the same, traditional, face-to-face activity as it had been with university supervisors and site supervisors regularly meeting with the student candidates.

That fall it was announced that the educational leadership program had become hybrid and explained the format to potential students. There was an increased number in the cohort group that fall and an increased group every fall since.

The students all expressed, at the time of their admissions, that this is a better fit for their needs and as the faculty went back to the student concerns from previous years, that too matched. Students wanted some flexibility of time and ability to complete a rigorous and valuable program while still maintaining their educational jobs and family life. Not that some compromises were not obvious but this certainly stayed within some limitations. Faculty also wanted the students to

be the best teachers they could be while they were attempting to become administrators; no one wanted to see any compromise of good work ethic, etc. while they were a student at the university.

The faculty and professors, were pleasantly surprised about the learning levels of the students that first semester and many of the fears were allayed. It was thought that meeting the students in August and then not meeting face to face until early October would present a serious problem in the loss of knowing the students. Faculty found that reading postings from each student, each week of the online portion helped them to actually know the students better than if they merely sat in a class face-to-face with the faculty each week.

Thinking back to the traditional classroom scenario, a student may sit there during an entire class session and contribute nothing. Class closes and they leave. The professor knows no more about them than they knew if they had been absent.

The anonymity of responding also allows all to respond with few hesitations and faculty really see a student's voice through their electronic responses as the time goes by. A key element of this is the level of questioning that allows for such a dialogue. Professors must ask higher order questions and give options so that each student has a response that can provide additional information to the overall question/problem scenario. Without such a format faculty might as well do a multiple choice exam online each week. The depth of the responses, bringing in student backgrounds, their knowledge bases, and their own syntheses of information has been a piece that has helped to transform the educational leadership program curricula.

Faculty must focus on issues that are truly cognitive, contemplative, transformational and worthy of an in-depth analysis, questions and problems that provide platforms for thinking

outside the box and helping the university students become the change agents that all the professors wish to have the students become. Bloom's Taxonomy has truly been dusted off throughout this process!

As a result the curriculum has actually become more rigorous, more in-depth, and more challenging of the students' presuppositions. The faculty still base the curriculum on the ELLC Standards (Educational Leadership Licensure Consortium) but they believe they are making a measurable impact even more so now that the format includes this diverse elements of both online and in-person. Now that the educational leadership program is past year four of doing this hybrid fashion, the program has its own in-house data that truly supports that this move was transforming for the students as well as the faculty.

Learning is different. There is built in wait-time for students to read the question and think about their answer, research it a bit, talk it over with a non-student colleague, etc. It makes the level of response certainly more engaging than before, across the student's entire life. This allows for knowledge from the text, online sources, student generated research, professor's notes, lectures, PowerPoint's, etc. all to be synthesized in a manner than was simply not possible before. The level of rigor in each assignment has risen because of these elements, the quality of the responses has increased, and the transfer of knowledge, skills and dispositions has been made much more efficient than in a traditional course framework/format.

Students begin to quickly realize the level of development that each weekly response needs to take. Since all students are required to respond each week, they often set a standard higher than even a professor might. The student that comes back with a well documented, citation laden, response to a question sets the stage for others to follow. Faculty reiterate to the

students that their opinions too must be based upon some knowledge and therefore should have back-up citations and references. But, this weekly exchange that begins on the first week of each course, soon has an expectation set by the best and brightest student(s) that raises the bar for everyone.

Faculty and professors enjoy this level of dialogue and have come to accept it for the norm now after four years of teaching this way. All faculty and professors would not choose to go back to the more static, traditional classroom filled with lecture and little responses from students except when prompted.

When students first come to the educational leadership program most of them are coming from a previous master's degree or at least bachelors' degree taken in the traditional fashion usually a few years ago. The median student in this educational leadership program is in their mid-thirties with a masters' degree and several years teaching experience. They often ask, "How does this work?" since they are not sure how twenty different people are going to respond to a question each week and how the answers wouldn't just be redundant. So, the first person to answer the question correctly would merely set the answer for all others to say they agree or propose a different solution. That simply is not the case, the questioning strategies developed by faculty and professors has had to evolve to make sure this does not happen and has required better preparation on their parts to instill a rigor and excellence that was not so well developed prior to this hybrid format. Spending time at the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy has been required to make sure our questioning techniques not only get to the crux of the material but also provide for multiple answers to problems based on multiple scenarios and solid confirmation through data and research of all those possibilities.

Teaching to the ELCC Standards has been the focus of the educational leadership program since its inception but this is more clearly in each student's mind since going to the hybrid format. Every assignment is based in some way in the standards, and documented appropriately so by the professor. The curriculum fits into the Standards and our assignments and check points for knowledge, skill, and disposition acquisition are out there for all to see but much more integrated into the student learning than previously. Faculty had felt that this was necessary since we would be seeing the students physically, face-to-face less and it may be important to keep them into the Standards constantly. Whether or not this would have happened without a hybrid format is hard to say, but since the university has gone to this it is much more evident that each student clearly understands the ELCC Standards and the place that those standards hold in their own learning.

Each question, case study, problem, and assignment is clearly rooted within an ELCC Standard and should be responded to as such. This has become a norm the faculty are now used to after four years, something that has developed through the format, purposefully or not. It has been the way the faculty keeps the curriculum relevant and focused while on-line.

There certainly still is the ability for academic freedom within a course but the content is also much stronger and the relationship to the standards upon which are curriculum is based is also much more evident to the students through the multiple levels of interaction and integration, an element that the hybrid format helps to provide. Faculty know this through their evaluation comments over the past four years but they also see it weekly in the quality of the responses to the assignments. The fact, that the faculty have had to significantly modify past assignments and adapt other elements to this format, has provided for, and even in some cases forced, an increased and regular analysis of the program curriculum as faculty attempt to meet the needs of

the students and impart elements of the ELLC Standards to them as future administrative certification candidates.

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